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So different, yet so similar: theoretical reflections about intimate relationships in urban middle class India[1]

Tak różne, a tak podobne: teoretyczne refleksje na temat związków intymnych wśród miejskiej klasy średniej w Indiach

Abstract

Most scholars determine the extent of individual choice to delineate love and arranged marriages, as well as other types of intimate relationships, in India. On the basis of ethnographic fieldwork among urban middle class in Delhi, I challenge this approach. I argue that as no choice is ever taken in a social vacuum, the love and arranged marriage dichotomy, theoretically embedded in the individualisation thesis, is ill understood. Its inadvertent consequence is reproduction of neoliberal myth of an individual "freed" of social influences and constraints.
Keywords: intimate relationships, individual choice, middle class, India

Abstrakt

Większość badaczy uważa zakres indywidualnego wyboru za czynnik definiujący miłość i małżeństwa aranżowane, a także inne rodzaje związków intymnych w Indiach. Na podstawie badań etnograficznych przeprowadzonych wśród miejskiej klasy średniej w Delhi problematyzuję to podejście. Twierdzę, że ponieważ żadna decyzja nie jest podejmowana w próżni społecznej, dychotomia między małżeństwami z miłości i małżeństwami aranżowanymi, teoretycznie osadzona w tezie o indywidualizacji, jest nieadekwatnie rozumiana. Niezamierzoną konsekwencją takiego pojmowania tej dychotomii jest powielanie neoliberalnego mitu o jednostce „uwolnionej" od wpływów i ograniczeń społecznych.
Słowa kluczowe: związki intymne, osobisty wybór, klasa średnia, Indie

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From arranged to love marriages?

There is a consensus among scholars that marriages and intimate relationships in India are undergoing a change, especially within the middle class (Beteille 2000, Donner 2011, 2016; Fuller and Narashiman 2008; Orsini 2007; Osella 2012; Uberoi 2000, among many others). Moreover, the consensus is that this change can be broadly understood as a shift from arranged marriages to love marriages. But the debate on the nature of love versus arranged marriages is vivid not only in scholarly circles and public media. As marriage is a social institution which pertains to virtually everybody's life – only 1-2% of Indian population having never been married by the age of forty-five to forty-nine (Rukmini 2021:118) – it is no surprise that all the research participants of ethnographic fieldwork[2] which I conducted in Delhi and Mumbai had an opinion on the matter. The conversations about the pros and cons of love and arranged marriages were not rare. However, our opinions and arguments[3] were by no means ground-breaking or original, as they can be found in scholarly and media discourses as well. In other words, there are certain overlaps between common and scholarly understandings of love and arranged marriages. As it is unlikely that these overlaps are coincidental, I would like to bring them to attention.

In general, the characteristics of love, arranged marriages and their mixed forms can be summarised along four axes. The continuum – from love to arranged formalised relationship – pertains to: individual choice vs. family (influenced) choice of a spouse; lesser vs. greater responsibility undertaken by the families involved for a successful endurance of the union; love as *sine qua non* of marriage vs. love as a possible but not necessary (by-) product of it; modern vs. traditional form of a union. Each of these issues begs for a separate discussion, so in this article I focus on the first of these assumed differences (cf. Romanowicz 2021a). The goal of this article is thus to examine the scholarly assumptions that love and arranged marriages differ in the form and extent of choice. Although the core of this article is theoretical, it is empirically informed by ethnographic data which I gathered via participant observation among the middle class in Delhi and Mumbai.[4]

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[2] In which I employed participant observation.

[3] That is: mine and my research participants'.

[4] The data on which my consideration is based span the period from late 2007 until 2024. Within this time, I spent a few years among the Indian urban middle class, during which I got so embedded in my life in India that the presumed difference between my personal life and academic exploration got extremely blurred, if it existed at all (cf. Kosiek 2019, Romanowicz 2021a).

Thus, I first briefly describe my research participants' perceptions of love and arranged marriages as first and foremost embedded in types of choice. My respondents originated from various parts of India (most often from, among others, Maharashtra, Bengal, Kerala and the National Capital Region), represented different religions (such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam or Christianity), and they were subdivided by castes. Common to them was the element of belonging to the fraction of the middle class[5] with moderate economic capital, accompanied by cultural capital consisting of higher education, the knowledge of English, a particular kind of sensitivity and perception of the world, the consumerist lifestyle, etc. As social class is the result of the processes of exercising capitals and its effects on practices (Bourdieu 1984:106), including marriages, it is in our interactions that intimate relationships were reworked as well. Secondly, I provide examples of scholarly analyses of the shift and types of marriages in urban India. I point out that – just like everyday perceptions of people with whom I cooperated – scholarly perspectives (a) are embedded within the assumption of necessary difference between love and arranged forms of heterosexual unions; (b) even as they seek to problematise simple binaries of love-arranged dichotomies, they unavoidably reproduce the difference they attempt to deconstruct.

At a first glance, it might seem that there is nothing controversial in such an approach. It certainly brings many interesting accounts of family life, gender and caste relations. But while it results in various typologies of marriages and other intimate relationships, it also tends to reproduce the neoliberal notion of free choice, unrestrained by wider social influences. As Meena Khandelwal put it, "[d]iscourses of exaggerated cultural difference serve national interest" (Khandelwal 2009:583); but to what extent do they serve the scholarship? Although there is no denying that cultural specificities of various forms of intimate relationships might exist, the question about the ways and goals of describing them remains valid, as it indicates the relations of power. My article brings attention to these relations of power, but it does not try to pinpoint or assess socio-cultural and historical evolution or an essence of differences between love and arranged marriages in India. Thus, it should not be seen as a part of the debate on whether particular culturally influenced types of relationships can be classified as love or arranged (or in between); rather, being aware of multiple analyses of this problem (Romanowicz 2021a, Romanowicz 2026a, Romanowicz 2026b) and across various contexts across the globe, my goal here is to show wider consequences of assessing intimate relationships, and not to assess them myself (cf. Romanowicz 2025, Romanowicz 2026a).

[5] I adopt the definition of class in which it is a category that organises social actors into groups of similar capitals (Bourdieu 1984, 1987); and capital is a "set of actually usable resources and powers—economic capital, cultural capital and also social capital" (Bourdieu 1984:114).

So different – on choice and individualism. Everyday accounts of various types of marriages

Most of my research participants declared that they were in favour of love marriages, although many of them did not rule arranged marriages out, in case they were not able to find a suitable love partner. However – regardless of these declarations and actual practices – they all had certain perceptions of the characteristics of these two forms of formalised relationships (Romanowicz 2021a, Romanowicz 2025). Arranged marriages are unions decided by the families of the bride- and groom-to-be. As the union is decided by the families, it follows that the latter "permit" the marriage to take place. Thus, families exercise more influence over the choice of the partner, the venue, the guest list and other related matters. Love and arranged marriages are treated as separate phenomena, whereas love is not a necessary condition for a marriage (Romanowicz 2021a, Romanowicz 2026a). When asked about her preferences for getting married, one of my respondents, Ishita, a 28-year-old IT worker in Delhi,[6] stated: "I would not mind my parents finding me a husband, if I did not fall in love with anyone". Ishita's juxtaposition of parents-arranged relationship with love-based relationship was not rare; it was, in fact, prevalent.

By contrast, love marriage is perceived as a union in which love is a must, and at the same time the existence of love excludes the involvement of the family. The union takes place on the basis of free choice of the individuals involved, and even the family's involvement in the wedding preparations may be sought to be minimised (Romanowicz 2021a). Another of my research participants, Shruti, a Mumbai-based accountant, claimed that she never sought a love marriage because her family "was too important" to her. Thus, she contrasted individual choice, associated with love marriage, as the opposite of "caring" for her maternal family. Eventually, pushed by her parents, she married an IT professional to whom she referred as her "best friend", for whom extended families were equally important.

In other words, as declared by my research participants, love and arranged marriages are different by their very definition. But these are two "pure" forms. There was also an agreement that these "pure" forms can be mixed. It is possible, for example, to distinguish a love-cum-arranged marriage, in which the decision made by the couple is later agreed upon by their families, or an arranged-cum-love marriage, in which the families make the choice, but love develops when the couple gets to know each other better (either before or after formalising the relationship). In other words, the difference between "love-cum-arranged" and "arranged-cum-love" marriages is the perceived sequence of events and feelings associated with them.

In the first type of marriage, a person falls in love first and then seeks the approval of his/her family of origin. For example, this is how Meghna, a research assistant in her

[6] Names and other personal details are often changed in order to protect the participants' identities.

early thirties, based in Delhi, explained her situation to me: "My parents are there [in Lucknow], so they don't see me every day here [in Delhi]. Perhaps it is better. I have time to make up my own mind. Like with Abishek, you know, I think I love him, but I need time to make up my mind before I introduce him to parents. I would like them to accept my partner, but I'm afraid they won't do that if they sense that my own mind is not made; that I still hesitate". In this, Meghna clearly indicated that even if she wanted a love marriage, her parents' approval of her deepest feelings and life choices was equally important. In the second type, the marriage is first arranged by the family, the couple gets married, and it is only after the ceremony, with time, that the feelings of romantic love develop. This is how Praveen, a scholar at one of Mumbai universities, narrated the story of his parents: "They did not see each other before marriage, I think. Their village was very conservative, you know. But I think in the end it works for them. I can see love between them, how they look at each other, with this care and nostalgia, after so many years. I think I would like to share these [feelings] with Anamika [his current partner]". There is no doubt that my research participants were reflective about their own needs and emotions. They also eagerly described their observations and expectations with me, as their friend, an acquaintance and a researcher. However, what is common to all their accounts is that even the accounts of love-cum-arranged and arranged-cum-love marriages are derived from the ideal, radically different, models of relationships – arranged and love ones (cf. Romanowicz 2021a, Romanowicz 2026a). An assumption of difference was embedded in these notions.

Scholarly accounts of transition and hybridisation

Of course, many scholars[7] recognise that "pure forms" of arranged and love marriages, as in the perceptions of my research participants described above, are more complex than binary oppositions. Thus, in an attempt to deconstruct these relationships, they compare them with actual practices of their respondents' everyday life. I argue that even noting various hybrid forms in between, scholars, just like my research participants, mirror the difference they seek to deconstruct.[8] For example, Hennrike Donner, whose impressive ethnographic work in Calcutta spans over a few decades and is one of the

[7] In the chapters (Romanowicz 2025, Romanowicz 2026a) and another article (Romanowicz 2026b, currently under review) I employ these examples of scholarship to illustrate that individual choice can be seen as a form of cultural capital, and to illustrate difficulties in analysing ethnographic fieldwork data within the individualisation thesis.

[8] A note is also required about the general nature of this review. I do not mean to represent the whole work of these authors, as this task would be counterproductive to the goal of this article. Instead, I try to reconstruct the understanding of individual choice as presented by these scholars. This obviously does not do justice to their comprehensive ethnographies but serves the purpose of addressing the issues on which I focus. In order to avoid potential accusations of misrepresentation, I heavily rely on the quotes from the authors' work.

most comprehensive in the field, notices that "[m]uch of the literature on emerging modernities in South Asia seems to assume that social relationships evolve in a kind of linear fashion, with free choice, individualism, sexual identities, and citizenship based on contracts like marriage homogenizing a varied field" (Donner 2016:1166). This "linear" understanding, according to Donner, seems to be inspired by Giddens's understanding of "modernity" in which "the individualistic tendencies modern societies foster, make partner choice and sexual relations a prime focus of modern selves […] and partner choice a site for crafting selves" (Donner 2016:1165).

Donner agrees that although the discourse based on this assumption is powerful both in public and private spheres, it does not reflect reality. To her interlocutors, the ideal of a self-chosen partner is an important site of identity formation – but in practice, most marriages are arranged. No doubt, the change in the nature of these intimate relationships exist, but it lies in the process of arranging the marriage. The novel aspect of the latter consists in negotiations with family members, incorporation of family values into one's own preferences, while at the same time the narrative about compassion and an insistence of the choice being one's own, remain important. In Donner's own words, "the question of individual fulfilment and choice led not so much to romantic love and affairs as to reformed conjugal relations and the de facto streamlining of what constituted multiple meanings and institutional arrangements realized *within the family*" (Donner 2016:1167; emphasis mine). She further juxtaposes "embrace of an ideology of choice and consent" by her respondents and "self-chosen marriage preceded by premarital affairs or romantic courtship", stating that this ideology is rarely followed with love marriage defined in this way (Donner 2016:1187). Furthermore, "[a]mong the middle classes such new patterns are, on the one hand, based on social privilege, but are restricted by anxieties about social status and upward mobility on the other, and do not necessarily indicate the appropriation of a wider ideology of individualism" (Donner 2016:1187).

Therefore, this "ideology of individualism" is declared, but social practice indicates that it is not followed. Instead, one can talk about "different modes of individuation" (Donner 2016:1188). In other words, Donner claims that self-chosen marriages propagated in the media, and in some cases in the narratives of her respondents as well, are actually arranged marriages, since they incorporate considerations about family values and social mobility, as well as an attempt to incorporate "self-choice" into existing social structures of society. The ideology of individualism includes choice understood as taken by individual on the basis of her or his feelings, and without further regard for wider social group. Donner rightly proves that such an ideal is practically absent in everyday practices. She further asserts that the result is a special form of social practice among her Calcutta's respondents. By tying herself to this ideal as a starting point of comparison, Donner answers the question about actual social practices. One can ask, however: Where is this ideal actually practised? Is ideology of individualism drafted in this "pure form" practised anywhere else? Does "pure" individualism mean complete

detachment from family and its values? If not, what was particular about the case of Donner's respondents? Donner disagrees with Giddens's linear understanding of evolution of intimate relationships, yet paradoxically she ties herself to his understanding by working within its scope. As a result, she adds other elements to love and arranged marriages, as if they were indeed some pure forms existing in an undefined socio-cultural context, instead of fully deconstructing and analysing these ideals themselves.

An opposition between love and arranged marriages, as accounted in Ravider Kaur and Priti Dhanda's analysis of matching practices with the use of online services, is more straightforward. Their research questions centre around Giddens's notion of relationships, but unlike Donner, those authors do not question its validity. Kaur and Dhanda are occupied with determining whether marriages in India are "moving towards […] individualism, choice and equality" (Kaur and Dhanda 2014:272) and whether "matchmaking agency shifted substantially from parents to the marrying individuals" (Kaur and Dhanda 2014:273). They oppose arranged marriage as "endogamous within class" (Kaur and Dhanda 2014:271) with marriages based on "self-choice" (Kaur and Dhanda 2014:272). Self-chosen marriages are those over which family has no control and are distinct "in allowing individuals to challenge traditional marriage and pursue a vision of more egalitarian marriage"(Kaur and Dhanda 2014:273). Arranged marriages are the opposite: family not only controls the decision which is taken, but an arranged marriage is synonymous with reproduction of social position of the family as they "re-inscribe traditional community norms and criteria of caste, region, religion, language, class" (Kaur and Dhanda 2014:273). The authors not only reproduce the difference between love and arranged marriages, but also problematise it in a rather questionable way. To them, family involvement is synonymous with lack of individualism, and only marriages of this kind, by means of family involvement, reproduce class position. Consequently, romantic marriage would be deprived of this element. The question remains: does the free, individual choice mean that a person has to disregard his/her family and that there is absolutely no influence of the second on the first one?

Parul Bhandari admits that scholarship provides examples of "choice"[9] in arranged marriages and that "the reality of marriages is best captured in the use of in-betweens as in the case of arranged-love marriages" (Bhandari 2017:2). However, she goes further than that, as her article focuses on pre-martial relationships. She asserts that "[m]en and women appropriate this phase of 'non-marriage' to experience diverse romantic encounters, and subsequently this phase is associated with ideologies of individualism, freedom, and liberty" (Bhandari 2017:3). Her respondents claim their relationships are "based solely on the 'individual' dynamics and emotional compatibility of the couple" (Bhandari 2017:3). However, in her own words, Bhandari "reveal[s] that this image *does not necessarily hold for long*, as soon a moral framework set by the family is introduced to

[9] Quotation marks following the author.

the relationship" (Bhandari 2017:3; emphasis mine), and this constitutes indirect family involvement in a love relationship. What are the examples of "the moral framework of the family" on the basis of which Bhandari deems her respondents' relationships as not based on real individual choice? First, it is the fact that "women seemed more accepting of sexual experiences for both themselves and the men, whereas men were reluctant to accept woman's sexual histories" (Bhandari 2017:8). It is not clear how the author came to the conclusion that this is the outcome of the family influence, as she states herself that "[t]he obsession with a woman's virginity is well-established by the central ritual of a Hindu marriage […] as well as through a social conditioning whereby the suitability of the girl is determined by her control over her sexual self, which is established through a rigorous process of socialization both within the home and *outside it* (Dube 1988; Fruzetti 1982)" (Bhandari 2017:8; emphasis mine).

This does not seem to be merely a matter of family, and it disproves rather than confirms the author's thesis. Another example of "moral framework of the family" is "disciplining" (Bhandari 2017:8-10). This includes one partner's (usually a man) attempts to influence or mould another partner's behaviour and habits on the basis of projected family expectations (Bhandari 2017:8-10). Further evidence is presumed by Bhandari's replication of the family's model of "surveillance" in the love-based relationship, as she identifies "the exercise of control and authority externalized through surveillance. [F]or often men and women resist surveillance from their parents, fighting for individual space and freedom. However, this same space is soon occupied by a boyfriend or girlfriend, who puts the partner under strict surveillance" (Bhandari 2017:11).

Furthermore, Bhandari describes various examples of direct family involvement, in which parents either make sure that their child marries someone "from a similar class and social position" (Bhandari 2017:12) or relationship is broken off because of explicit lack of parental consent, their dislike of the partner, or pointing to practical difficulties in a relationship (Bhandari 2017:12-14). Thus, if a person considers her/his family's expectations in choosing their partner, or in influencing that partner's behaviour, s/he is not *truly* individualistic. One has to ask what image of love relationship and – again – individualism the author has in mind. It seems that not only direct interference in the couple's affairs but also influence on a person exercised by values acquired during socialisation within the family negates the existence of individualism. Even when the direct connection between the parents' action and the child's decision is impossible to establish and ascertain, indirect connections, influences and socialisation are always present. But do they really negate individualism? How is the latter defined? It seems that "individualism" here means that the person in question acts and makes decision in a social vacuum. The understanding of the role of family is similarly problematic at times, for example when Bhandari asserts that families practises "surveillance" by definition. Interestingly, this "surveillance" in a relationship cannot be an individual choice but is a simple repetition of practices in the family, as surveillance is seen as

a feature of every family by default. Neither can exercising "authority" and "control" be a sign of the individual and his/her choice – it is modelled after the family which is governed by "the principle of accountability" (Bhandari 2017:11-12).

These interpretations and analyses are based on the individualisation thesis and its modifications (cf. Allendorf and Pandian, 2016). As aptly noted by Carol Smart and Beccy Shipman, individualisation thesis "has become a core metaphor through which sociological analysis of family life is now pursued" (2004:492, cf. Applbaum 1995; Fricke, Thorton and Dahal, 1998; Malhotra, 1991, Pimentel, 2000; To 2015). Undoubtedly, there are differences within individualisation thesis itself, as conceptualised by its most renowned proponents.[10] What they share is the conviction that modernity leads to a disintegration of prior social forms towards individualism. For Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim, institutionalised individualisation is caused by a trend in which '[c]entral institutions […] are geared to the individual and not to the group' (2002:XXI-XXII) which leads to the "the individual […] becoming the basic unit of social reproduction for the first time in history" (2002:XXII). By contrast, for Anthony Giddens (1991, 1992) individualisation means that individuals are increasingly able to make their own reflexive choices (Giddens 1992). Importantly, a choice is an important feature of individualisation for Beck and Beck-Gernsheim as well: when people are no longer chained to group identity and traditions, there emerges the "homo optionis" – a person whose personal choices define his/her identity and lifestyle (2002:6). A choice can be made in almost every aspect of life, including identity and lifestyle but excluding the very process of individuation taking place (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Importantly, individualisation touches and is manifested in intimate relationships. For Giddens, people would be able to form "pure relationships", that is "relationships [are] entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another, and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it" (1992:58).

Scholarly discussion is often focused on whether "pure" forms exist in social practice, and if they do not, what this means for both the practice and the models. Therefore, it is taken at the face value that the difference in/around this form does exist. This is not to say that scholars easily accept any clear-cut distinction between love and arranged marriages; but all hybrid forms which cannot be qualified as "pure" arranged or love marriages are labelled as being of South Asian/Indian specific cultural form which constitutes an alternative modernity (for example: Bhandari and Titzmann 2017: 6), and thus the assumption of difference is taken as true. Crucially, in the Indian context, both

[10] I focus on Ulrich Beck, Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim and Anthony Giddens as their work is carried forward by sociologists/anthropologists of family in Indian contexts whose work I analyse in the following parts of this article. Other renowned proponent of the individualisation thesis is of course Zygmunt Bauman.

scholars working within the individualisation thesis and my research participants share assumptions that individual choice is a prerequisite to love marriage. Arranged marriages, on the other hand, are taken to involve family choice over and above individual choice. What follows is that every family involvement in a couple's affairs is identified as a contradiction to individual choice. On this basis, various typologies of culturally specific marriages are created. However, a choice cannot be rendered non-individualistic just because it operates within pre-designated options and is influenced by someone/something. As such, using this category or embedding the research in the continuum of love-individualistic and arranged-non-individualistic marriages, that is – within the individualisation thesis – an inadequate explanation (cf. Romanowicz 2026a). Importantly, attempts to determine the extent of individualism are a rather arduous and ultimately impossible task, additionally carrying the risk of reproducing the neoliberal notion of individualism.

So similar – marriages as class reproduction

Although the distinction between individual and social choice proposed by Parveen Mody (2002) is interesting, I argued elsewhere that delineating the two proves difficult (cf. Romanowicz 2021a, Romanowicz 2025, Romanowicz 2026b). Instead, I ask whether there really is a difference between love and arranged marriages that can be expressed along the continuum of choice, where purely individualistic choice lies at one end of this continuum, and no choice – due to family influence – at the other. Perhaps paradoxically, I attempted to answer the question about difference by comparing similarities between these two forms of relationships (cf. Kishwar 1994; Khandawal 2009). Most of my research participants would say that love is something that "just happens". It is not a feeling that can be controlled; it is not based on rational planning and objective factors are not taken into consideration (Romanowicz 2021a, Romanowicz 2021b). As such, love towards a person is also considered an individual experience. It is not influenced by "external" actors, for example family. These perceptions do not mean that the influence of other actors does not exist, but that it is muted. In other words, love marriages are no different from arranged marriages in that they reproduce social structures. Moreover, "the most indisputable evidence of this immediate sense of social compatibilities and incompatibilities is provided by class and even class-fraction endogamy, which is ensured almost as strictly by the free play of sentiment as by deliberate family intervention" (Bourdieu 1984: 241); whereas "[t]he illusion of mutual election or predestination arises from ignorance of the social conditions for the harmony of aesthetic tastes or ethical leanings" (Bourdieu 2013: 82, cf. Romanowicz 2021a, Romanowicz 2025).

In other words, people form relationships on the basis of similarities (Bourdieu 1984) or compatibilities (Streib 2015a, 2015b) of cultural capital, an indication of our habitus. Choice, even choice that is called "individual", is therefore never taken in a vacuum, not influenced by anything or anyone, be it a family or another social institution

(Romanowicz 2026a, Romanowicz 2026b). It is always the result of a creative variation of different impacts on an individual actor; even if influences and choices might be many, they are still limited, and they are still taken from particular cultural and social repertoire. Kathrine Twamley confirms that her Gujarati respondents "have internalised family and societal ideals of what makes a good spouse – that is, young people as much as their parents prefer to marry someone of the same caste and class background […]" (Twamley 2014:82). She also notices that there is an element of "arranging" in love marriages in the West. Love is not absent from marriages of her respondents; she therefore sees certain similarities between these two model forms (Twamley 2014:154; cf. Fuller and Narashiman 2008). Sarah Dickey notices that "[t]he alliance may also be used to create economic and social capital; thus the creation of those affinal relationships can be both a short- and a long-term investment" (Dickey 2016:145). Likewise, I have elsewhere argued that the difference between love and arranged relationships lies in distinct elements of capital being at play (Romanowicz 2021a, Romanowicz 2026a). Love marriages, like love-cum-arranged, arranged-cum-love and arranged marriages (cf. Fuller and Narashiman 2008; Kaur and Dhanda 2014), and informal relationships based on declared love are an important arena of reproduction of class homogamy (Romanowicz 2021a, Romanowicz 2025, Romanowicz 2026a).

With this emphasis on class perspective, it becomes clear that socialisation has bearing on our choices. Every choice is constrained within the options which exist in particular cultural and social realm. To assess relationships in accordance with individual choice which would be deprived of any constraints, deprived of the influences of thus cultural and social realm, is to assess them in accordance with a chimera. It carries the danger – as in the examples quoted above – of using liminal and arbitrary standards to test the respondents on whether they meet these mythical criteria. On one hand it, it is no surprise that scholars describe various imaginaries of love and arranged marriages as presented by their respondents, nor that they try to show the ground reality of how these categories are being used, practised and reproduced. On the other hand, perpetuating models of individual choice as being free and independent from wider considerations, these scholars not only fall short on a theoretical level, but are also at risk of reproducing neoliberal dogma, a notion of an individual responsibility and self-reliance, at the expense of robust social and institutional ties.

These unsolicited notions of individualism have to be instead used carefully. By insisting on and overemphasising the agency of an individual, the neoliberal vision of individual, free choice overlooks the influence and restrictions put on the latter by wider social structures. In particular, as argued by de Neve, "a study of love marriages provides valuable insights into people's engagement with–and critique of–contemporary values of individualism, entrepreneurship, and 'enterprise culture' that drive much of India's post-liberalization" (de Neve 2016: 1223). Thus, I would argue that reproducing the notion of an ideal love marriage based on arbitrarily defined individual choice and

describing various forms of in-betweens as specific for essentialized "Indian culture" might be a reproduction of middle-class privileged position by the scholars doing so rather than an explanation of empirical data (cf. Romanowicz 2026b). If people divide marriages into those entered into for love and the arranged ones and distinguish various forms in between, it might come as no surprise that their discourse is mirrored by the scholars working on the subject. The latter are, after all, preoccupied with the task of representing their respondents' views (cf. Fuller and Narashiman 2008:751), even if they describe the in-between forms. This permeability and mutual influence were aptly described by Patricia Uberoi, who said that "[the] study of the family […] is not thought to be a difficult, marginal or esoteric branch of knowledge, but on the contrary a rather 'soft' area within sociology proper. In contrast to kinship studies, the general banality of theory in the area has left space for the operation of 'common sense'. Everyone has experience of family life, and everyone has opinions – and feelings – on it. It is very hard to pinpoint where commonsense leaves off and academic sociology begins" (Uberoi 2000:1). My attempt in this article was to show that this permeability has real-life consequences of shaping subjectivity and class distinctions.

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