

Case 3: The Companionate Clash

The Scenario

The pre-marital timeline of the modern, urban Indian professional is increasingly characterized by a profound sociological transition, shifting away from the traditional, community-managed arranged marriage paradigm toward a hybrid model that researchers identify as the "arranged, endogamous companionate marriage". The protagonist of this clinical case study is a 25-year-old male, raised in a conventional Mumbai household, possessing a Master of Business Administration (MBA) and a career trajectory firmly rooted in the upwardly mobile corporate sector. He is currently in the pre-marital phase, engaged to a female partner of the same age who is an equally ambitious, highly educated corporate professional. Their union reflects the contemporary middle-class ideal where educational qualifications, personal compatibility, and shared financial aspirations form the bedrock of partner selection, effectively integrating modern romantic courtship into the traditional framework of caste and class endogamy. As a prospective dual-earner couple, they represent the vanguard of India's economic liberalization, operating within a modern cognitive framework that ostensibly champions egalitarianism, mutual respect, and shared household decision-making. The couple's courtship and pre-wedding engagement phase have been characterized by a mutual understanding of individual autonomy and professional dedication, signaling a deliberate departure from the historical Indian marital model where a woman's primary identity is inextricably linked to her structural assimilation into her husband's patrilineal household.

However, as the pre-wedding planning discussions intensify, the catalyst for systemic friction emerges, revealing a severe and potentially catastrophic mismatch between the couple's modern companionate ideals and the deeply entrenched traditional expectations of the protagonist's family of origin. The protagonist's parents frequently insert spoken and unspoken expectations into the daily discourse, making it unequivocally clear that they expect their future daughter-in-law to seamlessly manage the household kitchen, flawlessly execute domestic hospitality for visiting extended kin, and eventually throttle her career progression to prioritize child-rearing and intergenerational caregiving. Conversely, the partner explicitly states her requirement for an uncompromisingly egalitarian marriage, demanding a strict, mathematically equal division of domestic labor and zero professional compromise to accommodate traditional gender roles. This ideological collision places the protagonist in a strategic impasse. The systemic friction dictates that if he demands his parents abandon their traditional expectations, he violates the cultural norms of filial piety and risks being stigmatized by his family as disrespectful, Westernized, and prematurely "controlled by a woman". Alternatively, if he attempts to pacify his parents by asking his partner to "compromise and adjust just to keep the peace," he signals a critical failure in his capacity to protect their future marital boundary. This latter action effectively communicates to his partner that their marriage will not function as an autonomous sanctuary, thereby inflicting severe, potentially irreparable damage to her trust and their foundational attachment bond before the marriage has even been solemnized.

The Personal POVs (The Internal Reality)

The Son's POV

From a clinical and systemic perspective, the son is experiencing acute psychological distress rooted in a classic double-bind scenario, wherein compliance with one systemic mandate necessitates the violation of another. His internal reality is defined by the paralyzing anxiety of being caught in a no-win game where the competing demands of two mutually exclusive family systems collide. On one side is his "family of origin"—the system that provided his foundational attachments, cultural identity, and primary socialization, and which expects continued adherence to its operational rules. On the other side is his "family of creation"—the incipient marital system that requires his primary, undivided allegiance to ensure its survival, stability, and growth. The protagonist's fear of fracturing his bond with his parents is profound; within the Indian cultural context, the psychological separation from the family of origin is frequently misconstrued by traditional parents as a betrayal of filial duty rather than a necessary, healthy developmental milestone.

This internal conflict highlights a critical deficit in what Bowenian family systems theory terms the "differentiation of self". Differentiation is defined as the capacity to balance the dialectical forces of autonomy and togetherness, allowing an individual to maintain a clear, independent sense of self and assert personal boundaries without succumbing to the emotional reactivity, fusion, or anxiety of the surrounding family system. The son's paralyzing anxiety stems directly from a relatively low level of differentiation; he remains emotionally fused with his parents' expectations and fears that asserting his partner's autonomy will result in catastrophic emotional cutoff or rejection by his family of origin. He struggles to separate his intellectual reasoning—that his partner deserves equality—from his emotional conditioning, which demands obedience to parental authority.

Simultaneously, the son experiences a dawning, terrifying realization that his current strategy of passivity, appeasement, and conflict avoidance is actively threatening his future marriage. He recognizes that by failing to establish a definitive boundary now, he is leaving his partner exposed to a family system that structurally seeks to absorb and subordinate her. His internal paralysis is exacerbated by the fact that he possesses no cultural script for this specific type of confrontation. In the traditional patriarchal paradigm, the biological son is the ultimate beneficiary of both his parents' continued doting and his wife's uncompensated domestic labor. By choosing to enforce a modern companionate structure, he must willingly dismantle his own unearned patriarchal dividends, risking his parents' intense ire to protect a partner who refuses to be subjugated. The son's point of view is an agonizing tightrope walk between the guilt of disappointing his parents and the terror of losing his partner's respect and romantic devotion.

The Partner's POV

The partner's internal reality is characterized by a state of intense, calculated hyper-vigilance. She is not merely observing the logistical planning of a wedding; she is actively conducting a critical, real-time assessment of the protagonist's structural reliability and emotional maturity. Her primary objective during this pre-marital phase is to determine whether her future husband possesses the psychological fortitude to act as a definitive buffer against his family's traditional demands, or if she is walking blindly into a cultural trap where her autonomy will be systematically dismantled.

From a sociological perspective, the partner is acutely aware of the phenomenon of "selective modernization" that pervades the Indian middle class. She understands that while her

educational credentials and professional achievements are celebrated as markers of her family's upward mobility and social status, these same families paradoxically expect modern women to seamlessly superimpose traditional domestic roles atop their grueling professional responsibilities. This phenomenon generates the infamous "double burden" or "dual-role strain," a structural reality that disproportionately affects urban Indian women. The statistical reality she faces is stark and deeply alarming.

Time Use Survey Data (Employed Urban Indian Women vs. Men)	Employed Women	Employed Men	Impact/Implication
Total Daily Workload (Paid + Unpaid)	~9.6 hours	~7.2 hours	Severe "time poverty" for women, leading to physical and corporate burnout.
Unpaid Domestic Services (Daily Average)	285 minutes	Disproportionately low	Limits leisure, sleep, and self-care, generating chronic psychological distress.
Unpaid Caregiving Services (Daily Average)	142 minutes	Disproportionately low	Exacerbates the "squeezed middle" phenomenon, stalling professional advancement.

Her hyper-vigilance is a necessary protective mechanism against becoming a casualty of these statistics. If she observes her partner asking her to "adjust" or compromise on her egalitarian demands to appease his parents, she instantly interprets this not as a benign request for familial harmony, but as a profound structural betrayal. She recognizes that acquiescing to traditional demands, even temporarily for the sake of the wedding, sets a permanent, irreversible precedent for their marital dynamic. For the partner, the son's behavior in the present is the ultimate and only reliable predictor of their future. If he cannot advocate for their autonomous marital boundary now, she knows she will be permanently relegated to the subordinate role of a traditional daughter-in-law, forced to engage in endless, exhausting boundary negotiations with her in-laws while her husband retreats into the comfortable, culturally sanctioned role of a passive beneficiary of her double burden.

The Parents' POV

To understand the parents' perspective objectively, one must locate their reactions within the historical, sociological, and psychological continuum of the Indian joint-family structure. Their expectations are not rooted in a malicious desire to oppress or inflict suffering, but rather in a deeply internalized socio-cultural script where the stability, survival, and honor of the family unit depend entirely on strict adherence to hierarchical, gendered roles. In the traditional patrilineal and patrilocal paradigm, the arrival of a daughter-in-law is viewed fundamentally as the integration of a new, subordinate member into the existing family system, not the creation of an entirely new, independent, and sovereign family unit.

From the parents' viewpoint, a modern, highly independent daughter-in-law who demands a 50/50 division of labor and prioritizes her corporate career represents a profound existential threat to the family structure they have spent decades cultivating. They fear that such a

companionate, autonomous marriage will fracture the intergenerational continuity that defines their social reality. Their anxiety is multifaceted and deeply existential. First, they fear the structural isolation and emotional alienation of their son; they worry that a strong-willed, financially independent wife will usurp their influence, effectively pulling him away from his filial obligations and the emotional orbit of the family of origin. Second, they view the daughter-in-law's refusal to assume traditional domestic and hospitality duties as a direct, personal rejection of the cultural values, religious traditions, and familial hierarchy they hold sacred.

For the parents, the daughter-in-law's domestic labor is not merely about the pragmatic management of household chores; it is a vital, performative metric of respect, social capital, and family honor within their broader community. The ideology of *kanyadan* (the gift of the virgin) historically institutionalized this transfer of authority, framing the woman's labor as a duty to her new lineage. If the daughter-in-law does not serve the extended family visibly and willingly, the parents suffer a profound loss of face and status among their peers. Consequently, the parents' spoken and unspoken demands are a desperate defense mechanism—an attempt to reassert control over a rapidly changing social landscape, utilizing their son as the traditional conduit to enforce compliance and ensure the survival of their familial ecosystem.

The Analytical Framework

To successfully navigate this impasse, it is necessary to deconstruct the underlying psychological and structural mechanics driving the conflict. The friction experienced by the couple is not merely a clash of individual personalities, but a fundamental, systemic collision between two incompatible frameworks of marital organization.

Systemic Dimension	Traditional Patriarchal System	Modern Companionate System
Primary Allegiance	Family of Origin (Parents and Extended Kin)	Family of Creation (Spouse and Marital Dyad)
Role of Daughter-in-Law	Subordinate assimilation into the husband's family; primary caregiver and domestic laborer.	Equal partner; autonomous professional; shared domestic responsibilities.
Boundary Permeability	Diffuse boundaries; high parental involvement in couple's internal decisions and conflict mediation.	Clear, impermeable boundary around the marital dyad; external interference is firmly rejected.
Function of Marriage	Social obligation, reproduction of caste/class, eldercare, and status production.	Emotional intimacy, mutual fulfillment, dual financial growth, and egalitarian partnership.

Deconstructing Pre-emptive Loyalty

The concept of "Pre-emptive Loyalty" is a foundational tenet in the establishment of a healthy, autonomous marriage, particularly within cultures that heavily emphasize extended kinship networks. In structural family therapy, the transition from an individual's family of origin to their newly formed family of creation requires a definitive, observable shift in primary allegiance. Pre-emptive loyalty dictates that this shift must occur *before* the marriage is formalized. The exact moment the protagonist must choose to prioritize the rules of his future marriage over the rules of his childhood home is the very first moment his parents' traditional expectations collide

with his partner's boundaries.

Failing to establish this primary boundary prior to the marriage creates severe, systemic structural defects that plague the couple for decades. When a partner enters a marriage without the explicit guarantee of pre-emptive loyalty, the marital foundation is built on structural ambiguity. This ambiguity inevitably breeds hyper-vigilance, resentment, and chronic, escalating in-law friction. The psychological mechanism at play involves the aforementioned differentiation of self; the protagonist must demonstrate the emotional maturity to tolerate his parents' disappointment, anger, and anxiety without resorting to emotional cutoff (severing the relationship) or fusion (capitulating to their demands).

By asserting pre-emptive loyalty, the son signals to his partner that the conjugal subsystem is paramount, secure, and impenetrable by outside forces. This act establishes a secure attachment base for the marital dyad, allowing emotional intimacy to flourish. If the protagonist delays this loyalty shift, operating under the delusion that the tension will spontaneously resolve post-wedding, he commits a fatal clinical error. Post-marital attempts to establish boundaries are universally met with exponentially higher resistance from the family of origin. The parents will have already interpreted the son's pre-marital silence as a tacit endorsement of their traditional rules, making any subsequent boundary-setting feel like a sudden, aggressive betrayal instigated by the new wife. Thus, the choice of pre-emptive loyalty is not merely a negotiation of wedding logistics; it is the definitive, structural inauguration of the marriage itself.

The Structural Flaw of the "Neutral Bystander" Posture

The most common, and arguably most destructive, coping mechanism employed by sons caught in this cultural crossfire is the adoption of the "Neutral Bystander" posture. The protagonist attempts to play the role of a passive, objective mediator, urging both his parents and his partner to "be reasonable," "compromise," and "understand each other's perspectives." However, analyzed through the lens of Salvador Minuchin's structural family therapy, the concept of neutrality within a hierarchical family system is a dangerous functional fallacy. In a traditional family structure, the parents inherently hold the systemic power, moral authority, and home-court advantage. The incoming daughter-in-law is the structurally subordinate outsider attempting to integrate into a pre-existing, highly complex matrix of unspoken rules, alliances, and loyalties. When the son attempts to remain neutral, he is not creating a balanced mediation; he is functionally defaulting to the established power structure. His inaction creates a power vacuum that allows the dominant system (the parents) to exert unrestricted cultural and emotional pressure on the subordinate system (the partner). Therefore, in systemic terms, the son's neutrality is never neutral; it is an active act of compliance with the traditional hierarchy. Furthermore, the neutral bystander posture triggers a highly toxic psychological phenomenon known as "destabilizing triangulation". According to Bowenian theory, a two-person emotional system is inherently unstable under stress, leading them to draw in a third party to form a triangle and diffuse the anxiety. When the husband fails to act as the definitive buffer, the tension between the parents' expectations and the wife's boundaries cannot be contained within the appropriate dyad. The parents, seeking to enforce compliance, will bypass the son and direct their expectations, criticisms, and microaggressions directly at the daughter-in-law. This forces the wife into a defensive, antagonistic relationship with her in-laws, a battle she cannot win without appearing culturally disrespectful.

This dynamic often morphs into a "perverse triangle," where the parents and the son implicitly align against the wife, or where the wife is forced to become the "Identified Patient"—the person pathologized as the source of all family conflict. The son's neutrality effectively outsources the

emotional labor and the systemic conflict to his incoming spouse, violating the core protective function of the marital dyad. The ultimate structural flaw of the neutral bystander posture is that it guarantees perpetual, multi-directional alienation: the wife feels profoundly abandoned by her husband, the parents feel deeply antagonized by their daughter-in-law, and the son remains trapped in a state of chronic anxiety, caught in a crossfire of his own making.

The Strategy Playbook (The Systemic Moves)

To successfully transition from a patriarchal joint-family expectation to a stable, autonomous companionate marriage structure, the protagonist must completely abandon passivity and execute a deliberate, structural realignment of the family ecosystem. This requires a rigorous, 3-step actionable strategy designed to systematically dismantle the friction before the wedding vows are exchanged.

1. The Sole Insulator Rule

The foundational, non-negotiable move in the strategy playbook is the adoption of the Sole Insulator Rule. This clinical directive mandates that the biological son must assume 100 percent of the responsibility for communicating, enforcing, and absorbing the friction of all marital boundaries with his own parents. The systemic reasoning for this rule is paramount: outsourcing the enforcement of boundaries to the incoming spouse always fails and inevitably destroys the in-law relationship.

When a daughter-in-law attempts to assert a boundary directly with her in-laws (for example, refusing to cook a multi-course meal after a 10-hour corporate shift), the parents filter this action through a cultural lens of disrespect, defiance, and poor upbringing. The conflict immediately escalates into an interpersonal attack on her character and a judgment of her family of origin. However, when the biological son asserts the exact same boundary on behalf of the couple, the parents' reaction, while likely still highly resistant and emotional, is processed entirely differently. Because of the unbreakable biological and foundational attachment bond, the parents are forced to grapple with the boundary as a structural reality of their son's adult life, rather than as a malicious, competitive attack by an invading outsider.

The Sole Insulator Rule requires the protagonist to step physically and emotionally between his parents and his partner. He must ensure that his partner is never forced into a defensive argument with her future in-laws. If the parents express disappointment about the partner's career priorities, lack of domestic involvement, or progressive values, the son must instantly intercept the communication and claim total ownership of the boundary. By acting as the sole insulator, the son preserves the possibility of a cordial, respectful relationship between his wife and his parents, because he alone absorbs the heat of their disappointed expectations, leveraging his secure attachment to weather their temporary anger.

2. The Shared-Labor Demonstration

Verbal boundaries, no matter how eloquently stated, are entirely insufficient if they are not continuously corroborated by behavioral evidence. The parents' traditional expectations are anchored in the deeply ingrained assumption that household labor is strictly gendered, and that their son is either incapable of or unwilling to manage domestic tasks. To permanently shatter this assumption and protect his partner from the crushing reality of the "double burden," the

protagonist must engage in the Shared-Labor Demonstration.

This systemic intervention requires the son to actively, consistently, and visibly change the household dynamic *before* the marriage takes place. He must begin executing domestic responsibilities—such as cooking meals, serving guests, cleaning, and managing household logistics—in full, unapologetic view of his parents. When extended relatives visit, the protagonist must be the one to prepare and serve the tea, deliberately overriding the parents' instinct to wait for the future daughter-in-law to assume the servile role.

This systemic move achieves three critical, simultaneous objectives. First, it forces the parents to experience the cognitive dissonance of seeing their highly educated son performing what they consider "women's work," thereby aggressively normalizing male domestic labor within the family of origin's physical space. Second, it signals unequivocally to the parents that the 50/50 division of labor is not a draconian rule imposed by a controlling, manipulative daughter-in-law, but rather a deeply held, internalized value adopted by their own son. Third, and most importantly for the health of the conjugal subsystem, it provides the partner with undeniable, behavioral proof that the protagonist is a structurally reliable partner. Seeing him take on this labor actively dismantles the threat of the double burden, significantly lowering her hyper-vigilance and reinforcing a profound level of marital trust.

3. The Boundary Scripting

The final step involves equipping the protagonist with precise, rehearsed verbal scripts to navigate the inevitable confrontations with his parents. In Indian cultural contexts, aggressive, hostile, or highly Westernized boundary-setting ("You need to respect our privacy and stay out of our lives") is often highly counterproductive, triggering severe emotional cutoff, perceived disrespect, and escalating hostility. Instead, the son must utilize a sophisticated technique of "high-warmth but zero-negotiation" communication.

This approach deliberately validates the parents' underlying emotional anxieties (the fear of losing their son, the fear of family dissolution, the fear of social judgment) while simultaneously rendering the partner's autonomy and the marital boundary completely non-negotiable. The protagonist must consistently frame the boundaries not as his partner's selfish demands, but as the couple's unified, carefully considered decisions.

Script 1: Deflecting Expectations of the Daughter-in-Law's Domestic Servitude *Context:*

The parents remark that the partner will need to learn the family recipes, adjust to the household routine, and take over the kitchen duties once she moves in. *The Script:* "Ma, Papa, I know how much pride you take in how this home is run, and both [Partner's Name] and I deeply respect that. But I want to be entirely clear about how we are building our life together. Her career is just as demanding as mine, and her professional success is incredibly important to both of us. We have decided together that we will be splitting all household chores 50/50, and we will likely hire help for the daily cooking. [Partner's Name] will not be taking over the kitchen. I know this is very different from how things were done in the past, and it might be an adjustment, but this is the partnership I have chosen. I need you to support the way we are doing things, because this is how our home will operate."

Script 2: Intercepting Microaggressions Regarding the Partner's Career *Context:* The parents hint that the partner should decline a recent promotion because it will require travel, induce stress, and interfere with future child-rearing duties. *The Script:* "I hear that you are worried about how we will manage a family in the future, and I truly appreciate your concern for our well-being. However, [Partner's Name]'s career trajectory is entirely non-negotiable, and I am her biggest supporter in going after this promotion. She has worked incredibly hard for this."

When the time comes for children, we will adjust our schedules together as a team, sharing the load equally. I am asking you to celebrate her ambition and success just as proudly as you have always celebrated mine. We will not be discussing her stepping back from her career again, as that is not a path we are taking."

Script 3: Addressing Parental Anxiety Over Loss of Control and Alienation *Context:* The parents become highly emotional, accusing the son of changing, abandoning their values, and allowing his future wife to isolate him from the family. *The Script:* "I love you both very much, and getting married does not change the fact that I am your son. You are not losing me, and you are not losing your place in my life. But I am creating a new family with [Partner's Name], and as her husband, my primary responsibility is to her and to the health of our marriage. We want a close, loving, and involved relationship with you, but that relationship must be based on respecting our decisions as an independent, adult couple. I will not allow [Partner's Name] to be blamed or criticized for the rules we have set together. We are a team, and we hope you will support us as a team."

By consistently and courageously deploying these systemic moves, the protagonist actively dismantles the structural ambiguity and anxiety of the pre-marital phase. He actively transitions the family system away from a patriarchal, enmeshed hierarchy, and lays the impregnable, differentiated foundation required for a modern, egalitarian, and deeply connected companionate marriage.

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