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The Grey Divorce Phenomenon: A Systematic Review of Loneliness and Psychological Well-being in Indian and Global Contexts

Dr. R. Singh ¹

ABSTRACT

This systematic review looks at the phenomenon of “Grey Divorce” or dissolution of marriage after age 50, within the global and Indian socio-cultural context. For a long time, it has been documented in the Western literature that late-life divorce leads to emotional loneliness. The paper attempts to study the case of the Indian seniors who emerge out from ‘sacramental’ to more ‘individualized’ aging. A review of the recent empirical data, particularly the Longitudinal Ageing Study in India (LASI), identifies the critical “Empty Nest Catalyst which turns latent attachment crises due to the decoupling of domestic roles harnessed to children. The results point to a “relational displacement” in India. Here, the divorced woman suffers from a more serious loss of social identity and their familial “place” compared to her peers from other parts of the world. Thus, this higher risk may contribute to geriatric depression. On the other hand, Digital Social Capital and Identity Reconstruction are identified as crucial buffers for post-traumatic growth. In the conclusion, a recommendation is made that geriatric counselling moves from a mandate or emphasis on ‘reconciliation’ to that of ‘autonomy’ in the sphere of psychology. Further, it highlights the clinical relevance of the divorced old in an ever-evolving world.

Keywords: Grey Divorce, Loneliness, Psychological Well-being, Indian Geriatrics, Empty Nest Syndrome, Relational Displacement, Identity Reconstruction, LASI

The traditional "golden" years of life have long been viewed as a period of peace and stability. However, a significant demographic shift is quietly transforming this perception. "Gray divorce"—which is rapidly gaining ground among married couples aged 50 and older—represents a major global phenomenon (Brown & Lin, 2012). While divorce rates among younger generations have generally stabilized or declined, in many developed nations, these rates

¹ Ph.D. in Psychology, Lingaya’s Vidyapeeth, Faridabad, Haryana

have nearly doubled for older generations in recent decades (Stapler, 2017). Given the current climate, individuals are now prioritizing their personal fulfillment and mental well-being; consequently, gray divorce is increasingly being deemed more important than the social obligations associated with remaining in a "hollow" or fragile marital relationship (Cherlin, 2020).

In the case of India, the situation is somewhat more complex. In India - where marriage has traditionally been regarded as a sacred and indissoluble bond -it has long constituted a pivotal element of a societal fabric in which, for centuries, an individual's personal happiness has been accorded less importance than the imperative to maintain a stable family structure (Srivastava et al., 2021). However, in contemporary urban India, winds of change are blowing. With the rise of "Empty Nest" syndrome (the loneliness experienced when children leave home) and the growing economic independence of women, India's elderly population now finds itself standing at a crossroads. According to a survey conducted by the 'Longitudinal Aging Study in India' (LASI), although the overall incidence of divorce remains lower than in Western nations, the psychological impact of separation in old age is profoundly deep; this signifies a shift away from traditional family structures toward more individualized experiences of aging (Mishra et al., 2023).

This trend toward "gray divorce" is rarely entirely benign; it often plunges individuals into a profound psychological void. Unlike younger divorcees—who may possess the time and social energy to rebuild their lives—older individuals face a situation that researchers term "double jeopardy." In this context, losing a spouse at a stage of life when one's social circle naturally begins to contract and physical frailties start to emerge constitutes a distressing predicament (Amato & James, 2018). At the core of this struggle lies loneliness—not merely the absence of companionship, but a deep emotional and social isolation that serves as a conduit for depression and diminished life satisfaction in later life (Carr & Utz, 2020).

Although Western literature has extensively studied this domain, a significant gap in empirical research remains evident within South Asian nations. In the Indian context, the trauma of separation is often exacerbated by a long-standing social stigma and the apprehension of losing social standing within the joint family system (Rajan & Kumar, 2022). Conversely, for some individuals, the dissolution of a highly acrimonious marriage can pave the way for unexpected "post-traumatic growth" and a newfound sense of autonomy (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). Therefore, this research paper presents a systematic review of these interconnected realities. By integrating global trends with the evolving Indian landscape, our objective is to explore how loneliness impacts the well-being of the "silver" demographic, and to identify the cultural safeguards that may offer them protection.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The discourse surrounding late-life marital dissolution has evolved from viewing divorce as a mid-life crisis to recognizing it as a systemic demographic shift. Current research suggests that the "Grey Divorce" phenomenon is not merely about ending a marriage, but about redefining the psychological parameters of the "third act" of life (Lin & Brown, 2021).

Current psychological literature emphasizes a critical distinction between social loneliness (the lack of a network) and emotional loneliness (the lack of an intimate bond). While older divorcees in the West often have robust social networks, they frequently report "persistent emotional loneliness" that non-spousal relationships - such as friendships or even close ties with adult children - rarely mitigate (Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007). Furthermore, longitudinal data suggests a "gendered recovery path": while women often face greater financial challenges, men frequently experience a "delayed social loneliness." Men may appear resilient immediately after the split, but often show a significant psychological decline years later as the social circles previously maintained by their former wives begin to wither (Amato, 2010).

In India, the rise of grey divorce is being fueled by what scholars call "Individualized Marriage," where personal satisfaction is prioritized over traditional obligations (Cherlin, 2020). Recent studies using the Longitudinal Ageing Study in India (LASI) Wave-I data highlight that approximately 30-34% of the Indian elderly report feeling socially isolated, but this prevalence is significantly higher among those who are divorced or separated (Mishra et al., 2023).

Newer research identifies an "Urban-Rural Divide" in psychological outcomes. In urban centers, the "Empty Nest" syndrome often acts as a catalyst; once children move away for professional opportunities, the "functional" purpose of a low-quality marriage disappears, leading couples to opt for separation (Srivastava et al., 2021). However, unlike in Western contexts, Indian older adults face a "Double Stigma" - they are marginalized not just for the marital split, but for the perceived failure to

provide a stable domestic base for their adult children's future marital prospects (Rajan & Kumar, 2022). In the traditional Indian socio-cultural framework, the parental identity often supersedes the spousal identity; the couple's life revolves almost entirely around the milestones of their children. Consequently, when the 'nest' empties, the sudden absence of this collective purpose forces a painful transition from a 'Sacramental/Child-centric' alliance to an 'Individualized' marriage, where partners are often strangers to each other's evolving emotional needs.

Loneliness is increasingly recognized as a significant public health risk in geriatric literature. For the "Grey Divorcee," perceived isolation is often a stronger predictor of cardiovascular health and cognitive decline than traditional lifestyle risk factors (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Recent Indian studies have found that "marital quality" - rather than just marital status - is the true driver of well-being. Individuals remaining in "high-conflict" marriages often exhibit poorer psychological scores than those who have already completed the divorce process, suggesting that the chronic stress of a dysfunctional marriage is often more damaging than the event of dissolution (Hawkins & Booth, 2005; Srivastava et al., 2021). While the joint family was traditionally the primary buffer against geriatric isolation, modern research identifies "Social Capital" in new forms as a savior for Indian silver-splitters. Participation in community interest groups and peer-support networks has been shown to reduce "subjective loneliness" by providing a sense of "belonging without judgment" that traditional family structures, burdened by stigma, may no longer offer (Rajan & Kumar, 2022).

THE RESEARCH GAP

While the Western canon has extensively mapped the psychological trajectory of "Silver Splitters," our systematic review reveals three significant voids in the existing literature, particularly regarding the Global South.

The "Collectivist Penalty" vs. "Individualist Recovery"

Current global models, such as the Crisis Model of Divorce, are largely predicated on Western individualist societies where personal autonomy is the primary metric of well-being (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 2020). There is a stark lack of empirical research exploring whether these models hold true in India. In a culture where identity is deeply communal, does the "autonomy" gained through divorce compensate for the "social penalty" of being sidelined in family rituals? Most existing Indian studies focus on the legal or economic aspects of divorce, leaving the internal psychological landscape of the older Indian divorcee largely uncharted.

Longitudinal Persistence of Loneliness in India

Most available Indian data, including the LASI Wave 1 (2017-18), provides a cross-sectional "snapshot" of marital status. However, there is a lack of synthesized longitudinal evidence showing how loneliness evolves over time for an Indian senior post-divorce. We do not yet know if the Indian "Grey Divorcee" follows a path of chronic strain (where loneliness persists due to social stigma) or resilience (where loneliness decreases as they build new, non-traditional social anchors).

The Role of "Digital Social Capital" as a Buffer

Recent 2024–2025 literature has begun to hint at the role of technology in mitigating geriatric isolation (Thadathil, 2026). However, there is no comprehensive review that compares how older adults in India use digital spaces to navigate post-divorce loneliness compared to their Western counterparts. While Western seniors might use dating apps or formal support groups, Indian seniors often navigate informal, decentralized networks (like WhatsApp or spiritual forums). The effectiveness of these "hidden" support systems remains an underserved area of academic inquiry.

Research Questions

Based on the gaps identified above, this paper addresses the following questions:

- To what extent does "Grey Divorcee" correlate with higher UCLA Loneliness scores among Indian seniors compared to their married peers?
- How do cultural buffers (e.g., co-residence with adult children) in India moderate the relationship between divorce and psychological well-being compared to Western social buffers?
- Does the "Empty Nest" serve as a primary psychological trigger for late-life marital dissolution in urban Indian contexts?

METHODOLOGY

To ensure the highest level of academic rigor and transparency, this study adheres to the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) statement. This standardized

framework allows us to objectively synthesize diverse datasets from both Indian and Global contexts, ensuring that our findings are replicable and free from selection bias (Page et al., 2021).

Search Strategy and Data Acquisition

A systematic search was conducted across four primary digital repositories: PubMed/Medline, PsycINFO, Scopus, and JSTOR. Given the focus on the Indian socio-economic landscape, we also integrated grey literature and primary reports from the Longitudinal Ageing Study in India (LASI) and the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research (IGIDR).

The search utilized controlled vocabulary and Boolean logic to intersect three core domains:

1. The Demographic: "Grey Divorce," "Late-life separation," or "Silver Splitters."
2. The Psychological Mediator: "Loneliness," "Social Isolation," or "Perceived Social Support."
3. The Outcome Metric: "Subjective Well-being," "Life Satisfaction," or "Geriatric Depression."

Inclusion and Exclusion Framework

To maintain a "high-quality" threshold, studies were strictly filtered based on their methodological soundness. We focused on peer-reviewed empirical studies and large-scale longitudinal surveys published between 2015 and 2026. This timeframe is essential to capture the post-liberalization shifts in Indian family dynamics and the most recent global data following the COVID-19 pandemic - a period that significantly altered geriatric social patterns.

Inclusion: Quantitative studies using validated instruments (e.g., the UCLA Loneliness Scale or Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-being) and qualitative studies providing deep narrative insights into the Indian experience.

Exclusion: We excluded anecdotal editorials, non-peer-reviewed blog posts, and studies involving populations under the age of 50.

Data Synthesis and Quality Appraisal

Following the initial screening of abstracts, the remaining papers were subjected to a full-text review. Data were extracted into a comparative matrix to identify patterns in Gendered Outcomes, Financial Strain, and Social Buffers. The quality of the evidence was appraised using the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS), which specifically evaluates the risk of bias in non-randomized longitudinal studies - the primary source of data for the "Grey Divorce" phenomenon.

By intersecting the global empirical data with the cultural specificities identified through the LASI reports, this methodology ensures that the subsequent discussion is not merely theoretical. The search strategy specifically filters for 'perceived social support' and 'life satisfaction' to bridge the gap between objective marital status and the subjective internal experience of the aging individual.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic review suggest that "Grey Divorce" in the Indian context is not merely a legal dissolution but a profound disruption of the late-life attachment system. For an individual who has spent thirty or forty years identifying primarily through the lens of a "spouse" or "householder," the sudden removal of this role creates a vacuum that standard Western models of "autonomy" fail to fully capture (Srivastava et al., 2021).

The "Chronic Strain" of Social Identity Loss

In the West, psychological recovery post-divorce is often framed as a journey toward self-actualization. However, the synthesis of Indian data indicates a different trajectory. In India, the "Grey Divorcee" often experiences "Relational Displacement." When a marriage ends in later life, the individual doesn't just lose a partner; they often lose their "functional seat" at the family table. This leads to a specific type of Social Loneliness where the individual feels like a "guest" in their own extended family - a psychological strain that is a much stronger predictor of geriatric depression than the divorce event itself (Mishra et al., 2023). This 'Relational Displacement' manifests as a profound psychological homelessness. In a collectivist society like India, the divorcee often finds that their social 'gravity' was tied to the marital unit. Without that unit, they are frequently treated with a fragile politeness by extended kin - effectively becoming a 'guest' in spaces they once co-governed. This loss of authority and belonging within the family hierarchy creates a vacuum that triggers a more severe depressive response than the legal separation itself.

Attachment Security and the "Empty Nest" Catalyst

A recurring theme in the literature is the role of the "Empty Nest" as a psychological tipping point. From a clinical perspective, many long-term Indian marriages function as "child-centric alliances." Once adult children migrate for careers - a commonality in the urban Indian middle class - the "distraction" of parenting vanishes, forcing the couple to face the emotional distance they may have ignored for decades

(Rajan & Kumar, 2022). For the partner who did not initiate the split, this can trigger Anxious Attachment behaviors, where the fear of isolation exacerbates the perceived intensity of loneliness, leading to a rapid decline in subjective well-being (Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007).

The "Stigma-Loneliness" Feedback Loop

One of the most striking psychological nuances in the Indian context is Internalized Stigma. Unlike younger generations who may view divorce as a "reset," older Indian adults often process the split through the lens of "Generational Failure." They may withdraw from social religious gatherings or community celebrations to avoid the "pitying gaze" of peers. This self-imposed isolation creates a dangerous feedback loop: the individual withdraws to avoid stigma, which increases their loneliness, further diminishing their psychological resilience to cope with the life transition (Srivastava et al., 2021; Rajan & Kumar, 2022).

Psychological Buffers: Beyond the Family

Interestingly, data points toward the efficacy of "Cognitive Reframing." Those who maintain high well-being post-divorce are often those who successfully pivot their identity from "Spouse" to "Individual Seeker" or "Community Contributor." In the Indian psychological landscape, this often mirrors the transition into a more detached, spiritual, or community-focused life - reminiscent of traditional life-stage transitions. Research indicates that individuals who engage in "altruistic social networks" (volunteering or mentoring) report significantly lower UCLA Loneliness scores than those who attempt to recreate their lost domestic life through traditional family structures alone (Mishra et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

The "Grey Divorce" phenomenon represents a definitive departure from the traditional Indian life cycle, signaling a profound shift in the psychological contract of aging. As this systematic review has demonstrated, the intersection of marital dissolution, loneliness, and well-being in the "silver" demographic is not a linear path of decline, but a complex re-negotiation of selfhood (Cherlin, 2020). While global data emphasizes the pursuit of individual autonomy as a primary driver for late-life separation (Brown & Lin, 2012), the Indian experience is deeply colored by what can be termed a "Relational Penalty" - a psychological tax paid in the form of social displacement and internalized stigma. We find that loneliness in the Indian context is rarely a simple absence of company; it is a profound "loss of place" within a collectivist structure that has yet to create a supportive narrative for the independent, divorced senior (Mishra et al., 2023).

The synthesis of existing literature highlights a critical psychological juncture: the Empty Nest Catalyst. For many Indian couples, the departure of children strips away the "parental mask," leaving a vacuum of intimacy that often results in a late-life attachment crisis (Srivastava et al., 2021). However, there is an emerging counter-narrative of resilience. Older adults who successfully pivot their identity - moving from a "spouse-centric" existence to one defined by community contribution or broader social capital - exhibit a remarkable capacity for post-traumatic growth, effectively buffering against the chronic strain of isolation (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003; Rajan & Kumar, 2022).

Ultimately, the psychological well-being of the Indian "Grey Divorcee" depends on the society's ability to normalize this transition. There is an urgent need for geriatric-focused counseling models that move beyond the "reconciliation-first" approach typical of traditional frameworks. Instead, interventions must focus on Identity Reconstruction, helping the aging individual navigate the grief of a lost past while building a meaningful, autonomous future (Amato & James, 2018). As the "Silver Tsunami" continues to reshape India's demographic landscape, understanding the internal world of the divorced senior is no longer just an academic exercise—it is a clinical and social necessity.

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