

POST-DIVORCE GROWTH AMONG FEMALES WITH NARCISSISTIC PARTNERS

Sayeda Shah Taj^{*1}, Erum Makhdoom²

^{*1}BS Honors Psychology Government College University, Lahore

²Lecturer, Department of Psychology Government College University, Lahore

¹shtaj555@gmail.com, ²erummakhdoom@gcu.edu.pk

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22914824>

Keywords

Narcissistic Partner abuse, Divorced Pakistani women, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Self-transformation, identity, motherhood, and recovery.

Article History

Received: 01 June 2026

Accepted: 23 August 2026

Published: 23 September 2026

Copyright @Author

Corresponding Author: *

Sayeda Shah Taj

Abstract

The current research study investigated the lived experiences of Pakistani divorced women who have survived narcissistic partner abuse. The main focus of the current research is on post-divorce growth among females who had narcissistic partners. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit eight females whose partners were narcissistic, four were working women (age range: 30-40 years) and other four were housewives (age range: 18-40 years) with duration of their marriage ranging from 1.5 to 5 years. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted face to face, in Urdu or Punjabi language. Research design was Qualitative and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used. Six major themes were obtained from the results of current study. The main themes are as follows: Maternal Identity and Child-Centered Coping, Recovery or Healing through Emotional Regulation, Legal Awareness and Empowerment (Structural Resistance), Reframing of Marriage and other Relationships, Self-Transformation and Independence, and Distrust and Selective Attachment (Post-Trauma Relational Pattern). From the current study, the implications are for the clinical settings, social settings, family settings, educational settings, legal/policy settings and research settings. Overall, the study will help in enhancing awareness, developing therapeutic interventions and will provide protection to such victims by formulating new policies.

INTRODUCTION

Narcissism is a personality construct characterized by an inflated sense of self-importance, a strong need for admiration, and a limited capacity for empathy toward others. Narcissism originates from the Greek myth of Narcissus, a man who fell in love with his own reflection. It describes patterns of self-absorption which range from traits to full disorder. Individuals show low self-esteem which is masked by grandiosity, social

withdrawal due to shame, and vengeful reactions when needs go unmet. The narcissistic traits exist on a continuum within the general population. Maladaptive or extreme expressions of narcissism can significantly impair interpersonal relationships. Contemporary psychological literature distinguishes between two types of Narcissism. The one is, healthy narcissism which supports self-esteem and confidence and other is pathological narcissism, which is associated

with emotional exploitation, entitlement, and chronic relational dysfunction. Narcissism exists on a continuum.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5-TR) as a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). NPD requires at least five symptoms from DSM-5 criteria. These symptoms include a grandiose sense of self-importance, preoccupation with fantasies of success, belief in being special, excessive need for admiration, entitlement, exploitation of others, lack of empathy, envy, and arrogant behaviors. Symptoms of NPD emerge in early adulthood and across the contexts, leading to fragile self-esteem sensitive to criticism and is often responded to with rage or withdrawal.

Marriage with narcissistic partner involves a relationship which is characterized by projection, splitting, manipulation, gaslighting, emotional invalidation, control, devaluation and lack of empathy. Divorce following narcissistic abuse is increasingly recognized as a uniquely traumatic life event. It is often characterized by prolonged psychological distress, identity disruption, and complex recovery processes. Narcissistic abuse involves patterns of emotional manipulation, gaslighting, coercive control, devaluation, and intermittent reinforcement, which may persist during and after the marital relationship, particularly through post-divorce litigation, co-parenting conflicts, or smear campaigns. A relationship with a person or partner possessing narcissistic personality traits is difficult but it is psychologically abusive. This abuse is a systematic pattern of coercive control and manipulation designed to destabilize the partner's reality and erode their sense of self, all to serve the narcissist's need for dominance and supply. Narcissistic abuse is often covert and it is difficult to articulate. It leaves survivors feeling invalidated and misunderstood by family, legal systems, and mental health professionals. Following divorce, survivors or

partners frequently report symptoms consistent with complex trauma which includes hypervigilance, self-doubt, emotional numbing, and difficulties in trust and intimacy.

Post-divorce growth refers to positive psychological and personal changes that individuals or divorced women may experience when they are adapting to their life after divorce. Although divorce is often associated with emotional distress, loss, uncertainty, and disruption of established roles, it can also provide an opportunity for divorced people to reassess their priorities, develop greater self-awareness, and reconstruct their sense of identity. Post-divorce growth may include increased self-confidence, emotional strength, independence, improved decision-making, greater appreciation of life, and the development of new perspectives about relationships and personal goals. Such growth does not imply that the divorced individuals were unaffected by the difficulties of divorce but it suggests that positive changes may develop alongside continuing emotional challenges. Divorce from a narcissistic partner is recognized as a significant life transition that involves emotional adjustment, changes in family and social roles, reconstruction of identity, and development of new ways of coping. For such divorced women, the post-divorce period may involve both continuing emotional difficulties and opportunities for the positive change. Women gradually start to develop greater self-confidence, independence, emotional regulation, stronger boundaries, self-prioritization, and new perspectives about relationships and themselves.

For women, post-divorce growth may involve particularly important processes of reclaiming the self and rebuilding autonomy. After prolonged experience of abuse, women gradually start to regain confidence in their own perceptions and decisions. The post-divorce period allows them to establish healthier boundaries, prioritize their own needs, develop financial or emotional independence, and redefine their understanding of healthy relationships. Post-divorce growth may also involve the processes of

meaning-making and transformation. The victims start to reflect on their past experiences, identify lessons from the relationship, develop new coping strategies, and establish different expectations for future relationships. Therefore, it is important to examine post-divorce experiences which provides opportunity to understand how such women make sense of their lives and reconstruct their identities after leaving such toxic relationships.

Within the Pakistani context, post-divorce adjustment for women is further influenced by the expectations of their families, social stigma attached to divorce, concerns about children, financial challenges, and societal pressure to maintain marriage. But they have various support sources like supportive family relationships, personal coping strategies, financial independence, spirituality, and psychological support which contribute to the recovery and growth in women. Exploring post-divorce growth among women whose partners were narcissistic provide insight into how they navigate and deal with these challenges, rebuild their lives, and find new meaning following divorce.

Existing literature on divorce and intimate partner abuse has largely focused on physical violence or general emotional abuse. It often overlooks the specific dynamics and long-term psychological consequences of narcissistic abuse. Despite an extensive body of research available on exploring symptoms, causes and treatments of NPD, there is a distinguishing gap in understanding psycho-social factors impacts on the life of women partners suffering from Narcissistic abusive partner. A study was conducted on post-separation abuse as it is a pervasive societal and public health problem. The method used was mixed method, literature review or theoretical research. The researchers reviewed the whole literature from articles published since 1987. The study aimed to critically synthesize the evidence on tactics and consequences of post-separation abuse. Another study conducted on post-divorce abuse focused on violence in families. According to study one in three US women experience Narcissistic abuse and intimate partner violence (IPV)

during their lifetime, and intimate partner homicide is a leading cause of mortality for women of reproductive age (Campbell et al., 2003; Wilson et al., 2022). Separation is commonly assumed to be the solution to ending Narcissistic abuse. Yet, a robust body of research has identified that separation is not end to violence but it is also a risk factor for lethality, continued or worsened IPV, and the occasional initiation of abuse for female victims (Rezey, 2020). Post-separation abuse includes patterns of legal, economic, psychological, and mesosystem abuse etc. (Spearman et al., 2022; Stark & Hester, 2019).

Research has found that constantly living with fear and anxiety caused by narcissistic abuse can keep cortisol levels unnaturally high and negatively impacts the brain. It is clear that repeated emotional trauma can lead to PTSD and C-PTSD. Repeated emotional "injuries" caused by Narcissistic partner can also shrink the hippocampus but enlarges the amygdala. A study focused on prevalence of narcissistic abuse and intimate partner violence during the COVID-19 pandemic's isolation period. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected preexisting abusive behaviors and simultaneously provided new opportunities, during the isolation period, for the abusers to control and manipulate their partners. Female victims of intimate partner violence or narcissistic abuse used coping strategies and remained resilient to psychologically heal themselves.

Research Question

How do women who have experienced narcissistic abuse in marriage make sense of their post-divorce growth and personal transformation?

Conceptual Framework for Females Post-Divorce Growth

The current study is conducted with the perspective of Biopsychosocial Model of Health and Trauma Theory, especially Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD) (Herman, 1992), which focus on psychosocial experiences and the conceptualization of narcissistic abuse as a relational trauma which is central to the

literature (Day et al., 2020). Narcissistic abuse is viewed as a form of relational trauma which effect psychological well-being, physical health, relationships, coping, and social functioning of victims. The post-divorce experience is multidimensional and influenced by family, social, financial, and cultural factors.

Post-divorce growth among these women is conceptualized as a process of psychological adjustment, meaning-making, and personal transformation after the end of a highly distressing marital relationship. Prolonged narcissistic abuse causes adverse effects on self-worth, emotional well-being, identity, trust, and sense of autonomy. However, divorce can also represent a turning point through which women begin to reconstruct their identities, regain control over their decisions, develop healthier boundaries, and recognize their personal strengths. In this framework, post-divorce growth is understood not just as the absence of distress, but it is taken as the emergence of positive psychological changes alongside the challenges of recovery. These changes may include increased self-confidence, independence, emotional regulation, self-prioritization, improved relationships, and a renewed sense of purpose, for the victims. The framework of current research study further draws on the concept of post-traumatic growth. According to this, the individuals who have faced significant adversities may experience positive changes in their perceptions of themselves, relationships, and future possibilities. Women who are recovering from narcissistic abuse, for them growth may occur through processes like coping, reflection, acceptance, cognitive restructuring, social support, and meaning-making. Within the Pakistani sociocultural context, this process of growth is additionally impacted by family expectations, divorce-related stigma, motherhood, financial circumstances, spirituality, and social support. Therefore, the present study conceptualizes post-divorce growth as a subjective and context-dependent process through which women make sense of their experiences and reconstruct their

identities, relationships, and future after divorce from a narcissistically abusive partner.

Methodology

The current research study utilized a qualitative method research design to explore the post-divorce growth for victims, whose partners were narcissistically abusive from the perspective of divorced women in Pakistan. For analyzing qualitative data, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used. Because the phenomenon is subjective, deeply personal, IPA is an appropriate methodological framework to capture the participants' experiential realities and to understand their own sense making rather than measuring predefined variables by using Quantitative method. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit eight females, four of them were working (age range: 30-40 years) and other four were house-wives (age range: 18- 40 years) with duration of their abusive marriage ranging from 1.5 to 5 years whose partners were narcissistic abusers. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted face to face with all participants, in Punjabi or Urdu language. The interview with each participant lasted approximately 40-50 minutes and was held in privacy. All the interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, upon completion. Interviews were later transcribed and field notes regarding non-verbal communication and emotional expressiveness were made. Upon receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) clearance, each interview participant provided their written informed consent. It upheld standards of confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary participation and conducted in accordance with ethical research principles. It systematically examined the patterns and themes associated with Maternal Identity and Child-Centered Coping, Recovery or Healing through Emotional Regulation, Legal Awareness and Empowerment (Structural Resistance), Reframing of Marriage and other Relationships, Self-Transformation and Independence, and Distrust and Selective Attachment (Post-Trauma Relational Pattern). Although post-divorce growth among women

who have experienced narcissistic abuse remains under-researched, existing literature on trauma, recovery, and post-divorce adjustment provides support for my research findings.

The purpose of the current study was to explore the growth and coping mechanisms of divorced women, whose partners were narcissistically abusive.

Results

Table 1 Themes, Sub-themes, Quotes of Participants (Post-divorce)

Themes	Sub-themes	Illustrative Quotes (Participant's Statement)
Maternal Identity and Child-Centered Coping	-Hyper-responsibility for Child -Protective Parenting -Attachment Rebuilding -Fear of Child Trauma Perception	"Biggest blessing of Allah for me is my son. He helped me so much in recovery. When my son is with me, I don't feel depression. I feel depressed when I am alone" "My goal is to become a totally and
Recovery or Healing Though Emotional Regulation	-Acceptance of past Trauma -Emotional management Skills -Mindfulness and coping Strategies -Gradual Healing, not Full Recovery	Actually, independent woman and proudly single mother" "Now, I don't depend on anyone emotionally. Now my feelings or emotions don't develop easily for anyone because I have done mistake by trusting on that person" "I use technique of mindfulness and I write journals. Besides this I like to talk to those people who are close to me. I have started to travel. I avail opportunity to spend my time with nature"
Legal Awareness And Empowerment (Structural Resistance)	-Knowledge of rights -Using legal system as protection -Resistance to legal Institutions manipulation -Confidence in legal Navigation	"There are rights in Pakistan which protect rights of women. Women should know, understand and use these laws. They should have legal knowledge to avoid being manipulated by lawyers. And be assertive in such situations"
Reframing of Marriage And other Relations	-Marriage not as guaranteed solution -Awareness of red flags (warning signs) -Shift from Idealization to Realism -Relationship as choice, not obligation	"If your partner is unable to do something extra-ordinary for you, still its okay. This does not mean that the person does not love you. Minor efforts should be counted as love also" "I have set my boundaries and I don't allow anyone to interfere in my life. Now, I feel very peaceful"
Self-Transformation And Independence	-Financial independence -Self-Prioritization -Identity Reconstruction (as single mother)	"The strategy for coping which I used is working on myself, to make myself better. I also improved myself professionally. I made myself better

	-Self-confidence and	financially and I have made myself
to myself	Autonomy	capable of achieving all good things” “I think after abuse I have recognized the importance of self-love. Now, I have started to give priority
me		and I focus on things which makes happy”
Distrust and Selective Attachment (post-trauma Relational Pattern)	-Distrust in men or relationships -Selective emotional Bonding -Fear-based relational caution	“Now, I don’t believe un people claims of loving me. I don’t trust these verbal claims because I will not be able to believe until they prove this with their behaviors or actions” “In our society, marriage is marketed as a solution of all problems. But before marriage, you should decide if you want to accept this deal, of whether going into a trauma or relationship”

Maternal Identity and Child-Centered Coping

The superordinate theme of “Maternal Identity and Child-Centered Coping” reflected that after abusive relationship and separation participants started to focus on the well-being of their children. Most of the divorced women used this for coping with narcissistic abuse and divorce. Motherhood provided strength and purpose to women during distress. Participants also described that they endured difficulties and made sacrifices for their children. These participants used caregiving as a key coping strategy after divorce.

As participant no 1

“I shift my attention towards my children and say to myself that

I am lucky that my children are with me and I am working hard for them.”

Participant 1 has described that after abusive relationship and divorce; she has shifted all her attention towards her children. She does self-talk to herself, when she feels imbalance in her life. She feels lucky to have her children with her. She described that she feels lucky because she is working hard for her children, to fulfill

their needs and to provide them with a good future.

After abusive relationship ends, women usually get involved in post-divorce shift in meaning-making. The women who have become mothers, their children become the central focus of emotional investment and life purpose for them. They use their motherhood as an active cognitive coping strategy which they use to regulate emotional imbalance and maintain psychological stability. They engage in caregiving. The responsibility of children helps them to reconstruct their identity around resilience and “providing mother”. This offers a renewed sense of value and direction. Motherhood become both a source of meaning and a protective coping mechanism in victims following post-abuse adjustment.

As participant no 3

“Biggest blessing of Allah for me is my son. He helped me so much in my recovery. When my son is with me, I don’t feel depression. I feel depressed when I am alone.”

Participant 3 has described that after her abusive relationship ends; she is still thankful to Allah. She is most thankful to Allah for having

a son. She described that her son is biggest blessing of Allah in her life and her son helped her so much to recover psychologically from abusive experiences. She said that when her son is with her, she feels no depression at all. She feels depression when she is alone.

For many women, post-divorce meaning-making process involves their attachment with their children. Child may become a central source of emotional stability and recovery. They express gratitude to Allah or God which suggests spiritual coping along with maternal attachment as key resources for psychological resilience. The victim women may use coping strategy of presence-based regulation. Because of this strategy their depressive feelings reduce significantly, especially in presence of their children. The caregiving and maternal bonding may function as protective factors against post-abuse emotional distress.

As participant no 5

“My goal is to become a totally and in actually independent woman and proudly single mother.”

Participant no 5 has described her life goal and ultimate wish. She said that she wanted to become a really independent woman. She said that she also wants to become a proudly single mother.

Mostly, after divorce women reconstruct their identities. Gaining independence becomes central to their sense of self and future aspirations. Such women also show desire to become a “proudly single mother”. These goals and orientations of life reflect movement from dependency and emotional control toward autonomy, self-respect, and empowerment. Motherhood function not only as a responsibility but also as a meaningful source of strength and purpose for women. These future-oriented goals reflect adaptive coping and psychological rebuilding after the abusive experience.

Recovery or Healing Thorough Emotional Regulation

This superordinate theme reflected the efforts of participants to regain emotional stability

after narcissistic abuse and divorce. Participants described that they used self-talk, spirituality, caregiving, and future goals to manage their emotional distress. For them, healing appeared as a gradual process of emotional adjustment and rebuilding inner stability.

As participant no 2

“I accepted the decision of Allah and my remaining family also had to accept that.

I accepted the decision of Allah unwillingly; this was not my wish.”

Participant 2 has described that she accepted the decision of Allah and her family also accepted that. The participant herself did not wish for this but she also unwillingly accepted this.

After divorce or separation, women get recover by emotional regulation through acceptance and spiritual meaning-making. They accept the decision of Allah or God which help them to manage emotional distress. Then, gradually women adjust to an unwanted life situation. Their initial unwilling and then acceptance suggests an ongoing emotional struggle. But they use this as an adaptive coping process which is shaped by faith and familial acceptance.

As participant no 4

“I use technique of mindfulness and I write journals. Besides this I like to talk to those people who are closed to me. I have started to travel. I avail opportunity to spend my time with nature,”

Participant 4 has narrated that after her divorce, she uses the strategy of mindfulness to regulate her emotions and to heal herself. She said she write journals and she talk to people who are close to her. She also travels and spends time with nature.

People use active and self-directed process of emotional healing after divorce. The practices of mindfulness, journaling, social connection, and spending time in nature appear to function as emotional regulation strategies for victims of abuse. These strategies help them to process distress and to restore psychological balance. They engage in these coping mechanisms which

highlights increased self-awareness and intentional efforts of victim toward recovery and personal well-being.

Legal Awareness and Empowerment (Structural Resistance)

This superordinate theme from master table reflected that participants has growing awareness of their rights and efforts to challenge the abusive relationships despite societal pressure. Women or victims seeking divorce, independence, and personal security reflected movement from silence and dependency toward self-advocacy and empowerment.

As participant no 6

“But yes, here in Pakistan, tell me any such case where before divorce, husband supported the wife by supporting (compensating) her financially. This never happened. Even if u take legal action women get nothing or even if get something in return it is very less.”

Participant 6 has narrated that in Pakistan, women or wife is not compensated by husband.

Husband don't give anything in return to support the woman financially. There are no such cases in our country, where man or husband did this. She further highlighted that even, if women take legal action against this injustice of their husband, mostly they receive nothing. Sometimes, if they get something, it is very less.

In Pakistan, women have feelings of financial vulnerability and perceived lack of structural support for them, after divorce. Women feel sense of injustice and helplessness regarding their limited access to financial compensation and legal protection after marital abuse. Therefore, structural and legal limitations may further intensify emotional and economic insecurity in women, after divorce.

As participant no 5

“There are laws in Pakistan which protect rights of women. Women should know, understand and use these laws. They should have legal knowledge to avoid

being manipulated by lawyers. And be assertive in such situations.”

Participant 5 has described that there are many laws in women, which protect the rights of women. She said that women should have knowledge about their rights, legal laws and should use these as a shield and for having a sense of security. She further highlighted that lawyers or other legal actors also manipulate women, therefore having legal knowledge is very necessary. She said that women should behave assertively in these situations.

The development of legal awareness and assertiveness may act as forms of empowerment for divorced women or victims of abuse. There should be emphasis on knowledge of women rights. This can help women in shifting from vulnerability and dependency toward self-protection and informed decision-making. In Pakistan, women have distrust toward legal and social systems. There is perceived need for women to remain psychologically alert and assertive while navigating post-divorce challenges, especially in legal situations.

Reframing of Marriage and other relationships

The superordinate theme reflected that participants changed their perceptions of marriage, trust, and emotional relationships after narcissistic abuse and divorce. They described that they have become more cautious, emotionally guarded, and doubtful about emotional dependency and commitment. Abusive experiences reshaped their understanding of emotional safety and marital relationships.

As participant no 1

“I am unable to trust anyone.”

Participant 1 has narrated her extra-ordinary fear of going into relationship because of very strong betrayal. It is human nature that if an incident or experience hurts someone deeply, they develop deep fear. She has described that she has become unable to continue that activity or relationship. She avoids future relationship After extreme abusive relationship and betrayal by partner, victims develop intense fear and

emotional avoidance toward all future relationships. They associate intimate relationships with emotional pain and psychological harm. This perception leads to withdrawal from relational involvement. They avoid of future relationships. Victims use this as a protective coping strategy which develops in response to abuse, and prevent further emotional injury and restore a sense of safety.

As participant no 3

"If your partner is unable to do something extra-ordinary for you, still it's okay.

This does not mean that the person does not love you. Minor efforts should be counted as love, also."

Participant 3 narrated that to make sense of relationships, it is necessary to redefine love in more realistic and emotionally balanced terms. According to her, people should not associate love with grand gestures. She said that she also value consistency, small efforts, and emotional presence within a relationship. This is her attempt to reconstruct her understanding of love and relational expectations after painful marital experiences.

After abusive relationships, people or victims reconstruct their meaning-making process and reframe their perception of marriage and other relationship. Their understanding of love and relationships changes after painful abusive experiences. They move away from idealized expectations of love toward valuing emotional consistency, care, and presence in the relationships. They made attempts to emotionally reorganize relational expectations in a more realistic and psychologically safe manner after experiencing abuse and disappointment.

As participant no 4

"I have set my boundaries and I don't allow anyone to interfere in my life. Now, I feel very peaceful."

Participant 4 narrated that she makes sense of her experiences by viewing personal boundaries as a source of emotional safety and inner peace, in relationships. She has experienced interference and emotional distress in past

relationship of her marriage. But now, she values autonomy and control over her personal life. She believed that maintaining boundaries in relations seems to represent self-protection, emotional stability, and psychological relief.

After being a victim of abuse in marital relationship, victims get involve in psychological restructuring of marriage and other relations. They set personal boundaries and personal safety become central to their understanding of healthy relationships after abuse. They emphasize on autonomy and personal control which indicates their effort to restore emotional safety and protect themselves from further psychological distress. The process of boundary-setting becomes associated with emotional stability, self-preservation, and regained sense of inner peace after the abusive marital experience.

Self-Transformation and Independence

The superordinate theme of "Self-Transformation and Independence" reflected that participants have shift toward autonomy, self-prioritization, and identity reconstruction after narcissistic abuse and divorce. Victims described that have increased self-confidence, emotional strength, and they focus on motherhood and personal growth. This indicates movement of participants from dependency toward psychological empowerment and independence.

As participant no 1

"The strategy for coping, which I used is working on myself, make myself better.

I also improved myself professionally, I made myself better financially and I have made myself capable of achieving all good things."

Participant 1 has described that she made sense of her experience through self-improvement which she used as a coping strategy. She views personal, professional, and financial growth as a way to regain control and self-worth. According to her, becoming capable reflects rebuilding confidence and empowerment after the past difficulties.

After abusive relationships, victims may involve in process of self-development. This becomes a

central coping strategy for them. They start to focus on their personal, professional, and financial growth. This is an effort to restore agency and rebuild a disrupted sense of self-worth. Victims or women put emphasis on “becoming capable” and this highlights a reconstruction of identity which is grounded in competence, control, and they regain confidence after experiences of emotional disempowerment.

As participant no 8

“I think after abuse, I have recognized the importance of self-love. Now, I have started to give priority to myself and I focus on those things which makes me happy.”

Participant 8 as described that after abusive marital experience, she has recognized self-love as important. She has learned to give priority to herself and her own well-being. Now, she focuses on what makes her happy. This reflects her way of valuing her own needs and emotional satisfaction. According to her, self-prioritization represents a positive shift in how she lives her present life.

After abuse, self-love becomes central to the recovery of victims. They shift their focus on themselves and start to give priority to themselves. Through this they rebuild their self-worth and emotional needs after facing neglect in the marital relationship. This process indicates an adaptive shift of victims toward their own well-being and identity reconstruction after divorce.

Distrust and Selective Attachment (Post-Traumatic Relational Pattern)

This superordinate theme reflected the reduced trust and emotional caution of participants after narcissistic abuse and divorce. They described fear of being hurt again and feel reluctant to again form close relationships. Victims showed preference for selective bonding which is shaped by past betrayal and emotional harm.

As participant no 1

“Now, I don’t believe in people claims of loving me. I don’t trust these verbal claims because I will not be able to believe until they don’t prove this with their behaviors or actions.”

Participant 1 has narrated that after abusive marital experience; she has become skeptical of verbal expressions of love. She understands that words alone are no longer enough to develop trust on people or to feel emotional safety. But now she relies on actions and consistent behavior as proof of genuine care or love. She claimed that her trust will only build through observable behavior rather than only spoken claims.

After traumatic abusive experiences, victims reconstruct their sense of trust. For them, verbal assurances of love lost credibility because of their past relational betrayal. They start to give value to observable behavior. This change indicates an attempt to re-establish emotional safety through more concrete and reliable cues. Victims of narcissistic become hyper-vigilant in interpersonal evaluation. They start to trust behavior of consistency and actions rather than words. This is an adaptive but guarded relational stance which is shaped by previous emotional harm.

Participant no 7

“In our society, marriage is marketed as solution of all problems. But before marriage, you should decide if you want to accept this deal, of whether going into a trauma or relationship.”

Participant 7 has narrated that marriage is idealized in her society (Pakistan). She said that marriage is often portrayed as a solution of problems, to women or girls. But she claims that in reality marriage can also bring emotional difficulties or trauma. She said for her, entering into a marital relationship feels like a decision that should be carefully considered rather than assumed to be positive. She frames it as a “deal” where one should be aware of both possible happiness and suffering. The critical re-evaluation of culturally idealized narratives which is associated with marriage is necessary. There is need of a shift from socially endorsed expectations of marriage as inherently

positive toward a more cautious and experiential understanding, which may be reshaped by personal trauma. In some societies, especially Pakistan marriage is like a “deal”. Because there are also potential emotional risks and benefits related to marriage in some societies or cultures. Both sides of marriage should be acknowledged. Sometimes, after abusive relations, victims reconstruct their worldview about marriage which is influenced by lived experience of marital distress and psychological harm.

Discussion

The current study aimed to explore the growth, healing and coping mechanisms of divorce women whose partners were narcissistically abusive. Primarily the interviews explained the impact of narcissistic abuse on their psychological well-being and post-divorce growth to a great extent. There is multitude of research about experiences of women whose partners were narcissistically abusive and its impact but there is very limited research done on post-divorce growth and self-transformation of victims.

The findings from the current study provide strong evidence of the diverse ways in which victims of narcissistic abuse showed post-divorce growth and self-transformation. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) key themes explored which were, Maternal Identity and Child-Centered Coping, Recovery or Healing through Emotional Regulation, Legal Awareness and Empowerment, Reframing of Marriage and other Relationships, Self-Transformation and Independence and Distrust and Selective Attachment, offering a comprehensive understanding of the Post-Narcissistic Abuse Divorce and also its impacts on victims and their children, under the Pakistani Cultural context.

The present study explored post-divorce growth among women who had experienced narcissistic abuse from their partners. The findings of study suggested that although participants experienced significant emotional distress, manipulation, self-doubt, and relational

difficulties, divorce also became a turning point for victims, which facilitated self-awareness, independence, stronger boundaries, and reconstruction of identity. My research findings are consistent with the concept of posttraumatic growth, which proposed that individuals may experience positive psychological changes following highly challenging experiences (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Participants of the current research reported that they have developed greater confidence, autonomy, and awareness of their personal needs after leaving the abusive relationship. This growth reflected a process of rebuilding the self after prolonged emotional invalidation and control. Previous researches also suggested that survivors of intimate partner violence may experience positive changes like increased personal strength, improved self-understanding, and greater appreciation of life alongside psychological distress (Anderson et al., 2012). Thus, the findings of current study indicate that recovery does not necessarily mean the complete absence of distress but it includes positive changes which may develop alongside continuing emotional difficulties.

The themes obtained from current study also highlighted motherhood, independence, and coping as important sources of growth. Women described that they have become more responsible, self-reliant, and focus more on creating a safer environment for their children. This self-transformation in victims, suggest that personal adversity may contribute to the development of new priorities and sources of meaning for people.

Importantly, the Pakistani sociocultural context appeared to shape the experiences of female victims. Social stigma of divorce, family expectations, and pressure to maintain marriage intensify the challenges faced by divorced women. Therefore, the development of autonomy and self-worth is understood not only as recovery from narcissistic abuse but it is also as a process of negotiating or dealing with broader social expectations. The current study themes of maternal identity, self-transformation, independence and legal

awareness and resistance provide nuanced psychological insights and were under-explored in Pakistani qualitative literature on divorce and narcissistic abuse.

Implications of the Study

The results of current study significantly impact multiple clinical, social and policy levels. Mental health professionals can use findings of the study to develop trauma-informed interventions which focus on self-esteem, self-blame, emotional regulation, boundaries, and identity reconstruction. Therapy can provide support to these women in recognizing their strengths, autonomy, and post-divorce growth, rather than focusing only on psychological distress. The findings of study also highlight the need to reduce stigma attached to divorce and should increase social support for divorced women. Families and communities should provide emotional, practical, and financial support rather than pressuring women to remain in abusive relationships. Awareness programs should be started to help people recognize emotional and narcissistic abuse, which is less visible than physical abuse. New policies should be made to strengthen access of victims to psychological, legal, and financial support during and after narcissistic abuse and divorce. Early identification of psychological abuse and safe pathways for seeking help can be promoted through public awareness programs and community-based services. Legal and social-support systems should consider the specific needs and challenges of women who get divorce from psychologically abusive partners. Developing structured systems of support will improve outcomes for victims of abusive relationships and divorce. It will also enhance the overall well-being of their children and families, as well.

Limitations and Suggestions

One of the limitations of the current study is that the researcher may increase the data for study with variety of demographics. The study used a small, purposive sample, which limits the generalizability of the findings to all divorced women. Interpretative

Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which is a qualitative research design was used but future researcher can use mixed method studies. The current study focused on women who experienced narcissistic abuse, so the findings may not apply to other forms of marital abuse. The research was conducted within the Pakistani sociocultural context. Future researchers can study other cultures for finding the post-growth in other populations. The study relied on self-reported experiences of victims, which may have been influenced by memory, emotional state, or willingness of victims to disclose sensitive experiences of their life. The study results have following suggestions: Regardless of the fruitful insights about growth and self-transformation in victims, the focus of the future researcher shall be on using larger and more diverse samples to explore post-divorce growth across different socioeconomic statuses and demographic groups. Longitudinal research can be done to examine how psychological recovery and post-divorce growth in victims change over time. Future research can also do comparison between women who experienced narcissistic abuse with women who experienced other forms of intimate partner abuse. Future research can also study quantitative measures of posttraumatic growth, psychological distress, self-esteem, and resilience alongside qualitative interviews. Similar other studies should be conducted in different cultural and geographical contexts to determine which aspects of post-divorce growth are culturally specific and which are more universal.

Conclusion

The current research study explored the growth, self-transformation, adjustment and coping mechanisms in divorced women who remained in narcissistically abusive marriages. The findings of study indicate that, although victims of abuse experienced substantial emotional distress, self-doubt, manipulation, and relational difficulties, the process of leaving the abusive relationship also facilitated meaningful psychological transformation. The victims developed greater self-awareness, independence,

self-confidence, stronger personal boundaries, and a clearer sense of identity. It means that post-divorce growth is not just the absence of pain but it is a gradual process of reconstructing meaning, rebuilding the self, and developing new perspectives after abuse. Motherhood, coping strategies, social support, and the recognition of personal strengths also appeared to contribute to this growth after divorce. The women recovering from narcissistic abuse should be understood not only in terms of the psychological harm they experienced but also in terms of their resilience, agency, and capacity for growth. In Pakistani sociocultural context, divorce is accompanied by stigma, family and societal pressures. Therefore, the development of autonomy and reclaiming one's identity represent a particularly significant form of post-divorce growth. The current study therefore emphasizes the importance of trauma-informed psychological support which can address both the consequences of abuse and the potential of victims for recovery, empowerment, and personal transformation, during and after abuse or divorce.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this manuscript.

Funding Statement

This research received no external funding. All activities, including study design, data collection, analysis and manuscript preparation, were carried out independently by the authors.

Authors Contributions

Sayeda Shah Taj has contributed to the study conception, data collection, primary analysis, drafting of initial manuscript, data analysis and interpretation. Erum Makhdoom has assisted in refining the study design, data analysis and led the critical revision of manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

REFERENCES

- American Psychiatric Association. (2022). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed., text rev.; DSM-5-TR). American Psychiatric Association Publishing.
<https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425787>
- Baker, A. J. L., & Darnall, D. (2006). Behaviors and strategies employed in parental alienation: A survey of parental experiences. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 45(1-2), 97-124.
https://doi.org/10.1300/J087v45n01_06
- Carnes, P. (1997). The betrayal bond: Breaking free of exploitive relationships. Health Communications.
- Cloitre, M., Courtois, C. A., Charuvastra, A., Carapezza, R., Stolbach, B. C., & Green, B. L. (2013). Treatment of complex PTSD: Results of the ISTSS expert clinician survey on best practices. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 24(6), 615-627.
- Herman, J. L. (1992). Trauma and recovery. Basic Books.
- Newton, T. L., Szabo, Y. Z., Warnecke, A., & Cerrillos, A. M. (2025). Survivors' perspectives on positive life changes and growth after intimate partner abuse. *Violence Against Women*
- Payson, E. (2017). The wizard of Oz and other narcissists: Coping with the one-way relationship in work, love, and family (2nd ed.). Julian Day Publications.
- Saleem, J., Khalil, A., Jahan, N., Fatima, U., & Khan, A. D. S. (2025). Exploring mental health and social support among divorced women.
- Waseem, J., Muneer, R., Hoor-Ul-Ain, S., Tariq, R., & Minhas, A. (2020). Psychosocial determinants of divorce and their effects on women in Pakistan: A national review. *International Journal of Human Rights in Healthcare*.

Rezay, M. L. (2020). Separated women's risk for intimate partner violence: A multiyear analysis using the National Crime Victimization Survey. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 35(5-6), 1055-1080.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260517692334>

Spearman, K. J., et al. (2023). Post-separation abuse: A concept analysis. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 79(3), 1225-1238. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.15310>

Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror*. Basic Books.

Anderson, K. M., Renner, L. M., & Danis, F. S. (2012). Recovery: Resilience and growth in the aftermath of domestic violence. *Violence Against Women*, 18(11), 1279-1299.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801212470543>

