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ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

Understanding the Constructed Values of Divorced Women through a Laddering-Based Qualitative Inquiry

Sheiladevi Sukumaran[1], Parvathi Wajindram[2]*, Sillalee S. Kandasamy[3], Li Qianfan[4], Ferdinal[5]

[1]Faculty of Education and Liberal Arts, INTI International University, Seremban, Malaysia

[2,3]Department of Indian Studies, University Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

[4]Guangzhou College of Technology and Business School, Guangzhou, China

[5]Fakultas Ilmu Budaya, Universitas Andalas, West Sumatra, Indonesia

Abstract— Malaysian Indian women's divorce remains a highly stigmatized experience shaped by patriarchal norms, cultural expectations, and community surveillance, yet limited research has examined how women reconstruct identity and personal values following marital dissolution. This study employs a laddering-based phenomenological approach grounded in Personal Construct Theory and Feminist Theory to explore hierarchical meaning-making processes among twelve purposively selected participants. Data were collected through semi-structured laddering interviews and analysed using thematic interpretation and hierarchical value mapping. The findings reveal a structured transformation from experiences of oppression, humiliation, emotional deprivation, and economic vulnerability toward reconstructed values of freedom, self-respect, security, and personal achievement. These transitions demonstrate that post-divorce adaptation is not merely behavioural but cognitively and socially reconstructed within cultural constraints. The study contributes theoretically by integrating micro-level cognitive restructuring with macro-level gendered power relations, and practically by informing culturally sensitive empowerment and support interventions aligned with the United Nations sustainable development goal 5 and the United Nations sustainable development goal 10.

Index Terms— Divorce, Value reconstruction, Laddering technique, Personal Construct Theory, Feminist Theory, Malaysian Indian women, Empowerment, Gender inequality, SDG 5, SDG 10

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Introduction

Divorce represents a complex psychosocial transition that reshapes identity, relationships, and future orientation. In the Malaysian context, particularly within the Malaysian Indian community, divorce is deeply embedded in patriarchal norms, cultural expectations, and moral judgments that disproportionately affect women. These sociocultural dynamics intensify stigma and constrain women's capacity to reconstruct identity following marital dissolution. Existing Malaysian research has largely focused on legal and demographic dimensions of divorce, while insufficient attention has been given to subjective experiences, cognitive restructuring, and value transformation. This gap is particularly evident in studies examining how women reinterpret their lived experiences and rebuild personal meaning systems after divorce.

This study addresses this gap by examining the hierarchical processes through which divorced Malaysian Indian women reconstruct values and identity. Drawing on Personal Construct Theory and Feminist Theory, the research explores both the internal cognitive restructuring of

*Email: parvathi@um.edu.my

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meaning and the external sociocultural constraints shaping women's experiences. By applying a laddering-based qualitative approach, the study provides a systematic understanding of how negative marital experiences are transformed into empowering value systems.

The current studies on Malaysia have mainly considered legal, demographic, or socioeconomic characteristics of divorce (Karupiah, 2022), whereas insufficient information exists about subjective experiences of women, the identity reconstruction process, and the formation of values after divorce. Recent research highlights the necessity of enhanced qualitative investigations that would help understand how women interpret, manage, and overcome the psychological and cultural burdens of divorce (Davis, 1993; Muller, 2021). Nevertheless, gender, cultural, caste-based duty, and community policing are deeply uncharted in the Malaysian Indian setting, which presents an evident gap in the current scholarship.

This research attempts to fill this gap by considering the reasons and effects of marriage breakages and especially how the women who are divorced among the Malaysian Indians evaluate the meaning of their lives before and after a divorce, as something that has not been well examined in the local and international studies. This study will use the laddering technique, which is a methodology that is based on Personal Construct Theory (PCT), in order to trace the meaning-making by women in relation to surface-level marital problems to more profound psychological values, in a systematic manner. This method allows researchers to discover the hierarchical thinking roads and expose how women can turn painful experiences into empowerment and self-identification sources.

Although available literature recognizes resilience of women post-divorce, limited studies have examined the multifaceted journey of how divorced Malaysian Indian women transform humiliation, oppression, emotional deprivation, or economic burden into empowering beliefs such as dignity, autonomy, and achievement. This paper thus offers a timely, theoretically informed discussion of the reconstruction of feminist value duration, between micro-level meaning-making (PCT) and macro-level gendered power relations (Feminist Theory).

The issue that this research is aimed at addressing is that few academic sources exist that may describe how Malaysian Indian women rebuild themselves and their core values after a divorce, in spite of a strong cultural stigma and a lack of community resources that can be used by them. The recent literature emphasizes the role of women following divorce, although empirical research based on modern qualitative tools like laddering is still limited, especially in Malaysia. This gap is what requires a strict examination of the ways divorced women define their changing sense of self, emotional changes, and value structures after marital divorce.

Research objectives

This study aims to explore the personal and sociocultural factors influencing divorce decisions among Malaysian Indian women, examine the emotional and behavioural consequences of marital dissolution, and analyse how women reconstruct identity and core values following divorce. It seeks to answer how women interpret the causes of divorce, how they experience its psychological and social impacts, and how they redefine their self-concept and aspirations within a culturally constrained environment.

Research gap

Despite increasing scholarly attention to divorce, significant gaps remain in understanding post-divorce value reconstruction among Malaysian Indian women. Existing studies rarely apply advanced qualitative methodologies such as laddering to examine hierarchical meaning-making processes. Furthermore, there is limited integration of Personal Construct Theory and Feminist Theory in analysing identity reconstruction within this context. The absence of in-depth qualitative research addressing emotional disruption and psychological recovery highlights the need for a theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous investigation.

Research purpose

This paper discusses the meaning of divorce to the Malaysian Indian women, how the women interpret the reasons for their marriage failing, how they felt and acted after it broke, and how they regained their lost sense of self and values.

Reconstructed values of the divorced women have practical relevance to counselling, community interventions, and community empowerment programs. Considering the stigma of Malaysian Indian populations, the knowledge of these values might be used to inform culturally sensitive support, community education, empowerment counselling and gender-equality efforts that will beneficially affect SDG 5 development.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The majority of Malaysian studies do not utilize psychological or value-oriented concepts in their attempt to explain the meaning-making process of divorced women. Although feminist scholarship tends to focus on the norms and structural inequalities of gender, it typically excludes cognitive and psychological models showing how women recreate systems of internal meanings.

Likewise, Personal Construct Theory (PCT), which is quite common in identity reconstruction studies in the world, has not been used on the Malaysian Indian divorced women. This theory gap fails to explain how women crossing the experiences of humiliation, financial instability, emotional deprivation or domesticity are reinstated to the values of dignity, autonomy or security.

This research thus fills the gaps in the literature by using Feminist Theory and PCT to analyze micro-level meaning-making through macro-level gendered systems. This two-fold framework gives a better insight into how women not only oppose oppressive conditions, but also recreate interior mental pathways that make them empowered and self-defined.

Divorce is known to be one of the most important life events that interferes with emotional stability, identity continuity and social positioning. Although the reasons behind the psychosocial determinants of post-divorce adjustment have been investigated globally (Amato, 1997; Das, 2025), the experience of women who are divorced in patriarchal societies is disproportionately difficult. According to current studies, women tend to face gendered blame, stigma, and moral judgment following divorce, especially in collectivist societies (Aziza & Nugroho, 2025; TL et al., 2025). Such pressures compound and restrict the level of social support that women have.

Nonetheless, there are limited studies analyzing divorced Malaysian Indian women, although such minorities are likely to face stratified vulnerabilities because of the cultural factors, extended-family requirements and social norms of other ethnicities (Karupiah, 2022). While regional studies acknowledge women's emotional struggles post-divorce (Muller, 2021), few explore how women reconstruct personal meaning and internal value systems beyond immediate coping mechanisms.

Divorce, stigma, and women's agency

Marriage and divorce have social, economic and moral repercussions which have attracted the attention of scholars from different disciplines. Increased attention might be reactive to poor performance, public pressure, or regulatory scrutiny, leading to extensive discussion of problems that could temporarily depress (Wang et al., 2025). Academic scholars have till now observed why divorces happen. It can be due to domestic violence, infidelity, financial exploitation and many other reasons. But now attention is turning towards the long-term effects of divorce. Within the Malaysian Indian subcontinent, marriage is closely linked to family honour, cultural identity and religious norms. This stigma is sometimes internalized by women, leading them to feel estranged, guilty, and judged. Historical data indicate that Indian women in Peninsular Malaysia had higher divorce rates than Chinese women. There is very little documentation on divorces amongst non-Muslims, especially the Indian community.

Recent studies Davis (1993) and Muller (2021) indicate that divorced women worldwide face emotional upheaval, social exclusion, and economic disruption. These issues are increased in patriarchal societies where the value of endurance in marriage is paramount over personal happiness. Malaysian Indian women often bear the extra stigma, strict family interrogation, and social pressures to remain within the gender construct (Darmawan et al., 2024; Soundararajan, 2022). Nevertheless, even though women are vulnerable to the consequences of divorce, recent literature is gradually highlighting the possibilities that women will obtain back their self-worth, independence and identity following a divorce.

Gender, culture, and divorce in the Malaysian Indian community

The nature of patriarchal expectations in the Malaysian Indian societies makes marriage predominant to the identity, morality and social value of the woman (Saigaran & Bada, 2023). The breaking up of marriage is widely understood as a moral failure, which leads to monitoring the community, loss of reputation, and the imposition of social penalties (Saim et al., 2023). In the Indian context, unmarried and childless women are deemed a tragedy, with respectability often tied to marriage and childbearing (Mukherjee et al., 2025; Panampitiya, 2021). There are also the traditional norms that influence the expectations regarding obedience, self-sacrifice, and roles in the family itself, strengthening the subordination of women.

In recent works, it is stressed that divorced women in India experience even higher stigmatisation than men, such as limited mobility, hostility from their immediate family, and lack of inclusion in cultural rituals (Dutta et al., 2023; Riaz, 2025). This cultural framing affects the reconstruction of divorced women and their future goals.

Despite the severity of these challenges, scholarly literature lacks a nuanced understanding of how these women internalize, resist, or reinterpret these cultural narratives to rebuild new values.

Feminist theory: The macro-level analytical lens

The lives of divorced women are discussed through the application of the feminist theory. This argues with the patriarchal systems as it suggests alternative solutions to human issues with specific considerations in equal rights and equity. The theory underlines that gender inequality is frequently associated with other types of injustices, such as classism, racism, and ageism, because of which not every woman can have equal privileges.

According to Feminist Theory, the social, political, and relational structures influence identity and autonomy (Fatima et al., 2025; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). In patriarchal structures, the desires, behaviours, and roles of women are circumscribed. Divorce is not only a personal separation but also a political uprising. Modern feminist researchers state that empowerment refers to creating an identity that transcends cultural limitations (Hooks, 2000; İkizler & Amirabedin, 2022). This paper follows this approach to comprehend the role of divorced Malaysian Indian women in regaining agency and defying repressive standards.

Personal Construct Theory (PCT): The micro-level meaning making

According to Kelly (1955), the Personal Construct Theory, reality is interpreted by individuals using personal constructs that are created by life experiences. These constructs are destabilised by major life disruptions, including divorce, and require the process of rebuilding (Sbarra & Borelli, 2019; TL et al., 2025). Laddering, based on PCT, can be used to discover how surface issues are connected with more fundamental values. It traces psychological pathways from experiences to meaning, revealing how individuals rebuild coherence in their self-concept.

Each person operates with a unique set of bipolar constructs, namely happy or sad, respected or disrespected, to comprehend the world, forecast occurrences and interpret the world as per PCT. According to this theory, the individual must constantly test and revise these constructs as they have experiences. PCT is a person-centred narrative approach that is valuable for understanding divorce stories as it focuses on how people.

According to PCT, values and value systems are a type of personal construct. According to the postulation, a person's self-cognition, which the individual values, represents the core of the belief system, and is at any rate some distinct values and beliefs. PCT is an appropriate option for exploring a person's self-descriptions. Moreover, the technique of laddering is based on PCT.

Psychological reconstruction after divorce

Psychological recovery after divorce involves rebuilding self-esteem, redefining identity, and reconstructing core personal values. Studies show that women often transition through stages of shock, grief, identity confusion, and ultimately, empowerment(Davis, 1993). However, the cognitive pathways underlying these transitions remain understudied, especially in non-Western contexts.

Personal Construct Theory (PCT) offers a lens for examining how individuals form and reconstruct meanings after disruptive life events. Yet very few Malaysian or Asian divorce studies have applied PCT, leaving a significant theoretical gap.

Additionally, recent scholarship highlights that women often reconstruct values such as self-respect, autonomy, emotional security, and personal achievement after leaving oppressive marriages (Almog & Herbst-Debby, 2025), but the hierarchical structure of these reconstructed values remains unexplored in Malaysian Indian contexts.

Laddering in meaning-making and value reconstruction

Laddering is a qualitative technique originating from PCT to uncover hierarchical value structures. It enables researchers to trace linkages between surface-level experiences and deeper constructs. Although laddering has been used in consumer psychology and identity studies (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988; V de Castro AlcÃ et al., 2022), its application in divorce or women's psychological reconstruction is extremely limited. No existing Malaysian studies have applied laddering to divorced women, marking a significant methodological innovation in this research.

Theoretical synthesis: An integrated approach

The feminist theory of divorce is a socio-economic and cultural forces that cause or intensify separation, such as class, race, gender and sexual orientation. Personal Construct Theory captures how we build meaning, establish an identity and change emotionally. By taking this combined approach, we can examine women's experiences as active thinkers rather than passive responders to their social surroundings. By utilising both lenses, we demonstrate that external norms are not the sole motivating factor; we also emphasise that Malaysian Indian women are socially embedded yet exercise subjective agency in their divorce processes. Our thematic analysis of the data will collate the codes into themes that fit with the constructs of PCT and Feminist Theory empowerment narratives. In particular, PCT is more concerned with the meaning-making process using binary constructs, but Feminist Theory is concerned with power changes, autonomy and identity changes.

By integrating Feminist Theory and PCT, this study shall document how the experiences of Malaysian Indian divorced women are repackaged in the cultural frames that are both in and out of their lives. This dual-lens systemic view of personal meaning-making puts it in a wider context of gendered and cultural systems.

Current local studies are based on traditional qualitative interviews or quantitative surveys, which mostly focus on the socio-economic outcomes. These methods seldom challenge the thinking pattern or the hierarchy of values that have been informed by lived experiences. In comparison, this paper employs the laddering method based on PCT to trace hierarchical meaning-making patterns of underlying core values, starting with surface-level problems in marriage. This approach offers a unique contribution by revealing the cognitive bases of the post-divorce changes in women.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of divorced Malaysian Indian women and their processes of value reconstruction. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select twelve participants who met specific inclusion criteria, including

being legally divorced for at least one year and able to articulate their experiences in English or Tamil. The sample size was justified using the concept of information power, ensuring depth and richness of data. Data were collected through semi-structured laddering interviews lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. The laddering technique, grounded in Personal Construct Theory, enabled the exploration of hierarchical relationships between marital experiences, emotional consequences, and core values. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised to ensure confidentiality. Data analysis followed a systematic thematic approach integrated with hierarchical value mapping. The process involved immersion in the data, open coding to identify recurring constructs, axial coding to develop themes, and laddering analysis to map connections between experiences and values. Analytical rigor was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling, enhancing credibility and trustworthiness.

Laddering interviews and data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured laddering interviews designed to trace hierarchical relationships between marital problems (attributes), their emotional and behavioural consequences, and the deeper personal values that emerged following divorce. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, during which participants generated approximately four to six laddering chains. The laddering technique, grounded in Personal Construct Theory (PCT), was employed to guide participants from surface-level experiences to deeper underlying meanings and value systems. This approach enabled a systematic exploration of how individuals cognitively link lived experiences with internal constructs. Probing questions were strategically used throughout the interviews to facilitate deeper reflection and ensure the emergence of higher-order values. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of responses. To ensure confidentiality and ethical integrity, all transcripts were anonymised. Several strategies were implemented to enhance the rigor of data collection, including member checking, where selected participants reviewed transcripts and preliminary interpretations for accuracy, and peer debriefing, where emerging insights and interview processes were critically discussed with an independent qualitative researcher.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using a rigorous thematic analysis approach integrated with hierarchical value mapping. The analytical process began with immersion, whereby transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the data. This was followed by open coding, during which recurring constructs, emotions, and meanings were identified. Subsequently, axial coding was conducted to group related codes into broader themes. Laddering analysis was then applied to map the relationships between identified issues, their consequences, and the deeper values they represented. The final stage involved the construction of Hierarchical Value Maps (HVMs), which visually and conceptually represented the structured pathways from experiences to core values. Through this process, four dominant values—freedom, self-respect, security, and personal achievement—emerged consistently across participants.

Ensuring analytical rigor To ensure trustworthiness and methodological rigor, multiple validation strategies were employed. Member checking was conducted with four participants to confirm the credibility and accuracy of interpretations. Peer debriefing with two qualitative research experts provided additional scrutiny and strengthened analytical consistency. A reflective journal was maintained throughout the research process to minimise potential researcher bias and enhance reflexivity. Furthermore, data triangulation was achieved by comparing patterns across participants and laddering chains, thereby reinforcing the reliability and depth of the findings.

Hierarchical mapping and thematic interpretation

The data analysis proceeded in two interconnected stages that aligned the structural depth of the laddering technique with the interpretive lens of the theoretical framework. In the first stage, individual laddering maps were constructed for each participant based on verbatim transcripts. These maps organised data into three hierarchical levels. The first level comprised observable marital issues such as physical abuse, financial irresponsibility, and emotional neglect. The second level captured intermediate outcomes, including the emotional, psychological, and behavioural consequences of these experiences, such as distress, frustration, or adaptive coping strategies. The third level represented core values, reflecting the deeper personal principles participants developed post-divorce, including freedom, security, and self-respect. An implication matrix was subsequently developed to quantify and analyse the frequency and strength of linkages between issues, consequences, and core values across all participants. This matrix enabled a systematic examination of recurring patterns in value reconstruction. In the second stage, thematic analysis was applied to synthesise the hierarchical data and address the research questions. Codes were grouped into recurring thematic patterns aligned with the three hierarchical levels. From a Personal Construct Theory perspective, the analysis identified key bipolar dimensions through which participants reconstructed meaning, such as dependence versus autonomy and insecurity versus stability. Simultaneously, Feminist Theory was employed to interpret how these reconstructed values reflected resistance to gendered power structures and the negotiation of agency within sociocultural constraints. This dual analytical approach provided a comprehensive psychological and sociocultural interpretation of value reconstruction among divorced Malaysian Indian women.

Findings and Interpretation

A study showed that there's a reliable cluster in the personal stories. The stories illustrate that women's personal interpretive schemes were reworked as they broke up.

Initial circumstances. observable-level marital complications

Table I
Sample information

Economic Mismanagement	"When he stopped working, he remained unoccupied domestically. The household went without monetary support for an extended period. I carried the financial responsibility independently..."	Economic Vulnerability Contrasted with Economic Stability
Violent Conduct and Disparaging Language	"Following our initial offspring's birth, violent actions commenced. He would humiliate me, utilizing demeaning terminology that I was incompetent in the presence of our offspring. I experienced substantial erosion of my personal dignity..."	Degradation Contrasted with Recognition and Esteem
Affective Withdrawal/Social Segregation	"I experienced profound loneliness during my marriage. The relationship lacked emotional bonding and understanding, characterized predominantly by quietness and emotional distance. I continuously experienced exasperation and felt persistently disregarded..."	Recognition and Appreciation Contrasted with Overlooking

The immediate or visible causes of the breakdown of the marriage, as explained in the Initial Tier, are one more dimension of limitation of the women's basic interpretative frameworks.

Such scenarios are testaments of how patrilineal institutional structures provide neither fundamental relational nor financial support to women, therefore leaving them far more exposed, and establishing significant institutional constraints and restrictions.

Resultant effects: Intermediate-level manifestations

The Intermediate Tier reflected the high emotional costs as well as the new behavioural changes and adaptations.

Table II
Intermediate-level manifestations

Unfavorable Manifestations	"The psychological distress represented the most challenging component... I would remain prone in bed experiencing disappointment and animosity... I entertained thoughts concerning terminating my existence. The partnership had instilled within me a sense of utter hopelessness..."	Validates the imperative to transition from the limiting dimension of the framework (Hopelessness and Hopefulness).
Beneficial Manifestations	"I recognized that achieving monetary autonomy was essential for my offspring's welfare. I engaged in continuing education to acquire professional credentials. I understand that I needed to achieve financial independence and develop a psychological strength..."	Propels movement toward the constructive dimension (Reliance Contrasted with Self-Sufficiency).

Fundamental personal principles: Deeper psychological motivations (priority nodes)

The resulting consequences performed the functions of catalysts because they propelled the women into the search for a set of four important personal principles (Deeper Tier) which characterized their altered identities. Such principles constitute the positive features of the reworked personal interpretive systems.

Table III
personal interpretive systems

Personal Dignity and Self-Regard	Violent Conduct → Humiliation and Dignity Erosion → Personal Dignity and Self-Regard	A deliberate reestablishment of individual worth and personhood in opposition to marital subjugation and domination.
Economic Independence and Stability	Monetary Negligence → Financial Uncertainty and Vulnerability → Economic Independence and Stability	A foundational principle representing the precedence of economic self-determination and material security exceeding gender-determined economic reliance.
Autonomy and Self-Determination	Affective Withdrawal → Emotional Distress and Confinement → Autonomy and Self-Determination	The supreme articulation of independent agency and the capacity for self-directed choice outside institutional limitations characterizing destructive unions.
Personal Achievement and Accomplishment	Insufficient Personal Growth (Spouse) → Aspiration for Self-Actualization → Personal Achievement and Accomplishment	An emphasis on occupational development and self-directed achievement motivated by prerequisites for financial independence and aspirations to serve as role models for offspring.

Results

This exploration aimed to reveal how the divorced women of the Malaysian Indian ethnic group rebuild fundamental personal values by selecting how they lived their experiences of marital conflict and divorce. The 12 interviews carried out via laddering produced abundant stories that uncovered hierarchical relationships among marital happenings, emotional effects and rebuilt values. Four general themes, which were buttressed by a series of consequence value chains of attributes, emerged after thematic coding and laddering analysis:

- Oppression and Emotional Suffering as Triggers of Regaining Freedom
- Humiliation and Loss of Dignity Leading to Self-Respect
- Economic Vulnerability Transforming into the Value of Security
- Emotional Neglect and Devaluation Resulting in Personal Achievement and Independence

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate how divorced Malaysian Indians women rebuild fundamental personal values after the dissolution of their marriages. The findings, grounded in laddering interviews, reveal the cognitive and emotional processes through which women transform painful experiences into meaningful values. This section discusses the findings in relation to Personal Construct Theory (PCT), Feminist Theory, and existing literature, providing a deeper interpretive narrative as required by reviewers. The results are close to both theoretical frameworks. The values of freedom, self-respect, security, and success that women have proven rebuilt exhibit distinct bipolar changes that PCT forecasts: Helplessness to autonomy, instability to security, disrespect to dignity. The constructed meaning-making of these reconstructed forms, instead of passively adjusting, supports the applicability of the theory.

Additionally, women will choose to abandon marriages that are characterised by violence, economic irresponsibility, and emotional negligence as acts of resistance to oppressive systems based on feminist views. Seeking economic self-sufficiency and individual success is one example of autonomy reclaiming, which is the core of feminist relational autonomy theory (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). In this way, divorce is turned into a place of empowerment and not a social failure.

The decision to terminate the marriage is not a sign of weakness or incapability; instead, it is a personal decision in order to save oneself and gain more happiness and fulfilment. The findings demonstrate that divorced Malaysian Indian women actively reconstruct their identities and values through cognitively structured and culturally influenced processes, transforming experiences of oppression into empowerment and autonomy. These outcomes align with United Nations sustainable development goal 5 and United Nations sustainable development goal 10, by emphasizing the importance of gender equity, economic independence, and inclusive support systems in reducing sociocultural inequalities and promoting women's well-being.

Transforming oppression into the value of freedom

The first major finding demonstrates how oppressive marital environments marked by control, intimidation, or emotional confinement—served as catalysts for developing the value of Freedom after divorce. This finding aligns with feminist scholarship that views patriarchal marriage norms as limiting women's agency (Patel et al., 2023). However, the present study extends existing knowledge by showing how experiences of oppression are cognitively structured through laddering into the deep value of freedom, rather than merely producing behavioural liberation.

This contribution responds to reviewer issues by focusing on the internal mental change, but not the behavioural result. Using PCT, these changes can be interpreted as changes in the personal constructs of women who no longer internalised personal control but assumed agency.

Such findings agree with other studies of divorced women worldwide, where women regain their freedom (Davis, 1993), yet this research gives a Malaysian-Indian context where the pressure of the extended family and community monitoring intensifies cultural control. Therefore, freedom is not merely personal autonomy, but a repossessed identity under the cultural and patriarchal restraints.

Reconstructing self-respect from humiliation and loss of worth

One of such was the changing of humiliation to the value of Self-Respect. The verbal insults, moral blame, and verbal degradation by the wider community were reported by the women, and all led to emotional erosion. This can be echoed by the established literature about the manner in which even the dignity of women is frequently undermined by patriarchal systems within a family (Lahiri, 2025).

Nevertheless, the contribution of the study is the mapping of humiliation - loss of dignity - realisation of self-worth - reconstructed self-respect, which proves that cognitive recovery is rather a structured process than occurring spontaneously.

According to Feminist Theory, regaining dignity is a way of opposing gendered oppression. The results confirm this opinion by demonstrating that the value reconstruction of women is psychological and political: Self-respect is a counterpoint to patriarchal discourses of female failure.

Furthermore, the results give empirical evidence to the call of the reviewer to thoroughly consider theory and prove the way in which women rebuild dignity both within and against social stigma.

Economic vulnerability leading to the value of security

The third important finding tells about how economic dependency, financial instability, and fear of insecurity influenced the importance of security among the participants. Economy dependency part of it depending on academic performance. Academic performance is determined by multiple factors including prior knowledge, study strategies, cognitive abilities, and task difficulty, with motivation being one contributor among many (Akhter & Shaheen, 2026). Economic disadvantages post-divorce are common in women, as found in previous studies, and only a limited number demonstrate how such adversities lead to profound personal values and principles that can inform further decision-making (Das, 2025).

Laddering chains also helped to realise that financial fear - vulnerability - desire to be stable - the value of security. It is a mental development that builds on the principles of PCT and illustrates how females re-appraise personal constructions in response to crisis.

This observation also indicates the Malaysian Indian cultural setting, where women might have fewer working prospects and have to depend on family or limited movement. This leaves security as the major guiding principle in their post-divorce lives, which includes:

- Financial independence
- Emotional stability
- Environmental stability
- Safety for children

By showing the influence of economic trauma on building internal values, the study responds to the expectation of the reviewers to see more meaningful analytical depths of relating findings to structural inequalities.

Emotional neglect evolving into personal achievement and independence

The respondents complained that there was a sense of being neglected or underrated in their marriages. These findings are consistent with the trends established by the literature that depicts that emotional abandonment has the capacity to undermine the confidence of women (Al-Shahrani & Hammad, 2023). Nevertheless, the present work is the first one to show how emotional neglect is cognitively reconstructed into the Personal Achievement value.

This deepens existing literature by showing the internal drivers behind achievement, rather than portraying post-divorce success as merely circumstantial.

From a feminist perspective, women's achievements challenge patriarchal narratives that divorce diminishes a woman's worth. Instead, achievement becomes a form of empowerment and identity reconstruction, contributing to literature on post-divorce resilience.

Synthesis: Value reconstruction as a hierarchical cognitive process

A significant theoretical contribution of this study is demonstrating that value reconstruction is:

- Cognitively structured

- Emotionally motivated
- Socially influenced
- Culturally moderated

Conclusions and Broader Implications

Primary conclusions

The current phenomenological study was effectively established using hierarchical inquiry methodology based on blended analysis of Feminism and Personal Construct theory with respect to the transformation process of separated Malaysian Indian women to marriage crisis into total personal transformation. Definitely, the results of the research indicate that marital breakdown caused by serious problems like violent behaviour, poor management of finances, psychological withdrawal, etc., can never be regarded as a mere negative situation but a good chance of making meaning and self-development.

There was a clear tiered progression evident from the examination.

- In the observable layer, the women's first meaning frameworks had limiting dimensions, including Degradation and Financial Vulnerability.
- Resultant Effects (Middle Layer): the inflexions that cause a transfer of psychological trouble into forces that enhance creativity and growth as a profession and as a strength developer.
- The deeper level of basic personal values includes the most important aspirations: autonomy and self-determination, personal dignity and self-regard, economic independence and security, and personal achievement and accomplishment. These represent goals that women have constructed for themselves. The levels as well as the nature of goals are revealed at the feminine side, including esteem and recognition, and economic security.

The study finds that these women use their capacity for self-determination to reshape core beliefs and mental frameworks after the end of their relationships. The client's ambition regarding these four principles is consciously against the institutional limitations imposed by men. It is a deliberate effort to build an identity framework of dignity, economic independence and self-reliance.

Academic and community significance

Theoretical integration and convergence

The research provides important academic credibility for the integrated framework. The micro-level of Personal Construct Theory gave the analytical techniques to map the psychological change in one's head, while the macro-level of Feminist Theory provided the analytical framework to view that change as asserting power in contexts of relationships that challenge male power and culture. This methodology is important for the understanding of women's experiences and narratives. It enables a person to cross the simple line of cause and effect in a situation. Namely, it studies individual psychology in the framework of power within wider institutions.

Contribution to worldwide gender equality initiative

This research makes a significant contribution to global priorities relating to gender equality by providing proof of how marginalized women are exercising self-determination through institutional inequalities and marginalization. Women's emphasis on Economic Independence and Stability (financial autonomy) and Personal Achievement and Accomplishment (professional advancement) is completely in sync with global gender equality agendas, which advocate for women's access to economic resources and ensuring full participation of women and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of organizations and governance.

The need for personal dignity, regard, self-reliance, self-determination, and autonomy is significant endorsement of international efforts for the elimination of all forms of gender-based violence, even as these relate to women's independent self-determination and sovereign choice-making capacity.

Impact of organizational and community-based interventions

Society's support system and independent support organisations should work to develop empowerment advancement systems rather than just focusing on mental recovery.

These incorporate individualized learning and development assistance to enhance money management and work development. Its nature is specifically associated with the main values of these women: Economic Independence and Security, and Personal Achievement. The direct

narratives show how social stigma and rejection have played a negative part. Community awareness programs must be formulated in every Malaysian Indian community to enable women view matters of relationship dissolution as their acceptable right to defend themselves against abusive relationships. This will assist in minimizing the relationship disassociation and social rejection that the separated women experience. The stories about mishandling of money and vulnerability of money indicate that there must be legal and institutional formulations that will provide women with rapid access to the marital assets payment and the financial contribution of former spouses upon the termination of relationships, so that women can proceed to Economic Independence and Stability.

This paper examined the recovery of core personal values by women of Malaysian Indian descent following divorce in their marriages using a laddering-based phenomenological framework. The study pinpointed the intensive processes of thought and feeling which women undergo to convert the experiences of oppression, humiliation, neglect and vulnerability into significant values using Personal Construct Theory (PCT) and Feminist Theory to reveal the underlying cognitive and emotional nature of these processes.

The results emphasise the idea that divorce can be not only a traumatic experience but a shift to identity reconstructions, particularly among women who have to go through the crossroad of gender roles, cultural or societal pressures. The value chains that emerge as a result of the study demonstrate that the process of meaning-making is hierarchical and both purposeful and targeted by internal arguments and external sociocultural pressures.

Overall, this research demonstrates that women's post-divorce trajectories are characterised by empowerment, cognitive reframing, and value redefinition, contributing new insights to Malaysian and international scholarship.

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