

BEYOND AWARENESS: COERCIVE CONTROL AND RESTRICTED AGENCY IN MORIARTY'S *BIG LITTLE LIES*

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Abstract

This study examines coercive control in Liane Moriarty's *Big Little Lies*, analyzing how victim awareness did not guarantee freedom from abuse. This study applied Evan Stark's theory of coercive control to analyze how abuse worked through systematic strategies that restricted the victim's autonomy and decision-making capacity. A qualitative approach was used, with data drawn from narratives, dialogues, and internal monologues in the novel. Data were categorized into coercive control strategies such as violence, intimidation, manipulation, and micro-regulation. The findings showed that manipulation and micro-regulation were the most dominant strategies used by the perpetrator. Manipulation manifested in gaslighting and love bombing, distorting the victim's perception of reality and reinforcing dependency. Meanwhile, micro-regulation was evident in the control of household routines, financial access, and emotional expression. Together, these strategies formed a system of control that eroded agency and independence. The study concluded that the victim's agency remained constrained by the absence of external support, despite her awareness, education, and privilege.

Keywords: *coercive control; domestic violence; manipulation; micro-regulation; psychological entrapment.*

1. Introduction

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) continues to affect millions of women worldwide, with WHO reporting that nearly one in three women experience abuse. This figure shows that violence in intimate relationships is still a widespread social problem. According to WHO (2021, as cited in Gunarathne et al. 2023), IPV involves not only physical assaults but also psychological abuse, sexual coercion, and controlling behaviors that harm victims within intimate relationships. Therefore, IPV can no longer be understood merely as a series of isolated physical attacks. IPV involves systematic control that often remains hidden yet causes profound harm. Lohmann et al. (2024) support this by explaining that non-physical tactics can be even more destructive than physical violence, as the persistent threat and the gradual erosion of the victim's sense of self lead to lasting psychological harm.

In line with IPV, Stark (2007) introduced the framework of coercive control. According to Stark, coercive control is a liberty crime that destroys the victim's structural autonomy through non-physical strategies. Katz (2022) supports this by demonstrating the

impact of this deprivation of freedom, explaining that victims who live with a coercive control perpetrator will have their reality distorted. This condition restricts the victim's space for action, paralyzing their ability to think, speak, and express themselves normally.

Although coercive control is destructive, traditional perspectives still prioritize victim awareness as the key to ending abuse. It is frequently assumed that once a woman realizes she is in an abusive relationship, she will possess the agency to leave. However, Studies show that leaving an abusive relationship is complex, shaped by psychological, social, and structural barriers (Luthfia et al., 2023; Mabunda et al., 2025; Rezaei et al., 2025; Saunders, 2020). As noted by Sichimba et al. (2020, as cited in Heron et al., 2022), a victim of domestic abuse may also stay because they hope that their partner will change their behavior. The assumption that victims can easily leave once they recognize the abuse becomes highly problematic when confronted with the reality of such an entrapment.

This contradiction is portrayed in Liane Moriarty's novel *Big Little Lies*. The novel depicts the lives of women in an upper-middle-class suburban community in Australia. One of the characters, Celeste Wright, is an educated woman who once worked as a lawyer but experiences repeated physical abuse from her husband. Celeste's husband, Perry Wright, embodies public respectability while privately exercising domination and violence. On the other hand, Celeste is not the typical passive victim. She is fully aware of her husband's abusive nature. Despite her education, financial stability, and awareness, Celeste remains entrapped. This failure illustrates the gap between awareness and agency under coercive control.

Although previous studies have examined domestic violence, masculinity, and misogyny in *Big Little Lies*, few studies have specifically investigated how coercive control operates as a mechanism of choice restriction that prevents victims from translating awareness into action. This study aims to fill that gap by analyzing how coercive control strategies in the novel work to undermine the victims' agency, demonstrating that awareness and resources are often insufficient to guarantee freedom against a structured cage of control. Based on this background, the study addresses the following question: How does coercive control in *Big Little Lies* restrict victim agency, so that awareness does not guarantee freedom?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Coercive Control as a Liberty Crime

Stark (2007) argues that the most devastating aspect of partner abuse is not physical injury, but the systematic deprivation of the victim's freedom. Within this framework, Stark conceptualizes coercive control as a "liberty crime" that targets the victim's fundamental civil liberties and structural autonomy. The perpetrator does not merely assault the victim's body; instead, they construct a "social cage" that strips away the victim's capacity for independent agency and traps them in psychological captivity.

Rather than relying on isolated incidents, this social cage is sustained through integrated and repetitive strategies that enforce total compliance. Physical and sexual violence (Fontes, 2015) serve as the underlying enforcement mechanism, providing a concrete guarantee that any future, non-physical threats will be taken seriously. This physical force allows the perpetrator to seamlessly transition into continuous intimidation to rule through fear (Giri & Parveen, 2024), which is systematically paired with isolation to sever the victim's ties with external support systems (Katz et al., 2020). To deeply erode the

victim's self-confidence, perpetrators employ cognitive manipulation such as gaslighting (Klein et al., 2023) and tactical love bombing to create debilitating trauma bonds (Mukhtar, 2023). Ultimately, this control operates comprehensively through the micro-regulation of daily life, dictating personal choices from clothing and cooking to social interactions (Stark, 2007) Through this condensed matrix of abuse, the domestic sphere is effectively transformed into a site of profound subordination where the victim's self-determination is entirely replaced by the perpetrator's authority.

2.2 Choice Restriction and Victim Entrapment

The most dangerous impact of coercive control is not merely physical suffering, but the erosion of the victim's agency and self-determination. The accumulation of physical force, intimidation, manipulation, and micro-regulation systematically restricts the victim's autonomy. Katz (2022) conceptualizes this phenomenon through the shrinking of the victim's "space for action." As this space narrows, the victim's fundamental capacity to think, speak, and express themselves normally becomes paralyzed. Consequently, victims living with a perpetrator experience a distorted reality, where their perception of the abuse is heavily manipulated, leaving them feeling as though they have no rational options left to escape.

This profound restriction underpins the mechanism of victim entrapment within abusive relationships. Traditional perspectives often incorrectly assume that once a victim recognizes the danger of their situation, they will simply leave. However, recent scholarship reveals that the decision to exit an abusive dynamic is far more complex. Saunders (2020) explains that psychological barriers, such as guilt and trauma bonding, frequently paralyze the victim's intent to leave. These internal struggles are further compounded by social pressures and structural isolation, wherein victims lose access to legal protection or independent economic support (Mabunda et al., 2025; Rezaei et al., 2025). Additionally, victims often remain trapped due to emotional manipulation that fosters a false hope for change in the partner's behavior (Sichimba et al., 2020). This paradox demonstrates a severe gap between awareness and agency; full cognitive awareness of abuse does not guarantee the freedom to act when the victim's life choices have been entirely locked down by the perpetrator's structured control.

2.3 Coercive Control in Literary Representation

Literary representation provides an important medium for exposing forms of abuse that often remain invisible in public discourse. Unlike physical violence, coercive control is typically embedded in everyday interactions through intimidation, isolation, manipulation, and the regulation of daily activities (Stark, 2007). Because these behaviors are frequently normalized within intimate relationships, they may be overlooked by outsiders and even by victims themselves. Literary texts make these hidden dynamics visible by granting readers access to characters' thoughts, emotions, and lived experiences. Through narrative techniques such as characterization, dialogue, and internal monologue, literature reveals how seemingly ordinary interactions can function as mechanisms of domination and control.

Furthermore, literature provides a unique space for illustrating the gradual and cumulative nature of coercive control. Rather than presenting abuse as isolated incidents, literary narratives can depict how repeated strategies shape a victim's perception of reality

over time. Therefore, literature challenges conventional understandings of domestic abuse that prioritize physical injury while neglecting psychological and emotional forms of domination. By representing these invisible structures of abuse, literary texts enable readers to recognize coercive control as a systematic pattern of power that undermines autonomy and freedom within intimate relationships.

One example of such representation can be found in Liane Moriarty's *Big Little Lies*. Through the character of Celeste Wright, the novel demonstrates how coercive control can exist beneath the appearance of an affluent and successful family life. As a result, *Big Little Lies* offers a valuable literary portrayal of the hidden mechanisms through which coercive control operates.

2.4 Previous Studies and Research Gap

Beyond theoretical frameworks, several scholars have analyzed *Big Little Lies* (2014) from different perspectives. Previous studies predominantly highlight masculinity (Salsabila & Ariastuti, 2020), discourse patterns (Moreno-Serrano, 2021), and conspicuous feminism within the #MeToo movement (Bautista, 2022) as the critical factors in domestic violence. Specifically, the abuse is understood as an effort to maintain male dominance (Salsabila & Ariastuti, 2020), which manifests linguistically through recurring communication cycles of tension and reconciliation (Moreno-Serrano, 2021). Meanwhile, Bautista (2022) argues that the representation of abuse in the narrative operates within a "conspicuous feminism" that gains commercial visibility through its scrutiny of misogyny. However, few studies use Stark's coercive control theory to explain why Celeste Wright, despite awareness and resources, remains entrapped. This study contributes by applying Stark's coercive control framework to demonstrate how awareness and resources are insufficient against systematic choice restriction.

3. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative literary method with an interpretive approach to conduct a comprehensive textual analysis of the selected narrative. Creswell & Creswell (2023) explain that the qualitative method is a framework that prioritizes the use of text and images as the primary data sources. In addition, this qualitative inquiry focuses on interpreting the core meaning of the phenomena by pulling direct evidence from the text (Abdussamad, 2021: 31). The interpretive lens allows the study to move beyond literal readings, critically exploring the invisible power structures and psychological dynamics embedded within the literary work.

The primary source of data for this study is the contemporary novel *Big Little Lies* written by Liane Moriarty, utilizing the paperback edition published by Penguin Books in 2014. The data extracted from this primary source consist of specific textual units, including character dialogues, narrative expositions, contextual descriptions, and internal monologues. The analysis focuses on Celeste and Perry Wright's relationship as depicted in Moriarty's *Big Little Lies*.

The data collection involved examining the novel to identify textual units, narratives, dialogues, and internal monologues that illustrate coercive control. The researchers performed repeated close readings of the novel to gain a deep familiarity with the narrative structure and the subtle behavioral changes in the characters. During the note-taking phase, the researchers identified and documented all textual units including dialogues and internal

monologues that indicated systematic domination. The coding process was then initiated by indexing the selected texts based on text-identifying markers. These identified data were structured into an inventory data sheet using a table matrix based on explicit classification criteria, ensuring that every textual excerpt could be systematically cross-referenced with its corresponding page number and narrative context.

Data analysis was carried out through systematic thematic coding and conceptual categorization derived from Stark's (2007) framework. The collected data were sorted and classified into four primary strategic categories of coercive control: physical and sexual violence, intimidation, manipulation, and control through the micro-regulation of daily life.

The thematic coding process focused on analyzing how each strategy functions as part of a unified system that restricts decision-making. By aligning the textual evidence directly with the research question, the researchers analyzed how these strategies erode Celeste Wright's autonomy and generate profound psychological barriers. This interpretation explains the internal mechanisms of victim entrapment, demonstrating why external resources and acute awareness are insufficient to ensure freedom when confronting a structured system of control.

To ensure analytical credibility and rigor, this study employed three validation strategies. First, the researchers engaged in repeated readings of the novel to achieve a deep familiarity with the text. Second, theoretical triangulation was established by cross-checking the textual data against Stark's (2007) conceptual categories of coercive control. Lastly, peer debriefing was conducted with academic advisors and peers to review the coding process and ensure objective, well-grounded interpretations.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of this research present the forms of coercive control exerted by the abuser against the victim based on Stark's theoretical framework. These discovered forms of coercive control work together as an interconnected system that destroys autonomy and creates deep dependency. Consequently, the victim remains unable to break free from the relationship despite possessing full awareness of the abuse.

4.1 Coercive Control Employed in the *Big Little Lies*

4.1.1 Violence

The strategy of violence in this study is categorized into both physical and sexual abuse, which the abuser utilizes to reinforce dominance and punish any signs of resistance. Here, physical force is employed by the abuser as a calculated mechanism to assert control over the body of the victim. The first pattern of physical violence is clearly observed in Data 1:

"He grabbed her upper arm. His fingers dug into the flesh. 'Hey,' she said. 'That hurts.' He gripped harder. 'Don't,' she said. 'Perry. Just don't.'"
(Moriarty, 2014, p. 144)

This physical assault occurs when the abuser perceives that the victim has made an independent decision. This finding supports Stark's (2007) argument that within a coercive framework, physical violence functions less as an episodic event and more as a continuous enforcement mechanism. The deliberate infliction of physical pain forces the victim into

compliance and silence, establishing that any resistance will invite further punishment. The second pattern of physical violence is evidenced in Data 2:

".....but then he grabbed her by the hair, twisting it behind her and pulling so hard," (Moriarty, 2014, p. 338)

The strategic execution of this physical assault is further reinforced by the victim's internal narration in Data 3, which normalizes the hidden nature of the abuse due to the social privilege standing of the abuser:

"My husband hits me, Renata. Never on the face of course. He's far too classy for that. Does yours hit you?" (Moriarty, 2014, p. 83)

Data 3 reveals the exact physical violence is highly calculated to avoid leaving visible marks. This refines Stark's (2007) concept of the "social cage", the cage here is built not by physical confinement, but by the boundaries of upper-class. This physical aggression is systematically followed by sexual violence, which is manifested as marital sexual abuse in Data 4 and utilized by the abuser as a tool for forced reconciliation:

"And sex was part of it. There was always sex afterward." (Moriarty, 2014, p. 78)

This stands in contrast to Moreno-Serrano (2021) interpretation of reconciliation within the cycle of violence. Data 4 illustrates that the reconciliation is fundamentally enforced through sexual subjugation rather than emotional restoration. Furthermore, these findings extend Bautista's (2022) discussion of domestic abuse by revealing that these strategies function not merely as representations of misogyny, but as strategic mechanisms of coercive control. Data 1 to Data 4 demonstrate that physical and sexual violence are strategically concealed to preserve public image, intensifying psychological isolation.

4.1.2 Intimidation

The abuser employs intimidation as a psychological strategy to keep the victim in a state of subjugation, even when physical contact is not being made. Intimidation is manifested in Data 5 through a direct death threat uttered by the abuser within the domestic space:

"'If you ever, ever embarrass me like that again, I will kill you, I will fucking kill you.' He tightened his grip. 'How dare you. How dare you.'" (Moriarty, 2014, p. 338)

An extreme verbal threat of murder combined with physical restraint is unleashed by the abuser to punish the independent action taken by the victim in public. According to Katz (2022) severe intimidation does not just frighten the victim, it fundamentally paralyzes their capacity to speak. Intimidation through death threats reinforces constant fear, ensuring compliance without physical contact. This finding extends from Salsabila & Ariastuti's (2020) explanation on masculinity by showing that intimidation functions not only as an expression of patriarchal authority but also as a strategy to micro-regulate the victim's future behavior.

4.1.3 Manipulation

Manipulation is identified as a frequent strategy used by the abuser to confuse the emotions of the victim and alter the reality of the victim.

The first form of manipulation is gaslighting, where the perception of reality is distorted by the abuser to make the victim feel responsible for the conflicts within the home. This form of manipulation is illustrated in Data 6:

"'You sick of me already?' He looked hurt. She'd been thoughtless. She should have known better. Perry was always looking for evidence that she didn't really love him." (Moriarty, 2014, p. 143)

Based on this evidence, the abuser practices emotional guilt-tripping by deliberately showing a vulnerable, "hurt" appearance to shift the moral responsibility of the conflict onto the victim. This dynamic embodies Katz's (2022) on manipulation, specifically how abuser constructs a false narrative to present themselves as "deserving of sympathy". This induces deep self-doubt and unnecessary guilt, forcing the victim to change her behavior to appease the insecurities of the abuser.

The second form of manipulation is love bombing, where the abuser utilizes dramatic displays of affection and material gifts post-violence to regain control, as demonstrated in Data 7:

"..... Perry cried. She cried. He promised. He swore on his children's lives. He was heartbroken. He bought her the first piece of jewelry she would never wear." (Moriarty, 2014, p. 145)

This intense affection creates a powerful illusion of hope. As identified by Sangeetha et al. (2022) this represents the 'honeymoon' stage, where a powerful illusion of hope is created by the abuser, successfully paralyzing the intent of the victim to escape. Stark's (2007) framework reveals that this intense affection is actually a tactical tool of choice restriction. Through a comparative synthesis with Data 8 (Moriarty, 2014, p. 393), the long-term impact of this behavior shows that the victim rationalizes abuse through a distorted moral economy, equating small acts of kindness with compensation for violence.

Furthermore, tactical promises of self-improvement are used by the abuser as another form of emotional manipulation to secure compliance when the victim tries to pull away, as shown in Data 9:

"He looked unhinged. 'I'll get help,' he said. 'I promise you I'll get help.'"
(Moriarty, 2014, p. 419)

This simulation of weakness is executed by the abuser to evoke the sympathy of the victim and stop her from leaving. Theoretically, this highlights Stark's (2007) assertion that coercive control operates through the micro-regulation of the victim's moral boundaries. This finding refines Moreno-Serrano's (2021) discussion of the reconciliation phase by demonstrating that apologies, affection, and promises of change are not simply restorative behaviors but calculated forms of manipulation that restrict the victim's ability to leave. When synthesized with Data 10 (Moriarty, 2014, p. 348), this tactical promise is driven entirely by a narcissistic projection of reality, ensures that the absolute focus of the relationship remains on his emotional need rather than the survival of the victim.

4.1.4 Control through Micro-Regulation

Control through micro-regulation is a structural strategy where the small details of the daily life of the victim are managed by the abuser to create a sense of absolute powerlessness. First, the rules of the house and parenting are micro-regulated by the abuser in Data 11:

"You're turning them into spoiled brats,' Perry had said. 'I don't want to live in a pigsty,' said Perry" (Moriarty, 2014, pp. 168-169)

Constant verbal monitoring over domestic neatness and child-rearing is enforced by the abuser to break the victim's independence and undermine her authority as a mother. This finding aligns with Stark's (2007) definition of "liberty crime". By policing how victim raises her children and maintains the house, this forces the victim into a constant state of anxiety, where she must continuously monitor her environment to avoid triggering domestic anger.

Second, financial control is utilized by the abuser in Data 12 to directly lower the victim's autonomy:

"She also seems to think we have unlimited financial resources,' said Perry. 'Doesn't earn a cent herself, but sure knows how to spend it.'" (Moriarty, 2014, p. 444)

This Material micro-regulation is executed by the abuser against the victim through public financial insults. This negative narrative regarding household spending to reinforce economic dependency and destroy the victim's self-worth, systematically eroding her professional confidence despite her background as a lawyer.

Ultimately, integrating these strategies reveals that the micro-regulation of domestic routines, finances, and emotional identity entrenches dependency and erodes autonomy. As synthesized in Data 13 (Moriarty, 2014, p. 257), this continuous tracking of material resources shapes a captive mindset where the victim cannot imagine where to go or how to live, making independent survival seem impossible. This entrapment is further consolidated by the emotional micro-regulation in Data 14 (Moriarty, 2014, p. 116), where the abuser completely takes over the victim's identity and desire, conditioning her to believe that life without him would be empty and boring. Salsabila & Ariastuti (2020) explain Perry's need for superiority through the lens of masculinity. However, the present study specifies how such superiority is exercised in everyday life through micro-regulation of finances, parenting practices, domestic routines, and emotional identity. Rather than being isolated demands, these micro-regulations function as a unified cage that completely destroys the victim's self-concept, trapping her into a dangerous relationship over an independent existence.

4.2 The Failure of the Escape Plan

The failure of the victim's plan to escape from the abusive relationship is caused by a complex network of internal and external barriers. Physical and sexual violence (Data 1 and Data 2) successfully triggers the victim's awareness of the domestic danger, prompting her to formulate plans to leave. However, the execution of these plans is systematically undermined by non-physical strategies. The abuser utilizes gaslighting and false promises of self-improvement (Data 6 and Data 9), to confuse the mind of the victim and distort reality. Furthermore, the cycle between physical assault and intense affection, known as love

bombing (Data 7), forces the victim to accept a distorted transactional logic (Data 8). This bad coping strategy causes the victim to focus on surviving the relationship day by day rather than executing the actual plan to leave. This internal entrapment is further reinforced by the micro-regulation of finances and emotional identity (Data 12 and Data 14), which destroys the victim's professional confidence and erodes her ability to envision independent survival (Data 13). This internal helplessness is made worse by external factors, specifically the lack of a good support system from the environment and friends of the victim. Because the abuser carefully hides the physical violence by not leaving visible marks on the face of the victim (Data 3) and covers the domestic abuse with expensive gifts, friends and people around the victim fail to notice the abuse. Without an external support system to provide physical safety, real logistical help, and emotional validation, the victim is forced to face the dangerous situation alone. In conclusion, despite awareness, escape fails due to the interplay of violence, manipulation, dependency, and lack of support.

5. Conclusion

This research shows that the escape plan made by the victim in the novel *Big Little Lies* fails due to the highly interconnected and systemic nature of coercive control. Within Stark's framework, secret preparations to leave represent active resistance. Although physical violence successfully makes the victim aware that the relationship is dangerous and triggers a plan to leave, the escape plan is undermined by non-physical abuse and entrenched. The entrapment operates through a deliberate combination of strategic concealment, severe verbal intimidation, and psychological manipulation such as gaslighting and love bombing which forces the victim into a state of continuous daily coping. This internal paralysis is further reinforced by the micro-regulation of domestic routines and finances, which effectively destroys the victim's autonomy and professional confidence, locking her into a state of structural dependency.

The narratives illustrate that the victim engages in active resistance, yet remains entrapped by systemic coercive control. Therefore, remaining in the relationship reflects a coping mechanism shaped by coercive dependency rather than passivity. Theoretically, this study extends Stark's framework by demonstrating that coercive control operates through the gradual internalization of dependency that transforms awareness into psychological paralysis. Practically, the findings highlight how literature can be used pedagogically to illuminate the hidden dimensions of domestic violence beyond physical harm. However, this study is limited to a single literary text and focuses primarily on one victim-perpetrator relationship. For future research, it is recommended to examine isolation more deeply, particularly how social disconnection interacts with manipulation and dependency to reinforce coercive control.

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