An Analysis of Draupadi's Cognitive Dissonance in *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract

The character of Draupadi in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* will be analysed in this paper from the perspective of cognitive dissonance theory. The study shows that through internal conflicts, Draupadi's identity is formed and sculpted by her behavior in exploring contradictions in her thoughts, emotions, and actions. Drawing inspiration from Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, this paper discusses psychological pain resulting from opposing tendencies, moral dilemmas, and social norms. The critique presents a case study of how Draupadi dealt with her dissonance: by either rationalising her action or generating pressure from the dissonance upon her.

The Palace of Illusions is based on the story of *Mahabharata*. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni constructs her novel around the events which is same events as the epic, but Divakaruni makes Draupadi the protagonist, narrating the events of the *Mahabharata* from her viewpoint, giving the novel a feministic method.

Cognitive Dissonance in *The Palace of Illusions*

Cognition pacts with the mind and how a person thinks while dissonance deals with the conflict between two things happening at the same period.

"Cognitive dissonance refers to a situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours. This produces a feeling of mental discomfort leading to an alteration in one of the attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours to reduce the discomfort and restore balance" (McLeod)

"Social psychologist Leon Festinger developed the theory of cognitive dissonance in 1957. Festinger (1957) defined cognitive dissonance as an "antecedent condition which leads to activity oriented toward dissonance reduction".

Leon Festinger was an American cognitive psychologist. Apart from his contributions in cognitive dissonance theory, Festinger also made significant contributions to the study of group behaviour, self-evaluation, and attitude change.

"His theory of cognitive dissonance was the indirect result of an earthquake. Festinger learned that Indian earthquake victims were terrified that a much bigger earthquake was coming, despite evidence to the contrary. Festinger believed that people bought these rumors because they served to justify fear that was already present. From this belief, Festinger developed the theory of cognitive dissonance."(GoodTherapy)

The theory was built upon the notion that individuals strive toward consistency. If there are inconsistencies, they try to rationalise to reduce psychological discomfort.

Festinger used the term "Consonance" in terms of consistency and "Dissonance" in terms of inconsistency." (Borah et al.).

"Cognitive dissonance can often have a powerful influence on our behaviors and actions. It doesn't just influence how you feel; it also motivates you to take action to reduce feelings of discomfort" (Cherry)

Several classic case studies have been conducted to show cognitive dissonance within the laboratory. One of the famous examples is that of Festinger and Carlsmith (1959), who showed subjects a boring task and then paid $1 or $20 to lie to

another participant and say that the task was interesting. This evidence suggests that those paid only one dollar experienced more dissonance and changed their beliefs by convincing themselves that the task was indeed enjoyable, thus justifying their behavior (Festinger and Carlsmith 203).

Another important research study, Brehm's (1956) free-choice paradigm, focused on post-decisional dissonance. Participants were asked to choose between two nearly identical options; later, they were asked to reevaluate their decisions and realized that selected alternatives were more attractive while the rejected options were rated distressingly. It exemplifies how, without one's own volition, one's preferences change to eliminate cognitive conflict and validate one's choice (Brehm 213).

One of the primary ways individuals reduce cognitive dissonance is by altering their behavior to align with their beliefs. For example, an individual who values health but smokes may quit smoking to resolve the inconsistency. In cases where behavior change is not feasible, individuals may adjust their beliefs instead.

A person who frequently eats fast food but understands its health risks may convince themselves that occasional exercise counteracts the negative effects, thereby justifying their behavior.

Adding another cognition is another equally common dissonance-reducing strategy. When faced with conflicting attitudes, individuals tend to add new thoughts just for the sheer purpose of balance. For instance, an individual conscious of the environment may justify his driving of a gasoline-powered car by donating to environmental causes.

Another method by which individuals will reduce that inconsistency might be the trivialising of its importance. An unethical workplace behavior might, for instance, be dismissed by being called "common practice" in an attempt to reduce that internal conflict. Selective exposure plays an equally important role in dissonance reduction, where individuals seek information that reaffirms their belief and avoid evidence that contradicts it (Cialdini 88).

Depending on the nature of conflicting cognitions, different kinds of cognitive dissonance may manifest. Some of the best-studied types include:

Belief Disconfirmation Dissonance:

This arises when new information directly contradicts a belief. The affected people may dispute the new evidence, turn to others with similar beliefs for support, or reinterpret the information in such a way that they can retain their confidence in the prior belief. This is particularly evident in discussions about political ideology, religious faith, and scientific evidence (Festinger 12).

Dissonance Induced by Compliance:

Such dissonance occurs when people perform a behavior that contradicts his own attitude due to pressure from others to do so. An example of this is Festinger and Carlsmith's (1959) classic study, which showed that participants paid a petty sum to lie about a fun task changed their attitudes more than those paid a larger sum (Festinger and Carlsmith 203).

Effort Justification Dissonance:

It is the dissonance felt by people after they have put so much effort into an endeavour and find it rather disappointing. To lessen the dissonance, a person may exaggerate the worth of the task in this case. Initiation rites, schooling, and organisational issues usually manifest this phenomenon. (Aronson and Mills 177)

Post-Decision Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance can arise in people who make a difficult choice and then find themselves uncertain as to whether they made the right choice. In trying to rid themselves of this discomfort, people often strengthen the positive attributes of the chosen alternative while denigrating the rejected alternative. Such behaviour is commonplace in consumer choice and in decisions made for work. (Brehm 213)

There have been numerous famous experiments that have demonstrated cognitive dissonance. One of the most famous studies conducted by Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) involved placing some people in a boring activity and then paying either $1 or $20 for lying to someone else about how interesting the work was. By doing this, the subjects would feel dissonance in doing what they had done. The results indicated that just $1 paid participants were more dissonant and had to change their beliefs to convince themselves that the job was really fun to justify their behaviour

Another important study, Brehm's (1956) free-choice paradigm, explored the area of post-decisional dissonance. After making the selection among two closely ranked alternatives, the participants reevaluated their choice in favour of the chosen alternative, which was rated as more attractive, while deemphasising the rejected alternative. In this instance, the automatic change of preferences serves to reduce cognitive dissonance and legitimise one's choice.

In literature, the technique of cognitive dissonance is applied in character development, moral dilemmas, and identity conflict. Characters who undergo such an experience often face dilemmas: between duty and desire, loyalty and morality, and tradition and modernity. This renders their journeys all the more compelling and psychologised.

One of cognitive dissonance's pivotal literary features is the inner conflict it can concretize in terms of moral and ethical considerations. Many characters in ancient and modern literature who confront dilemmas thereby confronting their ideas of self, societal roles, or even deeply held beliefs. This is what causes character development and pushes the reader to examine their own values and prejudices.

Literary writings sprout lots of types of cognitive dissonance, which generally symbolize much larger psychological and philosophical topics. Some keystones of types are:

Moral Dissonance

This happens whenever the moral construct of a character opposes her or his actions. In Shakespeare's Macbeth, for example, after murdering King Duncan, Macbeth fights with his ambition and moral compass. His growing shame and terror reflect cognitive dissonance.

Social and Cultural Dissonance

The clash of a character's own beliefs against the beliefs of societal conventions or cultural expectations. The reluctant protagonist Okonkwo stood by the path of traditional masculinity too far at the cost of adapting to changing standards in his society, over-indulgent in traditions that once empowered women, thus suggesting the typical Shakespearean example of cognitive dissonance in Achebe's Things Fall Apart.

Identity Dissonance

The very essential factor of character development is the question of shaking self-awareness as a character gets to face-settling or unsettling, agreeable or disagreeable stimuli or poignantly aimed at them. Example: In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the protagonist faces psychological dissonance as she tries to reconcile her reality with the oppressive expectations imposed by her husband and society.

Ideological Dissonance

This occurs when a character's political, religious, or philosophical convictions are questioned. Example: In George Orwell's *1984*, Winston Smith grapples with the dissonance between his knowledge of truth and the Party's propaganda, leading to his ultimate psychological breakdown.

Emotional Dissonance

When a character's emotions clash with their rational beliefs or responsibility. Example: In Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff experiences emotional dissonance as his love for Catherine coexists with his desire for vengeance.

In the novel *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi frequently encounters situations where her beliefs and actions are at odds, compelling her to settle these conflicts.

One of these instances of major inner conflict is generated by Draupadi's infatuation for Karna, which had already been indicated in the story. She denies him totally during her *swayamvara*, only to regret her decision later. Her dissonance comes from her pride and loyalty to the Pandavas, who are in total opposition to the great inner feelings she has. To cope, she justifies her rejection by saying that she is his enemy, though the novel implies her unfulfilled desire in quite subtle ways.

Another instance that shows Draupadi's dissonance is a wide and disheartened one is when she does not marry one but is forced to marry the other four Pandavas as well, just as she had intended for Arjuna. This would create serious internal conflict within her between selfish desire and duty. To escape from this torture, Draupadi rationalises this marriage as one of heavenly approval and also views it as a mandatory sacrifice for *dharma*.

When Yudhishthira had staked and lost in the game of dice, Draupadi had hit her lowest stage mentally and physically. Although she thinks of herself as independent and powerful, she is treated like property instead. Her questions to the elders in the assembly hall will restore that cognitive equilibrium and will function as an antidote to the moral evil of what has been done unto her.

Lastly the cognitive dissonance can be seen when Draupadi's rage against the Kauravas, particularly Dushasana and Duryodhana, seems contrary to the greater cause of her understanding of the outcome of war. She has a thirst for revenge and must deal with the consequences of its devastation. One of the ways in which she reduces her cognitive dissonance in that moment is the justification of war as a necessary means of re-establishing *dharma*, but her mind is still racked by doubts regarding violence.

Conclusion

Draupadi's journey throughout *The Palace of Illusions* is marked by her continuous tug-of-war between her wishes and the realities expected by society and oppressive fate. Her internal dissonance reveals itself frequently during some crucial moments, such as in the contradictory feelings she has experienced towards Karna and Arjun, her expectations of marriage with the actual shared life of five husbands, and her longing for revenge against her moral conflict. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays Draupadi not merely as a mythical figure but rather as a very real heroine with her share of psychological suffering and emotional ambiguities.

All of Draupadi's challenges are excellent demonstrations of all the unresolved issues faced by women subjected to male-dominant systems. Her acts of rebellion and the resultant internal conflicts symbolise the collective female battle over power, autonomy, and acceptable roles. However, the journey is towards a self-realisation, where often she is questioning her beliefs, motives, and choices. This is a narrative study that brings to the fore Draupadi's state of mind in terms of the parameters of cognitive dissonance, revealing the inner workings of human emotions and the harrowing journey of reconciling contradictory notions.

This book gives the viewer an opportunity to interact with Draupadi's story in a manner that lies outside the traditional confines of the Mahabharata, showing the inner torment of Draupadi with unrelenting force, thus transposing a modern feminist approach on an ancient epic. Cognitive dissonance in Draupadi thus brings into focus the hardships entailed in keeping alive numerous and often contradictory identities, thus rendering her a figure both timeless and available, whose problems continue to resonate with the present-day reader.

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