

Cognitive Dissonance and Marital Disharmony: A critique on the mental conflict in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*

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Abstract

Earthly marriages are a celebration of unions formed in paradise. It is the spiritual union of two souls that compromises the mental and physical planes. It accomplishes human relationships by providing friendship, security, and a strong sense of faith. The institution of marriage benefits society as a whole because it is the cornerstone of the family, which is the essential unit that forms the society. Lack of love, understanding, mutual respect, trust, commitment and togetherness causes a huge tremor in the foundation of modern marriages. This leads to degeneration of the marital spirit. One's life can terminate as a result of marital discord, which is extremely harmful. The couple in a loveless marriages experience disharmony, and the people around them also has to undergo severe mental sufferings. The paper emphasizes the theme on marital disharmony and the root cause of dissonance in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*. It delineates the marital life of Clara, the Clairvoyant and her volatile husband Esteban with the aid of cognitive dissonance theory.

Keywords: Marital Dissonance, Disharmony, Human relationship, Mutual respect, Cognitive dissonance.

1. Introduction

Isabel Allende is one of the most distinguished voices of prominent Latin American literature. Events in her novel serve as a symbolic depiction of both Allende's life experiences and the historical background of her country. Karen Castelluci Cox in her book on Isabel Allende states, "Isabel Allende's literature resonates with her contemporary readership because she addresses universal themes while inventing unique and memorable characters" (26). She narrates the story using her imaginative emotions. Her novels have dealt with subjects like marriage, sex, social conventions, moral values and everything else that could provoke strong feelings of resentment and fury towards the patriarchy. The male and female hemispheres make up the two halves of the globe. The idea that women should live up to the standards that men are not held to is something that Allende finds offensive. This statement is evident in the following lines: "What I felt was rebellious anger towards everything, against machismo, against the fact that my husband had advantages and rights that I simply did not have," she later recalled" (Axelrod- Contrada 18). The equality among two sexes serves as the central theme of her writings.

The House of the Spirits is a multigenerational family saga which emphasis on three generations of Trueba women. The main themes of the paper are significance of marriage and the underlying causes of disharmony in marital life. Understanding between one another is a crucial component in a husband and wife relationship. The couples experiencing disharmony is known as marital dissonance. The researcher has used the Cognitive dissonance theory to give an insight to the readers on the marital life of Esteban Trueba and his wife Clara. Cognitive Dissonance Theory was proposed by Leon Festinger in 1957. In social psychology, it has been one of the most important theories. “It has generated hundreds and hundreds of studies, from which much has been learned about the determinants of attitudes and beliefs, the internalization of values, the consequences of decisions, the effects of disagreement among persons, and other important psychological process” (Harmon-Jones and Mills 3).

Cognitive dissonance means the discomfort experienced by the mind when two opposing views, values, or attitudes are held. There is a contradiction because people want consistency in their views and attitudes, which make them, feel uncomfortable or uneasy. In this modern world the classic theory is still applicable to many relationships. This is evident through the following words: “Rather than being relevant to a single topic, the theory is relevant to many different topics” (Harmon-Jones and Mills 5). In marital relationships, this psychological condition appears frequently.

For instance, a person may feel that their wife or husband is caring and loving, but they may also feel that they aren't receiving enough attention or are not happy in their relationship. It is crucial to remember that cognitive dissonance is not inherently bad. People may be inspired to reconcile their opposing views or attitudes, which can result in personal growth and development. A more contented and peaceful existence may arise from this, causing a habit or a change in perspective. Couples can prevent the discomfort in their relationship and strengthen their bond by disclosing opposing ideas and cooperating to find common ground. An open and honest communication among each other serves as a strategy to avoid cognitive dissonance in marital life.

In *The House of the Spirits*, the marriage life of Esteban and Clara is amiserable one. Severo del Valle and Nivea's youngest daughter, Clara, is gifted with extraordinary psychic and prophecy skills. Rosa, Clara's gorgeous eldest sister, is betrothed to Esteban Trueba, a young man from an old upper class family. His quest for riches has led him to travel north to the mines. After Clara prophesies that Severo would run for Congress, Rosa is killed by a bottle of poisoned brandy intended for him. Throughout the following nine years, Clara stays mute and roams aimlessly. When Clara speaks again, she announces her upcoming marriage to his sister's former fiancé Esteban. She actually realises that her marriage will be devoid of love before she ever accepts the proposal. This is obvious through the following words “The character of Clara is closely linked to the idea of determinism, which holds that all occurrences are determined by preceding events or natural laws rather than by free will. She enters into an unhappy marriage because she sees it as her destiny” (Axelrod- Contrada 18). In the novel Clara can be associated with the Cognitive dissonance theory. It is not her inability that makes her mute, but rather willingness on her part. Her elder sister, Rosa's death has caused her considerable discomfort so; she remains silent for the past nine years. In the case of her marriage also she makes herself comfortable with an uncomfortable life.

After a span of two months, Esteban travels from Tres Marias to request Clara's hand in marriage from her father. After they are married, he loves her almost to the point of insanity, while she feels that human connection is superfluous and distracting. Esteban's greatest desire is to have her completely, but she is a woman from another world who eludes him throughout his life. Clara gets pregnant when they live in a spacious home in the Capital. While Clara gives birth to a girl named Blanca, Esteban was expecting a male. Esteban's sister Ferula gives the mother and kid her envious and compulsive attention. Following the marriage, Esteban underwent significant transformation and now appears revitalised. "Everyone could appreciate that Esteban has stopped going to the Red Lantern. His nights on the town, his cock fights, his gambling, his violent tantrums, and above all his bad habit of tumbling girls in the wheat fields were a thing of the past" (Allende 127). Clara has also undergone a change, appearing to have overcome her tendency to communicate with ghosts and use paranormal methods to move furniture.

Ferula is in charge of Blanca, the city employees, and household chores. Before the men return from the fields at dusk, Ferula collects all the women and children of the peasantry to recite the rosary. When she is completed, Clara stands in front of the assembly and yells the same catchphrases that her mother had used to chain herself to the Capital gates. This attitude of Clara infuriates Esteban. This is the first conflict between the couple and it initiates discomfort and disharmony in their marital life. This is obvious from the following lines:

Esteban soon found out about the second half of their prayer meetings and enraged. It was the first time he had ever been angry with Clara and the first time she saw him have one of his famous tantrums. He shouted like a madman, pacing up and down the living room and slamming his fist against the furniture, arguing that if Clara intended to follow in her mother's footsteps she was going to come face to face with a real man, who would pull her pants down and give her a good spanking so she'd get it out of her damned head to go around haranguing people, and that he categorically forbade her to go to prayer meetings or any other kind and that he wasn't some ninny whose wife could go around making a fool of him. (Allende 129)

Clara lets him beat on the furniture and scream until he is completely worn out. Then, still not paying attention, she asks him whether he can make his ears wiggle. Here Esteban and Clara lose peace and harmony due to lack of communication and mutual understanding. If they would have the skills of communication and understanding, their relationship might have been strengthened.

Clara experiences another period of silence after becoming pregnant for the second time. This time Esteban believes that his wife's silence is not a sign of mental illness but rather her final resort. With a Buddhist-like apathy to everything around her, Clara moves through the house like a silent, overweight shadow. She acts as though her spouse is a piece of furniture and does not even look at him. She acts as though she is on the moon and has not heard him when he speaks to her. Esteban is tensed because of the crazy attitude of his wife and the lazy, empty days he has spent in the city. Despite being able to keep himself occupied, he frequently loses his temper, which leaves him feeling uneasy and bored. Despite the fact that the house greatly needs him, he wishes to return to the country.

Clara has unexpectedly emerged from her Brahmanic sanctuary the day before her birth and has resumed her speech. She orders a cup of chocolate and then asks to go for a walk with her husband. Everything in the house is happy, and Esteban leaves the house to purchase her a diamond brooch from the Jewish jewellers on the street. Despite her overwhelming gratitude and admiration for it, Clara never wears it. It is possible that, similar to nearly all the other diamonds, she locks it away in an unexpected location and forgets about it afterwards. In order to examine Clara, Dr. Cuevas comes to the residence. After escorting her to her room, he tells Ferula and Esteban that although she appears to have overcome her mental health crisis, they should prepare for a challenging delivery due to the size of the child. Clara enters the sitting room at that precise moment. She must have heard the last words he said. “‘Everything will turn out fine,’ she said. ‘There is no need for you to worry’” (Allende 138). Esteban makes a joke, speculating that the child might be a male and might take his name.

The couple's disagreement over naming their children is the subject of their subsequent argument. This time, Clara says, she will give birth to twins, whom she names Jaime and Nicolas, respectively. Esteban becomes enraged and demands that at least one of them—like his father and himself—be given the name Esteban, but Clara explains that using the same name twice will lead to confusion in her life-documentary diaries. He becomes quite irritated by Clara's explanation. He therefore breaks a porcelain jar, the last heritage from his great-grandfather's illustrious past, but Clara seems unmoved. He closes the door behind him and walks out. With a deep sense of revenge, he visits the most well-known brothel in the city. He loses his temper and is tempted to become a whore because of his frustration with Clara. Clara, who is put under the care of Ferula and the servant Nana, gives birth to twins, Jaime and Nicolas.

Esteban starts to feel uneasy in his own house. His wife has become more odd, aloof, and unapproachable. Even with gifts, there is no way for him to get to her. He has developed an obsession out of his growing love for her over time. Clara should only think about him, and he could not stand for her to have a life apart from him. He wants her to tell him everything and to possess everything that he has not physically given to her. Clara appears uninterested in him, despite his need for her total dependence. Clara is not interested in domestic affairs. She moves from room to room, never even slightly astonished to discover everything in its proper place. She is unconcerned with what occurs in the house. Even though she cannot remember the names of her own children or the servants, she always manages to be there in the same joyful and kind way.

Even on the longest and most intense evenings, Esteban can never fully sate the dreadful need he has for Clara. He knows that the woman who is supposed to be sleeping by his side is not actually there, even in his fantasies. He could never approach her because she is in some unknown, other dimension. Sometimes he would become angry, shake her violently, and yell the worst charges he could come up with. Afterward, he would end up crying in her lap and pleading with her forgiving him for his brutality. Beyond his anger and pride, Esteban's overblown love for Clara is unquestionably the strongest feeling in his life. He would still be talking about it with the same trembling and urgency fifty years later. He will call her name in his old man's bed until the day he dies.

Another crucial discord which deteriorates the couple's marital life is their daughter Blanca's love relationship with Pedro. Pedro Tercero Garcia, the foreman's son and Blanca have been pals since

they were young. Pedro, a well-known folksinger and significant revolutionary, has grown to be Blanca's lifelong love. In all of Tres Marias, he is the only person who has the courage to challenge the patron. The summers spent at Tres Marias strengthen Blanca's affection for Pedro Tercero, who, in spite of constant beatings from Esteban and his father for his impertinence has emerged as a voice for change on the hacienda. The two teenagers develop a covert romantic relationship and meet secretly at night for three years. The impoverished Count Jean de Satigny, a dapper Frenchman hoping to wed a wealthy lady, settles up with the Trueba family.

The twenty-four-year-old Blanca enrages her father with her stubbornness by turning down the Count's proposal of marriage. As he keeps his eye on Blanca, the Count finds out about her regular trysts with Pedro by the river and proceeds to pursue her further. Without delay, he alerts her father, who thrashes her with fury and then hits Clara for bringing up that “Pedro Tercero Garcia hasn't done a thing you haven't done yourself”, Clara said when she could interrupt him. ‘You also slept with unmarried women not of your own class. The only indifference is that he did it for love. And so did Blanca’ (Allende 233). Esteban Trueba looks at her with a stunned expression. He feels as though she is making fun of him for a brief moment, but then a wave of blood shoots straight to his head. She gets knocked against the wall by his outburst, which consists of striking her in the face. Silently, Clara drops to the ground. Seemingly waking from a daze, Esteban kneels at her side, cries, and begs her pardon while attempting to justify addressing her by all the unique names he has used. He carries her into his arms, puts her on an armchair with tenderness, moistens a handkerchief to place on her forehead, and attempts to get her to sip on some water.

Clara finally opens her eyes. Her nose is dripping with blood. She spits out numerous teeth that fall to the ground and a thread of bloody saliva runs down her neck and chin as she opens her mouth. She decides not to talk to him ever again, gives up using her married name and takes off the delicate gold wedding band he had put on her twenty years back. Karen Castelluci Cox in her book on Isabel Allende interprets as follows: “Though her revolt is a small one, it symbolizes a move to reject the male violence that menaces these women”(21). Clara and Blanca have returned to the Capital after departing Tres Marias two days earlier. Esteban is left feeling as though something in his life has been permanently ruined. He is also ashamed and outraged. In the capital, Blanca's expanding tummy indicates that she is pregnant, while Clara revives her spiritualist circles.

Clara, for instance, retreats into her spirit world to avoid being dominated by her patriarchal husband. Allende confirms that magic can help people cope with an otherwise hopeless situation, “When we live with all forms of violence and misery, we have to look for explanations and hope in supernatural,” she explains. (Axelrod-Contrada 64).

When Esteban learns that Blanca is pregnant, he makes Count Satigny marry his daughter. He gives the Frenchman an explanation of the various provisions of the marriage contract, which significantly allays his fears. Returning to the city, Esteban Trueba now has a spouse for his deflowered daughter and a father for the young bastard. He declares, his anger catching fire, that he does not want to see Blanca, who must stay imprisoned until her wedding day. Clara does not show up to welcome him. Even when he tries to shatter his silver cane, she remains in her room and does not open her door. The effect is that the house appears to be a tangle of disputes and confusion.

Clara ignores the spouse and does not communicate with him, continuing on with her life. Being a virtual prisoner of Esteban, Count Jean de Satigny has stayed in one of the many guest rooms without ever seeing Blanca and has no idea how he became involved in this tragedy. Esteban Trueba has not seen his daughter since the night of the beating, until the day he calls her to take her to the dressmaker so she can try on her wedding gown. The following are Blanca's arguments with Esteban when she refuses to marry the Count:

‘I’m not getting married, Papa,’ she said. ‘Be quite!’ he roared. ‘You’re getting married. I don’t want any bastards in the family, do you hear me?’ ‘I thought we already had several,’ Blanca replied. ‘Don’t talk back to me! I want you to know that Pedro Tercero Garcia is dead. I killed him with my own hands, so you might as well forget about him and try to be a good wife to the man who’s going to lead you to the altar’. (Allende 248)

Blanca's union with the French Count is likewise doomed to collapse. The bishop has approved the wedding, which took place in the cathedral. Clara makes the decision not to go to the celebration since she has always opposed the notion of marrying Blanca off without her will. Esteban forces her to go to the celebration in some way. Despite her reluctance, she manages to smile at the guests because she loves her daughter.

The marriage between Blanca and Jean de Satigny is never consummated. Jean admits to Blanca on their wedding night that he is not particularly interested in being married. They live their lives as friends, and Blanca feels quite relieved. Following their honeymoon, they relocate to the countries far north, where they take up residence in an old, deserted villa. She writes to her mother and speaks to her unborn child during her free time. She keeps Jean's odd behaviours from her mother a secret, including his opium smoking, cocaine snorting, hiring of incredibly unfit Indians to work as domestic help, and establishment of a lavish photo studio that Blanca is never permitted to enter. The only aspect of this that bothers Blanca is his insistence on keeping their financial situation a secret, but even so, she decides to ignore it.

Jean soon starts a new business venture, smuggling Indian mummies into the home through illicit means. Blanca is convinced that the mummies are haunting the house, even though her mother has assured her that the dead are considerably less dangerous than the living. She is dubious when she tells Jean about this because of his aggressive denial of any such things. Once everyone has left the house, Blanca breaks inside the studio. She is shocked to learn that Jean and the Indians he works with are the source of the nightly sounds—grotesque amorous escapades they capture on camera—rather than mummies. Blanca has made the decision to go to her mother's house in order to give birth to her daughter Alba because she does not want her child to be exposed to these kinds of things. Karen Castelluci Cox in her book on Isabel Allende states, Blanca’s boldness is proved by the following lines: “Allende argues, ‘All the women in [*The House of the spirits*] are feminists in their fashion; that is, they ask to be free and complete human beings, to be able to fulfil themselves, not to be dependent on men” (21).

At the age of seven, Alba experiences Clara's death. Alba has learned from Clara that “‘Just as then we come into the world, when we die we are afraid of the unknown. But the fear is something from within us that has nothing to do with reality. Dying is like being born: just a change,’ Clara had said” (Allende 332). Clara thinks Alba would be at ease since, in her case, death would not be a separation but

rather a means of closer unity—something Alba has grasped admirably. Since Clara's passing, Esteban has even gone so far as to act insane. Lying side by side, he uses his last hours to tell her everything he was unable to say earlier. He believes that she has accomplished her purpose in life and has departed to another realm where her spirit, at last freed from the weight of earthly possessions, may rest more comfortably. In his opinion, she still exudes beauty even after passing away. Their marital discord remains unaltered despite the unavoidable circumstance of her death.

Conclusion

The women in the present scenario should adore the qualities of Clara like remaining silent, cool and creating another world inside their minds. If they obtain these qualities they can avoid disharmony and dissonance with their partners. On the other hand Esteban is always inconsistent in his behaviours which cause discord between himself and Clara. This attitude of Esteban makes Clara to go far away from him. So men should be consistent in their attitude and give equal importance to their better halves. The Couple and the people can benefit from cognitive dissonance by using it to better understand how their values, beliefs, and desires connect to their interactions and behaviours. This journey frequently strengthens the bond between the couple and might be enlightened. To sum up, in a marital relationship, maintaining one's sense of self as well as their partner's requirements can bring harmony and comfort to lead a successful married life.

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