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Unraveling the Interplay of Culture and Cognitive Dissonance in Moni Mohsin's *The End of Innocence*: A Critical Textual Analysis

Mashal Mumtaz¹, Uzma Imtiaz², Shafia Azam^{3*}

Abstract

*Inconsistencies among cultural beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors instigate the development of cognitive dissonance in humans at an early age. The prominently obtrusive symptoms of such dissonance include belief disconfirmation, induced or forced compliance, and effort justification. The psychological discomfort experienced after having contracted a dissonant state of mind results in the drive to reduce the inconsistency through a process termed Dissonance Reduction. The research paper attempts to decipher the confinements of the traditional belief system and the conflicts it triggers in the cognition of the female protagonists in *The End of Innocence*. This study explores the convoluted link between culture and cognitive dissonance, focusing on the cultural contexts that influence how cognitive dissonance is perceived and resolved. Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance and one of its fundamental tenets i.e., the forced compliance principle is employed as the theoretical framework to scrutinize Mohsin's text. With a peculiar emphasis on a child and a teenager protagonist respectively, this critical study finds out the role of varying cultural and social backgrounds in making dissonance a part of life discourse.*

Keywords: Culture and Cognitive Dissonance, Forced Compliance, Dissonance Reduction, Social Behavior, Life Discourse.

Introduction

This study draws on the complex interlink between culture and cognitive dissonance, focusing on how cultural circumstances affect the way cognitive dissonance is perceived and managed. Cognitive Dissonance refers to the conflicting beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of human beings that are experienced when people are uncertain of the correctness of their own actions and beliefs. The contrasting beliefs lead to the emergence of inconsistencies in human cognition followed by a feeling of discomfort. As a result, Cognitive Dissonance arouses and is characterized by psychological and physiological markers of stress that propels a need for change either in the belief or in the action. The drive felt by individuals with a cognitive state of mind to reduce inconsistency is termed as Dissonance Reduction which occurs after an unwanted action is taken and has produced unpleasant outcomes. Cognitive Dissonance theory proposed by Leon Festinger in his book *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* in 1957 studies the causes and effects of inconsistent and dissonant cognition in humans. Originally, this theory proved to be quite significant in examining and bringing about constructive transformations in human behavior. "The mechanism of thought or attitude change is the same mechanism used to produce changes in negative, irrational thoughts that are involved in the maintenance of depression and related disorders" (Thompson et al., 2012). The origin and background of cognitive dissonance in teenagers or adult humans are traced back to the early age of child development. It is proven to be a secondary drive that is learned early in childhood tenure and continues to exist later in the period of growing up to adulthood. When a child intentionally or unintentionally commits an action that ends up producing negative results, parents display a reaction towards the child's transgression from a consistent code of

¹ Department of English, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Email: mashalmumtaz331@gmail.com

² Assistant Professor, Department of English, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Email: uzmaintiaz@fjwu.edu.pk

³ Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Email: azam.shafia@gmail.com

conduct in the form of anxiety, punishment, and sometimes withdrawal of positive regard for the child. The parents' reaction either by impulse or by design teaches the child to avoid indulging in affairs that could possibly provoke detrimental reverberations. In the adulthood stage, the inconsistency between beliefs and actions perseveres and displays itself in the myriad issues a person deals with. It also exists in the form of avoidance of responsibility to commit to any conflicting action. Nonetheless, there is still much discussion and intellectual curiosity over how much cultural settings affect the development, perception, and resolution of cognitive dissonance. Individuals' thought processes and behavioral patterns are greatly influenced by culture, which is defined as the common ideas, customs, norms, and values of a society. The significance of cultural dissonance was highlighted by Cohen and Hoshino-Browne (2005), who described how people from multicultural backgrounds deal with competing cultural ideals, which exacerbates cognitive dissonance. Acculturation and cognitive dissonance interact to create a new dimension in which people reconcile opposing cultural norms and values, which affects their cognitive functions. This paper aims to critically analyze the intricate connection between culture and cognitive dissonance, elucidating the ways in which cultural frameworks affect how cognitive inconsistencies are perceived, tolerated, and resolved.

This study employs a critical textual analysis approach (Arya, 2020; McKee, 2003) to analyze *The End of Innocence*, Moni Mohsin's first book which was published in 2006. Moni Mohsin, being a modern and contemporary writer, is popular for her humorous and succinct commentary on contemporary Pakistani society. Her novels and journalist entries in columns wittingly explore the subjects of class discrimination between privileged and underprivileged groups, gender binaries, and convoluted relationships between Pakistan and the West. *The End of Innocence* also probes through similar thematic concerns regarding identity, social privilege, guilt, prejudices, family ties, and the complexity of political and social dilemmas prevalent throughout the plot of the text.

The End of Innocence is unusual in its setting: the rural farmland of West Punjab delineated in its changing colours and seasons with the minimal brush-strokes of a Japanese artist. The simple, sensuous prose reflects the multilingual world in which its child protagonist lives, moving easily from Western references to translations of local proverbs and citations of folklore (Hussain et.al., 20).

The novel is set in the winter of 1971 in the backdrop of a period of political turmoil and social change i.e. the war between Pakistan and India pointing towards the creation of Bangladesh as a separate state. Mohsin portrays a coming-of-age story of two protagonists, Laila and Rani, who share a friendship "based on love and estrangement, trust and mistrust and most of all power and marginalization respectively" (Aftab et.al., 794). The plot initiates with thirty-eight-year-old Laila, the narrator of the story, who traverses through the past events of her life in Sabzbagh when she was eight years old. Spending her time partly in Sabzbagh and partly in Lahore to attend a convent school, Laila grows up in a privileged household regulated by her liberal parents, Fareeda and Tariq. As the political tensions rise between East and West Pakistan, Laila's family confronts the reality of their privileged status quo and the repercussions of their decisive actions on the underprivileged community of Sabzbagh. "Ignored by the adults around her yet desperate to know their world," (Hussain et.al., 19) Laila gets caught up in the struggle to connect with the grownups but fails, so she begins to question the beliefs and ideological system of her family and the society she exists in. Hence, through Laila's endeavors of acknowledging her own separate identity, Mohsin displays a nuanced and insightful depiction of Pakistani society under the circumstances of social and political transformation.

Rani, fifteen years old, is the granddaughter of an old maid named Kaneez who has been serving Laila's Grandmother, Sardar Begum, for decades. She is illustrated as a marginalized character that has been confined to the conventions and beliefs of a poor conservative household. The failure to fulfill her

desires to experience and cherish the merriments, that she never gets to have, results in the development of cognitive dissonance. All her expectations were shattered by getting involved in a forbidden love affair with an unnamed young man despite Kaneez's and Sardar Begum's frequently and forcefully imposed conduct and principles. Thus, she strives to restore consistency to get rid of the dissonance in her mind. The friendship between Rani and Laila serves as "the fundamental premise is rich with possibility: the friendship between two young girls, both inhabiting the same physical space but belonging to different social realms" (Hussain et.al., 19). Rani tries to find solace in Laila when she encounters moments of dissonance and crisis but, Laila un-deliberately brings out destructive consequences for Rani in the wake of helping her due to her "innocence corrupted by pervasive paranoia" (Hussain et.al., 20).

The End of Innocence is an intact masterpiece of literature that has only been examined in the context of the war of 1971 and the conflicts of nations. The significance of this research paper lies in the maneuver to seek a deeper understanding of social psychology, especially cognitive dissonance and its influence on humans. The primary focus is directed toward the psychological inconsistency in children holding two or more contrasting cognitive notions and the influence of varying social backgrounds in fostering forced compliance. The research paper is significant with respect to the analysis and discussion of social behaviors in a purely conventional and feudal context of Pakistan.

Literature Review

This research paper focuses on the subject of cognitive dissonance, and Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance elucidates the cognitive development and actions of the selected text's characters. In 1954, before the advent of this theory, Festinger along with his contemporaries experimented with a group of people to see what changes occur in people when their beliefs are challenged and disconfirmed. The members of this group believed that the world was going to end soon and when the date of prophecy passed without the world being ended, it was witnessed that the members became sterner to their belief. Following the results of this experiment, Festinger put forth his theory in 1957 that suggests, "when two cognitions are at odds, an individual feels anxious and attempts to deal with the inconsistency through various means, such as ignoring conflicting information or adding cognitions that can reconcile the conflict" (Brannon and Gawronski, 1). Festinger views the process of dissonance differently from the other theorists who believe that maintaining consistency in cognition over inconsistency is a preferred approach that is considered to be controllable by the human mind. However, Festinger believes that it is not merely a preference but rather an instinctive drive that motivates the human mind to find ways to reduce the experienced dissonance. Festinger's notion of cognitive dissonance can be compared with other everyday human behaviors that are simple and accessible to be understood by cognition. For instance, the drive to eat when a person feels hungry and the drive to drink when he feels thirsty is considered natural and involuntary. In the same way, the drive to reduce inconsistency and replace it with consistent thoughts is also natural and the human mind is designed to look for resolutions to reduce the dissonance caused by inconsistency.

Festinger theorizes that "people who hold two or more cognitions that are psychologically inconsistent experience a state of psychological discomfort called cognitive dissonance. Moreover, the state of dissonance has drive like properties, motivating people to seek its reduction" (Cooper, 1). In the light of cognitive dissonance theory, Festinger believes that dissonance can arise under differing circumstances, for instance when people come across a notion or ideology that challenges their already existing beliefs when they happen to get involved in some action that might be unwanted or forced upon them and the result of that action contradicts their values and belief system and, most often, when people make decisions that bring about both constructive and deconstructive outcomes. This theory has been

employed to evaluate multiple phenomena in relation to social and psychological issues and consumer behavior. A concept named as “Attitudinal ambivalence” is also viewed to be closely associated with cognitive dissonance because it deals with the different attitudes an individual holds towards the same object. The connection is built between the two approaches based on the similarity they share i.e. both involve a conflict between two or more than two cognitions and attitudinal ambivalence produces the same outcomes like the inconsistency in cognitive dissonance including “aversive feelings and biased information processing” (Brannon and Gawronski, 2). In response to the development of cognitive dissonance and the negative aversive feelings that succeed, Festinger proposes a resolution to reduce the aftermaths of dissonance and termed it as the process of Dissonance Reduction. Festinger states that,

Dissonance Reduction is a psychological phenomenon found to occur after a person has made a choice between two approximately equal alternatives. The effect of the phenomenon is to enhance the attractiveness of the chosen object or chosen course of action (Festinger, 94).

Festinger forges dissonance to be capable of having drive-like characteristics i.e. the greater the dissonance, the greater the urgency to make cognitive changes that are deemed necessary to reduce the unpleasant state of tension. Dissonance functions on the degree of magnitude it possesses and that magnitude predicts and describes the extent of cognitive change that is necessary to happen. Inconsistencies among cognitions interfere with the tendencies of procreating actions that create negative sentiments as Festinger states “sometimes it may be very difficult or even impossible to change behavior and opinions that are involved in dissonant relations. Consequently, there are circumstances in which appreciable dissonance may persist for long periods” (Festinger, 94). There are several ways that have been introduced to reduce and resolve the cognitive dissonance. One way is to change the behavior towards the beliefs a person already inhabits and the beliefs he encounters through a direct or an indirect source. It may result in eliminating the discomfort experienced after doing an action that brings about psychological tension. Another way is to change the belief by staying focused on his beliefs no matter what is thrown at him and denying the beliefs he confronts. Another way to reduce the dissonance is to add a new belief to the existing system of his beliefs which could help him reduce the inconsistency between the thought and action. The final way to overcome the dissonance is to maximize the outcome of the actions done under his existing beliefs and minimize the value of inconsistency and guilt experienced after the said action. In order to evaluate the ways of reducing dissonance and inconsistency in the light of theory, Festinger narrates,

There are two major ways in which the individual can reduce dissonance in [this] situation. He can persuade himself that the attractive features of the rejected alternative are not really as attractive as he had originally thought, and that the unattractive features of the chosen alternative are not really unattractive. He can also provide additional justification for his choice by exaggerating the attractive features of chosen alternative and the unattractive features of the rejected alternative. In other words, the process of dissonance reduction should lead, after the decision, to an increase in the desirability of the chosen alternative and a decrease in the desirability of the rejected alternative (Festinger, 95).

Festinger’s theory follows four basic paradigms i.e. the Forced Compliance paradigm, the Free Choice paradigm, the Effort Justification paradigm, and the Hypocrisy paradigm. The Forced Compliance paradigm functions when a task is forced on an individual to perform and it does not corroborate with his beliefs. The distressing outcomes of maintaining such forced behavior “can lead people to change their attitudes if they are unable to find a situational explanation for their counter-attitudinal behavior” (Brannon and Gawronski, 5). The second paradigm of cognitive dissonance theory is the Free Choice paradigm which functions when individuals deliberately make a free choice of performing an action but post-decisional dissonance occurs. The dissonance occurs as a result of realizing that the chosen option manifests the negative features that are absent in the rejected alternative. Similarly, the rejected option has

more appealing properties that are not apparent in the freely chosen option. Festinger believes that “this spreading of alternatives effect is caused by an aversive feeling of post-decisional dissonance, which is reduced by exaggerating the attractiveness of the chosen item and downplaying the attractiveness of the unchosen item” (Brannon and Gawronski, 5). The third paradigm termed as the Effort Justification paradigm operates on the idea that the actions performed with “greater effort and pain result in more favorable attitudes toward the relevant target compared to actions involving smaller effort or pain” (Brannon and Gawronski, 5). The actions performed with more effort are likely to bring forth dissonance owing to the fact that the effort investment feels irrational. Hence, people end up altering their attitudes towards the initial target in order to reduce the dissonance arising from the effort justification. The fourth paradigm of Festinger’s theory is the Hypocrisy paradigm. According to this principle, people can change their behaviors due to dissonance even when they are strongly committed to perform an action and are reminded of the failures in their past to ensure that they act in line with their attitude. This paradigm is considered to “highlight the rational side of dissonance by providing valuable insights for effective interventions in the area of self-regulation” (Brannon and Gawronski, 5). This research paper only sets to probe through the text of Mohsin’s *the End of Innocence* under the lens of the Forced Compliance principle.

The End of Innocence is praised for the exceptional hallmarks of its narrative that is richly smothered in the vivid descriptions of Pakistani culture, its journey through complex political and social complications of a feudal rural setup, and “very well etched out” characters (Smitha). Despite the fact that this novel is composed in the context of 1971, Mohsin has brilliantly carved a narrative that is richly engrossed in a context that illustrates the essence of such a society that exists to date. Critics and book lovers all across the globe have paid their greatest regards and applaud the courage to shed light on some brutal truths prevailing in political and social atmospheres. Melissa Thompson praises Mohsin and her novel,

Mohsin uses words like a palette to paint a vivid picture of the country she grew up in. Themes synonymous with another world, honour killings, and family honour- collide with the universal consequences of exposed secrets. This is a beautifully written work that promises to be a real success (*The End of Innocence*, n.d.).

This novel is also significant for raising awareness about social and political plights using unusual characters, particularly the protagonists. The central characters of the story are both females belonging to a sensitive and vulnerable age. Through their indecisive thoughts, impulsive actions, and struggles to survive in a vicious social environment, Mohsin produces “a wonderful read. The situations are beautifully depicted, and the child’s mind is portrayed so very well” (Smitha). In the backdrop of this discussion, this research aims to bring forth the contributing events, in the novel, towards the development of inconsistencies in the protagonists as well as to investigate the effects of cognitive dissonance in children and provide necessary resolutions. This research addresses the questions, how cognitive dissonance accounts for the discrepancy in the attitude of characters in Mohsin’s *The End of Innocence* and what role social norms and influence play in inducing forced compliance in the protagonists of the selected text.

Leon Festinger’s theory of Cognitive Dissonance with an explicit emphasis on the Forced Compliance Principle serves as the theoretical ground for this research paper. Cognitive Dissonance is a theoretical perspective of social psychology that emphasizes the role of cognition in social behaviors and analyzes an underlying tension when an inconsistency is observed between one’s beliefs and behaviors. The forced Compliance Principle, as a paradigm of social psychology, exhibits a behavior that results from forcing an unwanted action on an individual and, hence, does not corroborate with his personal belief system.

The theoretical framework for this research paper incorporates a textual anatomization of Moni Mohsin’s *The End of Innocence* as the primary text. Leon Festinger’s book entitled “A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance” (1957) along with scholarly reviews and critiques are consulted as the secondary sources

for this paper. This study conducts qualitative and inter-disciplinary research based on a grounded theory to reflect on the unflattering aspect of the human mind and its retaliation.

Discussion and Analysis

This research paper brings forth the contributing events in the expansion of discrepancies among the thoughts and attitudes of both the protagonists can be fulfilled through a critical analysis of the primary text. *The End of Innocence* is a combination of various small narratives about different characters in the story, but on the whole, it can be categorized into Laila's and Rani's perspectives. Both of them appear as the female protagonists in the novel and share a mutual bond of friendship despite belonging to distinct social statuses and backgrounds. Laila's perspective is shared through the lens of an eight years old naive and innocent child who is curious to be introduced to the surrounding world of grownups. Having been born and raised in a privileged household, Laila is ignorant of the social and political injustices but grows up to eventually realize the truth as she witnesses the unjust and unfair social world. The inconsistency in Laila's thoughts and behaviors surfaces at the very beginning of the novel when she experiences perturbation and craves for solitude even in the presence of a crowd of elite socials. Laila narrates her discomfort and says, "The floor is thronged with the well-heeled members of the Imperial Club. But, to me, there seems a frantic edge to their merriment, as if they were all doing their utmost to forget what lurks outside" (Mohsin, 1). These lines from the novel are powerful and meticulously drawn to reveal the dissonant state of not only Laila but of all those people who appear to be enjoying their lives yet "doing their utmost to forget" and subside the discomfort of conflicting beliefs and behaviors.

The first chapter of the novel sets a backdrop for the plot of the rest of the story narrated by Laila in the flashbacks. The younger self of Laila is portrayed as a striving child who faces and endures some bitter reality checks while apparently living a fairytale life. Her cognitive dissonance develops in her childhood when she fails to construct meaningful connections with the adults around her and to nurture her kinship with her elder sister Sara and her friendship with Rani. The feeling of being left out of every adult gathering and grownup conversation accompanies her throughout her childhood years. As the novel narrates, "There were times when Sara and Rani would go off arm in arm to whisper about grown-up things. Laila felt the misery of exclusion as a physical pain, like shards of glass wedged in her throat" (Mohsin, 11-12). The experience of such ignorance from her surroundings results in the development of cognitive dissonance and in order to reduce its influence, Laila resolves to act like a grown-up and denies letting herself be treated as a kid anymore. In one of the arguments, Laila responds, "Don't tell me to grow up, Laila yelled. *I am grown up*" (Mohsin, 67). The unsettling inconsistency resulting from the development of cognitive dissonance in her mind makes her drift away from the relationships that add to her existing discomfort. This is where Laila attempts to reduce her dissonance by changing her beliefs regarding relationships, especially with her sister Sara. At one instance in the novel, "Sara chanted, You're a stupid little cry baby. Cry baby, cry baby" and in response to such attitudes that conflict with her beliefs, she denies sticking with the old notions as Mohsin narrates, "Laila had resolved never again to confide her fanciful thoughts to Sara" (86-87). There are a number of factors accountable for the inconsistent state of mind that has evolved in Laila over the course of time. Torn between a world classified into dos and don'ts yet interlinked deeply with her personal life and family ties, Laila becomes a victim of contrasting cognitions. She grows up in a household where her parents are liberal and educated but her grandmother, Sardar Begum, is a conservative feudal landlady who is quite strict when it comes to moral values and code of conduct. Laila spends her time partly in Lahore where she attends school and partly in Sabzbagh on vacations. In Lahore, Laila attends a convent school and her Bua is a Christian woman yet she is not allowed to visit the church in Sabzbagh. Her deep desire to connect with her parents, her grandmother, Bua, Sara, and Rani comes in conflict with her age and the left-out behavior she witnesses among the grownups. "Laila straddled a

divided world. On one side stood her mother, and on the other, Bua" (Mohsin, 72).

The other perspective of dissecting the events and causes of inconsistencies in the text is associated with Rani whose cognitive dissonance is mainly the result of the Forced Compliance principle. Throughout her childhood and teenage years, Rani has been restricted by Kaneez and Sardar Begum who inflicted upon her the beliefs of the conservative and conventional system of society. Due to the fact that Rani belongs to a less privileged and poor household, she wishes to achieve things that she has seen or heard about but never owned or experienced. Laila and Sara share good friendly relations with Rani and as they grow up in a rich and upper-class social background, appear to be a gateway for Rani to enjoy the things she is deprived of. The first instance that delineates the contrasting beliefs for Rani occurs when Sardar Begum gets an invite to visit a newly opened cinema where screening of *Heer Ranjha* is going to happen. Sardar Begum refuses the invitation but Rani pleads to Laila to convince Sardar Begum to take them all to the cinema. Kaneez does not agree to let Rani go along as she says, "The cinema is no place for good girls" (Mohsin, 6). On the other hand, Rani conceives contrasting beliefs to what Kaneez practices. In Rani's view, "The cinema, they say, is so big, with hundreds of seats, and so many lights that it is like a night sky thick with stars. Please I've never been and if we don't go now, I never will" (Mohsin, 9). Eventually, the trip to the cinema confirms the beliefs Rani has been holding for so long and "brought home all that was missing".

Moreover, the forging of conventional stereotypes and notions is seen prevailing throughout the narrative. In particular, when it comes to the affairs of marriage, Kaneez and Sardar Begum hold similar concepts that girls should be wedded off as soon as they hit puberty and the decision of marriage is solely to be made by the girl's parents or guardians. On the way back from the cinema, Sardar Begum finds it a perfect moment to define the limits for a good girl in case the movie screening might exert a negative influence on their sensitive and innocent minds. Sardar Begum suggests that "Good girls don't make up their minds about whom they want to marry and who not. They have to bow to the wishes of their parents who know best" (Mohsin, 21-22). On the contrary, Rani suggests different notions from what Sardar Begum initially said. In a conversation with Laila, Rani says, "I wish I was Heer. I wish someone would fall in love with me as deeply as Ranjha did with her. I want to be adored and sung to and smiled at" (Mohsin 33). In response to that, Laila whose innocent mind could not comprehend the differing attitudes answers, "But you heard what Dadi said, didn't you? Girls mustn't love like that. It's wrong and shameful. Heer had to kill herself and she shamed her family". Nonetheless, Rani does not pay much attention to the frequently told notions and casually exclaims that "Everyone has to die. What do I care as long as I get to dance and sing and taste some real happiness before dying?" (Mohsin, 34).

The aforementioned conflict experienced by Rani in her own beliefs and the beliefs of her grandmother and Sardar Begum leads Rani to develop a state of cognitive dissonance that deems her restless and distressed. In order to seek the reduction of this dissonance, Rani opts for a way where she sticks to her beliefs and progresses to perform the corresponding action i.e. meeting with the unknown boy whom she sees regularly outside her school and secretly adores. Eventually, she reaches the chosen designation for their first meeting but somehow her cognition keeps her uncomfortable for going behind her grandmother's back and deviating from her enforced principles. "Rani twisted her dupatta in her restless fingers. She was stupid and credulous to have believed him. She should leave. She mumbled, reluctant to dwell on this betrayal behind her grandmother's back" (Mohsin, 40). She initially resolved to follow her belief and thought to meet this young man, but is still unsure of what results her actions would bring about.

She hadn't known what this meeting would lead to, but if she declined to meet him, she might never have another opportunity. Rani knew the risks. If her grandmother found out, she would be removed from school. Locked up, flogged, even. But still she wanted to lift the curtain and glimpse the forbidden (Mohsin, 43).

Despite knowing that her actions have a fair chance of resulting in negative circumstances, she still

manages to follow her own ideology and eventually finds out that her beliefs and actions were meant to bring catastrophe not only for her but for all the related people.

The research paper under the lens of cognitive dissonance theory and its paradigm of Forced Compliance finds out that the inconsistencies between the beliefs and behaviors of Rani and Laila originate from a very early age. Despite varying social and economic backgrounds and distinct events, both protagonists experience similar discomfort as a result of cognitive dissonance. In order to reduce the dissonance, both of them strive to stick to their beliefs and commit actions that bring catastrophic results.

Conclusion

By and large, cognitive dissonance is most likely to develop in a child in his early years and never breaks away even when the child grows up. The human mind ceases to function at a balanced pace with the ongoing inconsistencies and dissonance in his mind. The conflicting and contrasting beliefs and behaviors pave the way for dissonance that can be only resolved either through changing one's course of action or molding one's beliefs. A conventional and conservative society particularly plays a key role in hammering out the development of dissonance and makes it a permanent part of life discourse.

The End of Innocence is a fresh literary piece in the field of research; therefore, it offers a number of opportunities for researchers to apply various theoretical perspectives to the text. Future researchers are recommended to scrutinize *The End of Innocence* from the perspective of Marxist Feminism or War and Literature to organize profound research.

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