Review Article

A COGNITIVE INTERPRETATION OF ARJUNA’S DEPRESSION IN CONTEXT OF MAHABHARATA

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to interpret the Arjuna’s state in battlefield of Kurukshetra. Arjuna showed an impression of depression due to approach-avoidance conflict. It has been tried to explain how he feels during the psychological state of depression and how he logically tries to defend his denial for not fighting for the sake of Dharma. The cognitive analysis was used to interpret the symptoms sighted by Arjuna. The article provides a new perspective for the cognitive interpretation of Arjuna Vishad Yoga given in Bhagwat Gita. Lastly, the paper highlighted depression, antecedents, conflict, and the psychological state of Arjuna. ASEAN Journal of Psychiatry, Vol. 24 (7) August, 2023; 1-5

Keywords: Depression, Conflict, Bhagwat Gita, Cognitive Analysis

Introduction

The story of Arjuna’s depression is unique in many ways. The birth of depression takes place on the battlefield. A warrior who came prepared to fight suddenly decides to flight. A warrior shouldered the responsibility of winning the battle is choosing to escape. A study of Mahabharata explains his strange change in behaviour i.e., from fight to flight. In psychology, we all are well aware of fight or flight response. These two responses live side by side. It is a kind of physiological truth. Physiologically, hypothalamus plays an important role in emotions and our stress reaction. Selye’s general adaptation syndrome emphasized reactions towards stressful situations [1].

Literature Review

Approach vs. avoidance

The cognitive appraisal of the stimulus situation can change a positive emotion into a negative emotion. Similarly, negative emotions by cognitive reappraisal can be changed into positive emotions. Freud’s emphasized on bipolar nature of human existence in terms of love and hate like fight and flight coexist [2]. Solomon and Corbit opponent-process theory explain the role of information in changing emotional labeling. Many experiments were done after Schachter and Singer reveals meaning can be manipulated cognitively. Anger by the mediation of cognition can turn into an escape. Approach behavior can be turned into avoidance behavior. This cognitive manipulation consists of self-attribution and attribution regarding causes and consequences [3].

Approach-avoidance conflict

Arjuna is in an approach-avoidance conflict. He knows that he has to choose between killing his kith and kins and winning the battle. He can’t win the battle without killing. Before coming to the battlefield, the conflict was there in his unconscious. The decision to fight was taken by all his well-wishers and he opted for the positive gains associated with accepting the challenge of a battle. He suppressed the idea that the killing of cousins and relatives would be the logical consequence of this battle. Miller proved that the gradient of avoidance is steeper than that of approach. The emotional fear experience results in a faster escape response as compared to the emotional experience of an approach love response [4].

The stress that Arjuna feels after he has chosen the avoidance response makes him miserable. He calls it a condition of depression or Vishad. The term depression is used here for two reasons. Firstly, in Gita, the emotional state of stress as experienced by Arjuna is called Vishad or depression and secondly, the term depression is very frequently used by people. It is one of the most popular terms that finds a place in the vocabulary of a common man [5].
Objective and rationale of the article

In this cognitive perspective, the main objective of the article is to understand the dynamics of Arjuna’s depression [6]. The opponent-process theory explains how Arjuna changed from one emotional state of the fight to another state of flight. Were these two tendencies (approach or avoidance) coexisting like twins in Arjuna’s mind? By changing the cognitive appraisal, the fight response became a flight response. Arjuna suddenly decided not to fight is explained by accepting the assumption that approach-avoidance tendencies existed, with equal strength. Fight dominated when stimuli present were appropriate for fight response. When the stimuli present were appropriate for fight response, fight behaviour dominated. Arjuna switched over to flight response from fight response. It is worthwhile to know that (1) Arjuna’s depression is an expression of the decision to solve an approach-avoidance conflict. (2) description of antecedents before the actual battle shall help us to know the working of Arjuna’s thinking. It would show that Arjuna wanted to avoid this battle [7].

Antecedents of conflict

The fact remains that Arjuna was in an approach-avoidance conflict much before the battle. To prove this point let us look at Arjuna’s behavior. Even Draupadi (Sankchipt Mahabharat) was shocked to see Arjuna favoring a peace and compromise formula. Though Bhimsen too was agreed with the agreement with Arjuna Krishna reminded Bhimsen that he had taken a vow to kill Duryodhana, when Draupadi was being disrobed. Bhima’s valour was revoked and he mentally again got prepared for the fight. Krishna was to act as a messenger of Pandavas to Kauravas and to dissuade Duryodhana from the path of violence and give the Pandavas their legitimate share (even five villages would suffice). The dialogues between Arjuna and Krishna and Draupadi’s speech instigating them to kill Kauravas, make interesting reading [8].

Arjuna said, “Shri Krishna! Whatever was to be said has been said by King Yudhishthir. But listening to you I feel that because of Dhritarashtra’s greed and selfish love for his son, you feel that a peace accord or compromise is not simple. So whatever you think proper and which is in the welfare of Pandavas please do, begin it quickly and please also tell us our next action” [9].

Sri Krishna said, “It is not within my control to change destiny”. Do you know Duryodhana’s mind and my views? Why posing to be ignorant, you are putting doubts before me? Gods have descended on earth to unburden the earth. You also knew this divine predestination. Tell me how a treaty with them could be? Yet all the way, I have to obey the orders of Dharmaraj” [10].

After this speech Nakul, Sahdev and Satyik expressed their opinion. Satyik said, ‘His anger will pacify only after Duryodhana is killed. ”Draupadi praised Sahdev and Satyik and weeping reminded Krishna of the humiliations and cruelties inflicted by Duryodhana. She said, “If Bhima and Arjuna have become cowards today and are eager for a treaty, then my father with his sons would fight against Kauravas and my five great brave sons with Abhimanyu shall join them. For thirteen years, suppressing my anger, I was waiting, alas! By arrows of the spoken words of Bhimsen, my heart is breaking. They are still seeing righteousness or Dharma.” She broke and wept bitterly.

Sri Krishna consoled her and said, “Soon you will see the wives of Kauravas in tears. I make a truthful pledge that you will see your husband rich and wealthy and your enemies dead”. Arjuna, even after this assurance given by Krishna to Draupadi, showed his inclination towards peace. Arjuna said, “Shri Krishna you are the greatest well-wisher of Kuru descendants. You are also a relative and loved by all. By bringing Kauravas closer to Pandavas you can make a compromise between the two.”

This last speech is important. It shows Arjuna’s mindset before Krishna’s departure to Hastinapur for a peace treaty. His conflict can be visualized in the following monologue. Though I know that enemy is cruel and wicked, they deserve to be killed, I can kill them all, but it is better if the war is avoided, and a peace accord is reached.

Krishna failed in his mission and war became inevitable. When Arjuna came to the battlefield reluctantly because he favored peace. He was in a dilemma that was temporarily resolved in favor of violence. He had to fight because he had no other option. It was not by choice. It was a choice forced upon him, perhaps against his love for family and humanism. He came to the battlefield with his sense of competence and confidence. Out of his three main traits, he was compelled by one trait (competence) and there was unconscious repression of two traits (Love

for family and humanism). Thus it can be concluded that Arjuna’s desire to escape and flight reaction on the battlefield was not sudden. Two suppressed traits were aroused on the battlefield in the presence of appropriate stimuli; the physical presence of family members. The traits were love for family and love for humanism (non-killing).

Discussion

Interpreting the symptoms: The stated by Arjuna

Arjuna told Sri Krishna that “By seeing the group of our own men in the battlefield desirous of fighting (1) my body; organs are feeling exhausted. (2) mouth is getting dry (3) my body is trembling and there is apprehensive thrill (4) my Gandiva (name of the bow) is also falling (5) the skin is also burning and (6) my mind is getting confused. (7) I am not able to even stand up. (8) Oh. Keshava, I see all the symptoms which procrastinate unfavorable consequence and above all, I do not see welfare in my killing of our own people”.

These bodily symptoms are psychological, where Arjuna is completely crestfallen and feels disheartened. It seems he feels no jest in life and considers his existence futile. Pleasures of life seem to have no attraction for him. This is the state of Vishaad or depression.

Arjuna expresses his motivation for flight response. He says, “Oh. Krishna! Neither I want victory nor kingdom nor pleasures. Oh, Govind! what will be the purpose of such a kingdom and pleasure of life, and what is the use of life now”.

“We desire kingdom, pleasure, and pursuits for them (kith and kins) and none but they are standing before me leaving aside the desire for all wealth and life”.

Arjuna throws a glance all around and says that “there are teachers, uncles, elder brother of father, sons and grandfather, maternal uncles, fathers-in-law, brothers-in-law, grandsons and all other relatives. Oh Madhusudan even if they kill me for the kingdom of all the three worlds, I can not kill them what to say of fighting for land.”

Arjuna expresses his final resolution saying that the killing of the sons of Dhritrashtra will be sinful. “So, O! Madhava! we are not meant to kill the sons of Dhritrashtra because by killing family how could we be happy?”

Having considered killing a sinful act, Arjuna does not share total blame for himself. The consequence is very frightening to him. He blames all those whose mind is corrupted by greed and does not see any sin in opposing their own people, even then ‘Oh! Janardan! the evil that would fall on us after the family is finished is worth considering so why should we not think to get rid of this sinful act?’

Perhaps Arjuna feels it necessary that he should elaborate on the details of evils if the whole family is finished. It is normally believed by a Hindu householder that he has supreme duty towards his family. The duty to family is eternal and when the family is finished it has dire consequences. Here for Arjuna, the killing of family means, the killing of male members only. In a father-dominated society, it is not strange that female members have a secondary role. The position of women in Arjuna’s period was very low. However, much emphasis is placed on the sexual purity of women and their unflinching loyalty to family males. If a woman is not protected by a male belonging to his own Varna (not caste i.e., Brahm, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudras) and is insecure, thereby becomes a victim of another Varna’s male lust. The offspring born out of such a union is considered to be a hybrid or Varnasankar. Arjuna is worried about the consequence that there shall be varnasankars in his lineage. To quote his words.

“When a family is destroyed eternal family virtues or duties also get destroyed and when virtues or duties or dharma is destroyed then there spread many sins in the family.”

“Oh Krishna! When sin grows more the women of the family get contaminated and become impure and, Oh, Varshnaya! When women become impure, the Varnasankars are born.”

Arjuna elaborates why it is dreadful to have Varnasankar’s in the family tree. He says, “A Varnasankar drags the killers of family and the whole family to hell. All the ancestors do not get a place in heaven and fall down to lower worlds because they are not offered sacred water and food servings, which is called ‘Pinda’.” It is believed in Hindus that ancestors can not get heaven unless their sons or grandsons perform the rites known as Shradha or Pind Dan. These rites involve a number of rituals performed by the sons or grandsons so that the dead ancestors find peace. Normally it is to be done by those sons and grandsons born of pure lineage. Birth out of a pure conjugal relationship is a must for those performing these rights. Varnasankar as the name denotes is of mixed origin and hence is not suitable to perform these rites. Arjuna is
concerned about the future purity of his family, when there are evils born out of these Varnasankars, they destroy family and caste virtues or Kul or Jatidharma.

Arjuna represents common folk wisdom. He has firm faith in the existence of heaven and hell. What he says is based on his knowledge as he has heard it from others. He says “Oh! Janardan! Whose family virtue (Kuldharma) is destroyed, such men have to live in hell for an indefinite period. It is what I have heard”. Arjuna having spoken about the family values and the desire to uphold them feels that he is behaving as a wise man. As a wise man now it is the duty not to indulge in sinful acts for petty gains like kingdom and pleasures.

Arjuna says “Though we are wise we are prepared to commit great sin to the extent that for greed for kingdom and pleasures we are set to kill our own men.”

The escape decision has been firmly rationalized. He is now in a self-denial mood. Come what may, he is not going to change his decision. So much so that he is ready to sacrifice his life for this heroic cause i.e., honor of the family Dharma.

Arjuna says, “I am without weapons and shall not face them, if the sons of Dhritrashtra kill me on the battlefield this too would be more beneficial for me”.

Saying this Arjuna, left his bow and arrows and in a pensive mood born out of despair sat on the back seat of the chariot.

It is clear that Arjuna advanced two reasons for his depressed state. In a conflict situation once again he is placed. He came to fight but now decides to fight. His repressed love for family and love for mankind is rekindled. He is of the opinion that those standing against him are his own men and for getting a kingdom it is not worthwhile to kill them. The spirit of peaceful coexistence and the pleasure in family bliss is supreme for Arjuna. The idea of purity of his family also forces him to foresee the plight of women in the family and perhaps they're becoming a victim of the lust of males belonging to other Varna or caste groups.

Let us raise a question, was Arjuna afraid that he too might be killed? Though he does not say so the way he offers himself in a weaponless suicide mood, perhaps, it appears that he is sure that as long as he has his Gandiva or weapons, no son of Kaurava could kill him. When he says that the family would be destroyed he is not worried about himself but for all Kuru family members. He is competent and is capable of winning.

Lord Krishna was very much aware of the competence of Arjuna and also his family values. He understands that Arjuna is suffering from false causal attributions. If by a cognitive re-interpretation he is made to see that his causal scheme is wrong, he can be made to restructure his causal attributions and thereby change his emotions. This family involvement, this fear of killing kith and kins, all could be removed if Arjuna is made to see things from a different rational perspective. The article outlines the causal attribution of Arjuna as perceived by Sri Krishna and counsellor-counselee relationship i.e., relationship between Krishna and Arjuna, where Arjuna as a counsellee expresses his all concern with Krishna.

Conclusion

The current article is highly applicable in understanding mental state of the person who is in conflicting state or state of confusion during a particular situation. The article also emphasized on the applied aspect of method of cognitive interpretation. It is very effective method which can be applied to understand the behavior of the person and situation.

References


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Received: 07 June 2021, Manuscript No. AJOPY-23-33253; Editor assigned: 10 June 2021, PreQC No. AJOPY-23-33253 (PQ); Reviewed: 24 June 2021, QC No AJOPY-23-33253; Revised: 19 July 2023, Manuscript No. AJOPY-23-33253 (R); Published: 16 August 2023, DOI: 10.54615/2231-7805.4780.