

The Sense of the Distances

by Giancarlo Bosetti

Gohar Homayounpouros book, *A Psychoanalyst in Tehran*, is a lively portrayal of the author's professional experience. After being educated in the West, she returned to her country of origin, Iran, where she added the emotions of a not very familiar job, and one not yet fully familiar to a Muslim country, to feelings typically experienced by exiles returning home and to her nostalgia, enthusiasm and disappointments. It is a tale that arises from a powerful need to share, from the desire to tell readers about her discoveries, as if in a direct and honest diary, but also from a challenge addressed at her father, who we discover is the person who translates Milan Kundera into Farsi. He too is therefore a man with a life straddling culturally different worlds and experiencing tensions similar to those of his daughter.

The author confesses that Kundera's books played an extremely important role in her education, as if they had become part of the framework according to which she measures her own analytical and self-analytical experiences. This introduces us to the "geographical tension" in the author's life, a "geo-psychic" tension, if one prefers, between East and West. Although Kundera speaks of the experiences of individuals and a society immersed in East European Communism, (or perhaps precisely for that very reason) one can certainly say that there are few books that like *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* have portrayed the Western soul between the years of the bright Prague Spring, extinguished by Soviet repression, to the eighties, when the book became a bestseller from Paris to Rome and New York. And thanks to Gohar's father also in Tehran.

All Gohar's experiences are tinged by tension between West and East, between, on the one hand, an extremely secularised society, disenchanted and "shameless", to quote Lorena Preta's afterword, as often seen in Western capitals, and, on the other, a society strongly marked by Islamic tradition and culture, especially as far as sexual and family relations are concerned, between "levity" and "gravity."

However, it is precisely on the threshold of the danger of a “existentialisation” of differences, that the author’s first and clearest intention is to free herself of “Orientalist” stereotypes and ambiguities, as Edward Said would say. The introduction by the great Iranian film director, Abbas Kiarostami, greatly emphasises this point, and warns of the risks there are in an exotic perspective or one with a predilection for the exotic. Wondering about Freudian practices in Iran should not lead us to imagine that in that country, suffering caused by love is any different, or that pain and joy are not universal human emotions. And yet, once this warning is taken seriously, one is confronted with the problem that a “geography” of psychoanalysis does indeed exist, and how. Gohar is an excellent witness of this, as when she tells us about a patient experiencing sentimental misadventures in a life split between Paris and Tehran, or when, thanks to her knowledge of so many family stories and relationships or marital crises told in Tehran and compared to her personal previous experiences, she portrays the “differences” in how sexuality, relations with one’s father, or the importance attributed to virginity are perceived. At a certain point, the author writes that the sexuality she encounters in her patients, reminds one of sexuality found in pages written by Freud in Vienna in his day. The diversity appears dramatically evident in the manner in which divorce is experienced in many cases. Without forgetting that, of course, divorce presents elements of suffering and drama wherever it occurs, there is no doubt that the social disapproval is minor in uninhibited Western societies and this is reflected in the patient undergoing analysis.

One is then faced with the task of addressing the sense of these differences and how one should interpret them. It is a complex issue that psychoanalysis has in common with social sciences and in general with relations between cultures. On the one hand, the fact that a person competent in the field of sexuality, such as a psychoanalyst, sees in Tehran behaviours, feelings or pathologies reminding one of those seen in a previous era and a different context such as early 20th century Vienna, might lead by analogy to the idea that things will change in Tehran and that, as modernisation takes place, things will “normalise” in the sense that one day there too sexual life will be similar to that in modern Europe or America. On the other hand, this phase displacement inevitably tends to be catalogued as a “delay” leading to the inevitable conclusion that there are more “advanced” situations while others are “backwards.”

When faced with such comparisons, it is interesting that the geography (and the history) of psychoanalysis should be warned and adopt a shrewder perspective as far as such “magnificent and progressive destinies” as Leopardi suggested, are concerned, or less pessimistically but more wisely, as the Indian American anthropologist Arjun Appadurai

suggests, when speaking of the need for Europeans to “provincialize” the manner in which they observe extra-European realities.

Not to “de-provincialize” as one says when in search of generic cosmopolitan merits, but precisely “to provincialize”, in the sense of getting used to seeing ourselves as a “province,” as a “parish”, a section of the world, and not as the required arrival point or the normative standard par excellence. Hence, an attitude distant from the latent ethnocentrism that afflicts any “ethnos” and any “demos”, including our own. This does not mean that one cannot express judgements, a preference, or demand respect for rights; nor does it mean one must accept traditions that violate the integrity, freedom and autonomy of human beings, be they men or women, only because they are legitimized by deeply-rooted customs, such as for example marital tutorship in the family law of some Arab country or genital mutilation of girls practiced in various African societies.

Anthony Appiah has written memorable pages¹ about the best and most effective ways to battle such customs, and is aware of the contexts that allow the abolishing of repugnant customs, such as the bandaging and deforming of the feet of Chinese girls or the shotgun weddings that followed the abduction and rape of young women in southern Italy until only a few decades ago. Cultural contexts change also thanks to courage and intelligence, but they do not change all at once and not all in the same way. It is important to understand the system, the hierarchies of values, the way it works, so as to also change what appears indefensible because it violates human dignity. It is important to consider that until a certain period, Chinese girls could not make a good marriage unless their feet had been deformed by that strange custom, or that a “violated” girl could no longer marry anyone except the man who raped her. It was necessary to be aware of this in order to be capable of implementing a wise reformist battle, requiring both the courage and heroism of rebels, but also intelligence to modify a custom.

“Provincializing” the way in which Europeans see themselves, also in their family lives and sexuality, means acknowledging the possibility of a variety of approaches, which, within the context of respect for human rights and individual freedom, reflect differing ideas about families, educating children, divorce, inheritance laws, and different ways of perceiving community life and individual happiness. As far as variety is concerned, it is sufficient to observe how differently the legalisation of abortion is regulated, allowed until the third month of pregnancy in Italy and the sixth in the United States, or how differently gay marriage is

¹ Anthony Appiah, *The Code of Honour. How morals change*, Raffaello Cortina, 2011

accepted or rejected in European countries. The diversity of cultural contexts and their variability over time is destined to liberalise behaviours that were sanctioned as being socially unacceptable in previous eras or other contexts. How could psychoanalysis not take into account the effect of the context on the psyche? And how great can these diversities be when a tradition or a matter on honour (sexual) has become consolidated over centuries?

That is why I believe that the idea of psychoanalysts embarking on a study aimed at acquiring better knowledge of cultural differences and the effect they have on the psychic lives of individuals, their suffering and their pathologies, is extremely useful, also thanks to the contribution this could provide, in general, to reciprocal understanding between different societies. In a contemporary world marked by globalisation and great migrations, this means stating a culturally plural and pluralist vision of human relations, using the contribution already provided by anthropology, as well as the philosophical tradition of pluralism expressed from Montaigne to Pascal and to Isaiah Berlin.

Becoming capable of imagining how others see our society and our customs, does not mean renouncing all capability of judging human customs, but rather, as Ernesto De Martino would have said, adopting a “critical ethnocentric” and humanist perspective, therefore broader than a traditional point of view. When, for example, life styles, in family and sexual customs and organisations in our regions, with its frequent divorces, and pre-eminence guaranteed to an individual’s right to choose, with the development of subjective rights in all directions, children born out of wedlock, small and ‘nuclear’ family units prevailing over more numerous and patriarchal ones, is all judged as corresponding to an ideology, as the product of a given *weltanschauung*, we should no doubt admit that the manner in which we live is not only the consequence of the state’s neutrality regards to any model for a good life, but the expression of clear preference and a pre-eminence attributed to individual rights rather than to those of the family community. And we should also admit that, in a setting respectful of human dignity and rights, it should be possible to have decent models and lifestyles, albeit differing to a certain extent from those prevailing in western metropolises. In other words, it is possible that our individualism may be seen as extreme by other cultures and, admit as legitimate a wish to pursue a model of family with stronger communitarian characteristics. We would not, however, therefore give up hope or stop requesting that all countries that have not yet done so, or not completely, should adhere to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

To the usefulness of this research on the “geography” of psychoanalysis, one must also add the fact that this appears nowadays to meet a rising request for the practices and texts of this discipline from countries in which it was little known or totally ignored. Demand seems to be increasing in Arab and Muslim countries in general, and in countries characterised by very traditional and patriarchal societies. The potential effectiveness of a culture that emancipates from bonds, taboos and impositions is evident. In this global journey among differences in contexts, from Morocco to Indonesia, one instantly comes across the work of Sudhir Kakar, the great Indian intellectual and psychoanalyst, whose school of thought was formed in multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-linguistic India as well as in the United States, where Kakar was Erik Erikson’s assistant. The pluralist Indian backdrop, perhaps more than any other, presents a multitude of religious, linguistic and caste variants, which influence family life, condition the perception of social positions and, inevitably, also the psyche. For this reason too, Indian psychoanalytic experiences, thanks to the work done by Kakar or by Erikson on India (Gandhi’s Truth), just like that of Gohar Homayounpour in Tehran, with a difficult balance between East and West, seems to be increasingly more useful also in European societies through a profound and irreversible transformation that makes them culturally plural and diversified.