

# *The Paradox Called Iran*

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To begin with, let us look at a few points on this Paradox Called Iran:

Iran has a population of seventy-three million people: in Tehran alone we have thirteen million people, and thirty-eight percent of the population is under the age of eighteen! Unicef statistics have shown that of the fifty-seven Islamic nations in the world, Iran has the largest number of bloggers (and 28 million internet users), and Iranian youth are one of the most politically active youth within these Islamic nations.

Interestingly, there are no more than ten psychoanalysts in Iran, and only two of them are women. So demand consistently outstrips supply, a situation that has led to full practices for anyone with a 'couch'. And so, for the past six years I have organized for a number of analysts in the United States and Europe to get up at ungodly hours and stay up late into the night, to do supervision and psychoanalysis over the phone. In a sense they are teaching the fundamentals of Freud to their counterparts on the other side of the world in Iran. This is the "Freudian Group of Tehran" that I have established, where we attempt to follow IPA regulations, such as the trilateral training of candidates and to function as an analytic institute.

All these efforts of my colleagues have raised the practice of psychoanalysis in Iran to new heights, to altitudes never reached before.

This desire and thirst for psychoanalysis that I have observed in Iran is what has made me stay, regardless of the various difficulties and struggles that I have to endure every day due to the paradox of doing psychoanalysis in the Islamic Republic of Iran, difficulties and struggles which are amplified for a young woman such as myself.

In Tehran, where on the macro level of a patriarchal symbolic order the role of the analyst as 'the subject supposed to know' (le sujet supposé savoir) is appropriated by men, a woman psychoanalyst is supposed to lack the phallus she would need to gain knowledge of the

unconscious. In practice, all the official rites of passage that are built into the system's legitimating formal structure function to remove any illusion of a phallus on the part of a woman psychoanalyst. By the time a woman analyst — particularly if she is young and a graduate of a foreign educational institute — gets to be certified as legitimate in Tehran, she herself needs to go back to the couch in order to recover from her castrating experience of dealing with “others” in positions of power, and to recover her own internal sense of legitimacy.

From the western point of view there seems to be an uncanny correlation: the more politically scandalous Iran becomes, and the more scrutinized it is by the western other, the more desirable an object it becomes. And so in recent years there has been a heightened desire for anything from Iran and about Iran. For example, a demand for all sorts of artistic productions, from movies to photos and literature. Of course there is a specific frame you have to follow in creating this exotic other, in order for it to be accepted and rewarded as what I have termed ‘Terrorist Art’. In simple terms, the delinquent child in the family is the one who gets the most attention from the parents.

My experience of speaking in different venues about doing psychoanalysis in Iran has been interesting. The audience's reaction to my account has been quite curious. I would characterize this reaction as a “fascinated rejection”, to borrow Julia Kristeva's expression.

The topic of doing psychoanalysis in Iran conjures up some fascinating fantasies from the start; the listener usually anticipates some juicy, exotic stories. Yet this fascination is accompanied by a rejection, suggesting the impossibility of doing psychoanalysis in Iran. I feel that I have almost caused disappointment by presenting case materials that are similar to those of patients in Boston or New York.

These reactions could also be characterized as a form of ‘orientalism,’ to borrow Edward Said's term. The exotic (or oriental) Other is fascinating for the Westerner, but the gaze is one that makes the other inferior; it is not the same kind of exoticness that the French enjoy. However; without going into the details of Said's theoretical position, I would like to add the responsibility of the ‘Orientals’ themselves in creating orientalism, according to his theory. We have to stop blaming the West for our condition, for our destiny.

A French friend recently reminded me that, “the French are also eroticized in various ways”. But I believe there is a difference between being eroticized for *crème brûlée* and eroticized through the chador. The former is not a manifestation of the master-slave mentality; the French are

eroticized for their superiority, while the Orientals are desirable for their inferior delights. I am not playing the blame game; we do it to ourselves, for there are so many neurotic gains to be had from the process.

Change starts within ourselves. We have to give up the pleasures of being looked upon as erotic, exotic and strange. We have to come face to face with our inevitable ordinariness. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the impossibility of being “in your own home” provides us with an ontological misunderstanding: the tragedy of identity.

The concept of “worrying strangeness” is a Freudian concept used by Kristeva as one explanation of this tragedy: “The fear of the other and the worry of strangeness are both the result of the fear of the difference of the Other (stranger) within ourselves.” We are scared of what we are and we are scared of our unleashed desires. Hence we transfer our fear to the Other, to the stranger, to the one who is not “us” and to the “difference”. The Other is both the source of our anxiety, and the danger which threatens us.

The fear that we experience, the strangeness, is more of an internal phenomenon than an external one. The “worrying strangeness” can never compete with the fear and the anxiety of facing our unconscious, our femininity or the fear of facing death. The worrying strangeness is closely related to the childish fear of the Other; the Other in the form of death, the Other in the form of woman and the Other in the form of our own uncontrollable drives ... in short, the fear of the Other as the stranger within ourselves.

The fight we put up against this is the same fight we put up against our own unconscious, and the only possible Derridian hospitality we could offer would be to accept and welcome these strangers into the fearful territory in which we (the stranger and the self) are both living!

According to Kristeva, living with the Other is living with this question: “Am I the Other?”

Or, as the French poet Rimbaud puts it: “I is an other”.

### **Whose Side Are You On?**

Applying a psychoanalytic perspective, while providing numerous clinical data obtained both from my psychoanalytic practice, and six other clinicians in Tehran, this paper attempts to

understand how the unfolding of the political events in Iran have affected what goes on in the analytic room in general and in the transference specifically.

Much has been written about the politics of psychoanalysis and about the psychoanalysis of politics. The politics of the analytic situation is an indispensable aspect of any analysis of transference and resistance. Yet there is little to be found in the literature about the sociopolitical context of the analytic practice, and about the impact of the political events outside of the analytic situation on the analytic process inside the room.

As Vamik Volkan reminds us in his most recent book (2009), 'Psychoanalysis has not paid much attention to the link between what transpires in the analyst's office and what happens in the historical arena... The study of the intertwining of the external and internal wars... resistances may prevail when both the analyst and the analysand belong to the same large group that has been massively traumatized ...' (P x).

My question in this paper is: How would a major political crisis in the society affect the unfolding of the analytic process within the session?

Since the Presidential election in Iran on the 12<sup>th</sup> of June, 2009, when the announced result of the election was not accepted by many Iranians, a people's movement, the Green Movement, was formed, which for a short time brought a great deal of political uproar to the streets of Iran. The outside political uproar affected my patients differently. Some were oblivious to the events outside of the analytic situation, while others experienced a great deal of internal turmoil that disturbed the ambiance of their sessions.

This is not a political paper and I am not interested in taking sides in the ongoing political discontent. It is merely an attempt at understanding how these "real" outside events can affect the process of analysis and the relationship between the two analytic subjects.

Clearly one reacts to any socio-political events according to her/his own intra/inter psychic structures. Yet as my clinical observations in the session suggests traumatic political events outside the room tend to provoke feelings of helplessness, fears of being attacked, annihilated and also a regression in the subject inside the analytic room.

A regression into a symbiotic state and a need to get into a narcissistic transference, elaborated mostly in terms of sides, splitting and a feeling of 'us against them'. The questions all over our data are: how alike are we? How hard it is to tolerate being with someone who is not like me? The idea

of me/not me. And, finally, are you on my side or their side?

In a sense the communication to the analyst seems to be; in order for you to understand me, you need to be on my side, and in order for me to feel you are on my side, you need to be exactly like me, and so you can understand me only if you are a replica of me.

Govrin (2006) writes on how the sense of we-ness is one of the most powerful schemas for organizing human experience. Various studies have found a clear in-group preference to emerge among normal subjects simply because of categorization; the essential characteristics of an individual's relationship to in-groups are loyalty and preference. The we-ness schema is powerfully activated when another group intimidates one's group, as is the situation in Iran between the Green Movement and the allies of the government ever since the elections. Solidarity and cohesion between members of a group in a time of crisis is one of the most documented phenomena in social life (p. 626-627). Thus we observed, in our clinical practice, different forms of regression in the patients during this particular socio-political time, a need to get into a narcissistic transference, elaborated mostly in terms of sides-taking, splitting and we-ness. The questions all over our data are: how alike are we? How hard it is to tolerate being with someone who is not like me?

Volkan's work (1985,1988), one of the most detailed psychoanalytic descriptions of the we-ness schema, points to a human need to have enemies as well as allies, a need connected with the developmental processes of childhood. Volkan stresses the importance of the stranger anxiety in the development of the "enemy" concept. According to Volkan, danger is experienced through the child's hostile destructiveness and rage toward his or her mother. Because the child cannot afford to lose the mother's love, rage is displaced on an external object—the stranger—even though the stranger has never attacked the baby. Following Spitz, Volkan argues: 'The actual identity of the stranger does not matter; what does matter is who the stranger is not.' (p. 18). This results in a precursor of the individualized idea of enemy.

In times of violent conflict, when there is a concrete threat to the existence of life, there is a regression to a primitive mode of thinking. When this happens, the subject's obsession becomes primarily a desire to defend oneself against the other and to relate to one's own group.

In a sense, the communication to the analyst elaborated in our data seems to be in the service of a need for recognition, understanding and support: you need to be on my side, and in order for me to feel you are on my side, you need to be exactly like me, in fact you can understand me only if

you *are* me!

Jacques Alain Miller (1) beautifully summarizes that we do not distinguish between psychic reality and social reality. Psychic reality is social reality. We find in Lacan's very last teaching this provoking proposal: 'Neurosis is due to social relations'. We only need to recall that at the foundations of social reality, we have language. By language, we mean the structure which emerges from the language we speak, under the effect of the routine of the social bond. It is the social routine that ensures that the signified can retain some sense, the sense that is given by the sentiment of each of us to "be part of his world, that is to say of his little family and what surrounds it."

In today's world it has become increasingly challenging to hide behind our analytic couches and to practice armchair psychoanalysis. For our most treasured desire of hearing the unconscious can solely be fulfilled if as Miller informs us we do not fail to realize that 'a psychoanalyst can only function if he is in direct contact with the social, but in his consulting room, he can fail to realize this.'

(1) Transcription by Catherine Bonningue of J.-A. Miller's talk during the PIPOL 3 Study Days, June 30th and July 1st 2007. The title of the Study Days was "Psychoanalysis in Close Touch with the Social".

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