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Free Associating In Tehran

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A review of

Doing Psychoanalysis in Tehran
by Gohar Homayounpour
$19.95

Reviewed by
Ronald Teague

Doing Psychoanalysis in Tehran is simultaneously a disappointing and an interesting book. It is disappointing because it is written more like a modern novel than a scholarly text, yet it is intriguing for just the same reason. Psychologists who would be attracted by the book’s title might expect a clear and concise treatise on methodological issues, on difficulties in adapting psychoanalysis to non-Eurocentric cultures, or on ideas about transcultural psychodynamic psychotherapy.

What the book presents is the phenomenological experience of practicing psychoanalysis in Iran by an American-trained Iranian-native, Gohar Homayounpour, offering her personal reflections on starting her practice in Tehran. The book is divided into three parts: a preface titled “Is Psychoanalysis Possible in the Islamic Republic of Iran?” and two chapters, “Upon Arriving in Tehran” and “A Few Years After Returning to Tehran.”

Readers get the first clue that this is not going to be a traditional book on psychoanalysis as the foreword is by Abbas Kiarostami, an Iranian filmmaker who praises
the book for its cinematic narrative, rather than by a famous psychoanalyst. The next clue about the nature of the book is that, although many works are quoted, it contains no references, and it has no bibliography.

The author warns the reader in her preface that

> I have attempted to avoid the defenses provided by classification and labeling. Julia Kristeva recounts that, having written many scientific papers and books on different topics, she has come to the conclusion over the years that at some level they perform a defensive function. One can authentically face oneself only in the highly intimate process of writing a novel. (p. xv)

and “What I would like to do is to report on some of these experiences, these co-constructed fantasies of this particular analyst and her patients after her return home to Iran” (p. xxviii).

From the very beginning of the book, the reader is invited in—no, pulled into—Homayounpour’s experienced world. She gives us her fantasies, memories, musings, associations, and thoughts in no particular order, sharing with us her experiences upon first arrival in Tehran as well as after a few years.

We get a glimpse of a young analyst who is full of fears and apprehensions about herself and the therapeutic technique that she is trying to apply. We see her struggle to maintain her theoretical orientation when faced with the different cultural assumptions about time, fees, politeness, gift giving, and interpersonal give and take. We see her make psychoanalytic mistakes that turn out to have real palliative effect and correct psychoanalytic interventions that from time to time fall flat. There is no theoretical discussion about why this is so, just a description of the facts.

Homayounpour also shares the experience of not being fully a part of Western or Iranian culture and how truly difficult this is. There is one passage describing a conversation with several women who are all dressed in black. She asks the women why this is so, and one of them says to her “Although you might be speaking Farsi, we speak very different languages” which, in many respects, was true.

The author also muses over several literary figures who might be quite unfamiliar to Western readers such as Farokhazad, Ferdousi, and Shaygan. When she does so, she shows no mercy to the reader by giving a description of who they are and why they are important. She forces the reader to come to her lived world, and she is quite unapologetic about this. She leaves the reader to do the hard work of finding out on his or her own the significance of these writers and artists in much the same way that a psychoanalyst has often to do the hard work of finding out the background narrative of what the patient is saying.

When Homayounpour discusses Western thinkers such as Freud, de Beauvoir, and Schopenhauer she does so in such a way that lets the reader know that these are old friends
of hers with whom she has spent many an hour in reflective conversations. Their ideas have become part of the fabric of her understanding of the human condition.

Two thinkers seem to most inform her. The first is Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian-French psychoanalyst, feminist, philosopher, and novelist. In many respects, the author is immersed in Kristeva’s approach, and many of her reflections and interventions reflect this poststructuralist semiotic interpretive approach; Homayounpour is very much interested in the *abject* and the *maternal body* as semiotic tools to evaluate the psychic experiences of her Iranian patients (Kristeva, 2012).

Once the reader becomes familiar with the weltanschauung of Kristeva, much of Homayounpour’s narrative becomes quite clear. She is less of a strict Freudian and more of a progressive Lacanian, holding that psychoanalytic ideas are not an end in themselves but rather a starting place to investigate the larger societal forces that are intertwined with particular human experiences. Psychoanalysis then becomes a dance between the particular and the general in which the meaning of individual suffering always incorporates the general suffering of society and culture. Her clinical practice could rightly be called Kristevian psychoanalysis.

The other major influence on Homayounpour’s narrative is the work of Milan Kundera. Whereas Kristeva informed Homayounpour’s professional life, Kundera (1984) informed her early personal life. She started reading his *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* when she was 11 and had a difficult relationship with Kundera’s Farsi translator. She writes, “I would find myself furious at him most of the time and even more furious the rest of the time” (p. 33). The translator was her own father. Her early fascination with this book is played out in much of her musings about the human situation and the nature of human relationships. This early exposure to modern Western literature seems to have paved the way for her attraction to a 21st-century feminist psychoanalysis.

Homayounpour’s descriptions of her patients’ histories are for the most part exceptionally terse. She condenses their life experiences into a compact narrative interaction with her, which is exactly what happens in psychoanalytic treatment. A patient will discuss a difficulty in a brief way, and the therapist has to either inquire about the details of the difficulty or quietly opine about what is behind this episode of human suffering. Rather than offering case histories and descriptions of clinical interventions, Homayounpour gives us an almost phenomenological rendering of the essential experience that she has of the patients she treats. In many ways, she is seeing her patients as Kundera “saw” his characters, as living examples of the flawed human condition.

One patient of Homayounpour’s, Ms. N., an accomplished arthritic artist who has lived for many years in Paris, plays a large role in her narrative. Their dialogue explores their shared experience of being Iranians in Europe and the experience of returning to the motherland. This dialogue shows the painful experience of becoming transcultural. These women do not fit in in either culture, and yet both of them have a deep appreciation of both lived worlds. This patient pulls Homayounpour out of her psychoanalytic reserve and into
what might be called an existential analysis rather than a traditional psychoanalysis. They
discuss how they both experience the differences between Paris and Tehran.

Homayounpour and Ms. N. find the Parisians, which they generalize to apply to all of
the French, to be unrelated and cold, whereas they experience the Iranians to be warm and
interrelated. Both of them feel that the standard psychoanalytic reserve on the part of the
therapist works well in France but not in Tehran, where the therapist needs to be more
accepting of interpersonal niceties such as food gifts and tea sharing. They try to understand
what enlivens them in both cultures and thereby attempt to create a liminal space where
there is a back-and-forth psychic movement between emotionally based fantasies and
cognitive generalizations. Together, Homayounpour and Ms. N. create an experience of the
world that is a blend of Iranian, French, and Hellenistic worldviews organized by Kristevian
psychoanalysis.

In some respects, this new worldview is summed up by Schopenhauer’s fable of the
porcupines in an ice storm, which Homayounpour quotes. The porcupines are torn between
the need for closeness and warmth and the pain that the warmth provides; they are not
comfortable with either closeness or distance. For the therapist and her patient, the warm
closeness of Iranian culture leads to the pain of entanglement, whereas the cold distance of
the Parisian culture leads to the isolated clarity of creativity and art. Neither position is
satisfying for them, and they find that psychoanalysis is a third, possibly orthogonal position
that incorporates the two.

Homayounpour reports in her introduction that when she talked to some of her
psychoanalyst colleagues from the West about her decision to move back to Tehran and
practice psychoanalysis, she was met with criticism. One colleague frankly stated that
psychoanalysis would not be possible in Iran, as Iranians do not know how to free associate.
Homayounpour replied that this was not true, as Iranians do nothing but free associate. In
this book she is as good as her word, as the book is essentially nothing but her free
associations reacting to her and her patients’ life experiences.

The book and her narrative invite conversations and reflections about the nature of
transcultural experiences of the psyche. This book is a useful addition to such works as Wulf
Sachs’s (2006) controversial work *Black Hamlet*, which was first published under the title
*Black Anger*. Sachs, a Russian Viennese-trained psychoanalyst, immigrated to South Africa,
where he treated a Native African traditional healer using psychoanalysis. His book, first
published in 1937, is his attempt to understand the psychic world of a traditional native
South African man (Conner, 1970). Although it is marred by cultural prejudices common at
the time, it represents one of the first attempts to create what might be called transcultural
psychoanalysis.

The presuppositions of the superiority of the Western psychoanalytic worldview that
dominate Sachs’s work are completely absent in Homayounpour’s lyrical narrative.
Surprisingly, there is no discussion of Homayounpour’s experience in America, where she
trained as a psychoanalyst. There is little direct mention of the current political situation in
Iran, nor is there any exploration about how that might affect the psychic experiences of her patients, although these forces are alluded to from time to time, especially in her use of Kundera’s novel, which is set during the Prague Spring and its repression by Warsaw Pact armed forces in 1968. His novel is a paean to the human spirit that can find meaning and love under the most repressive governments.

Homayounpour has produced an important work that shows her vulnerability and difficulties in applying a more modern form of psychoanalysis to her patients in Tehran. Out of her obvious psychic distress, she is moving slowly toward developing a more modern and more useful way of making psychoanalysis relevant for the 21st century.

To understand the depth and richness of this narrative, the reader will have to do some homework. If the reader will follow up on the author’s sources of inspiration, he or she will be rewarded with a more profound understanding of the human condition in a place about which little is currently known. Doing Psychoanalysis in Tehran is like an archeological dig for Persian culture in a modern Iranian city. It ultimately shows the existence and extent of the human spirit that has existed in a place for a very long time.

References


