Doing Psychoanalysis in Tehran

Gohar Homayounpour

foreword by Abbas Kiarostami
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To Darya and Yassamine, for being who they are
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The first thing that impressed me as I began to read this book was how the world that Gohar Homayounpour explores through the psychoanalytic lens closely resembles what I see through the lens of my camera. I caught myself smiling and then realized that I was thinking about an old Iranian saying: “Jana sokhan az zabane ma migooi.” “Dear, you speak from my heart!”

The truth is that neither of us considers our world merely a personal space where the slightest discord might bring discontent. Neither is this world of ours a public court of law where we sit in judgment of others’ private tragedies; we are only observing the illusive world of everyday life through multiple lenses, hoping to bring some sense to it through reflection and analysis. We try our best not to be provincial observers. Our world is not limited to our neighborhood, our city, or even our motherland. “Pain is pain everywhere,”
as Gohar Homayounpour says about the experience of doing psychoanalysis in Tehran and in the United States. For years I have been trying to convey the same message. My films attempt to express the human condition rather than the specific conditions or masks that localize this or the other group or person.

I know from experience how hard it is to explore this existential condition without falling into the trap of clichés, of the status quo, and of all that we take as given and as intransigently real. It is not an easy task for anyone, and I am sure that it has not been easy for Gohar Homayounpour to break away from clichés, to leave the sanctuary of stereotypes, and give up the pleasure of adhering to simpleminded images of the other. Of course, these days, there is a good market for films and books that portray Iran and Iranians in stereotypical terms. Homayounpour would have easily gained popularity by painting an evocative and passionate *orientalist* caricature of Iranians that would reinforce people’s prejudices. She could have even gotten her work on the bestseller list. Resisting this temptation is undeniably a sign of nobility, dignity, sincerity, and, last but not
least, evidence of an independent and original mind. It was this aspect of the writer that encouraged me to write this foreword; the brave sincerity, the original writing style, and the level of discourse that is indeed worthy of praise and admiration.

It was particularly fascinating to me—as I’m sure it will be to other readers—to experience her world through her words, and her complicated psychoanalytic encounters through her sophisticated and unassuming narration. What is apparently the account of her own story involving her relationship with her patients in Tehran put me in touch with my own personal story involving my relationships.

At this point, let me assure you in no uncertain terms that I would not recommend this book to those who are still searching for the “touristic attractions” of my country. Luckily for those people, the production of that kind of literature, films, paintings, and photography is prospering these days! However, Homayounpour’s book is an extraordinary work that is recommended for those who consider human pain and suffering as an existential phenomenon. Pain is beyond doubt pain everywhere; I have never heard of an Eastern or
Western cancer or of a radiography that would show the nationality, religion, language, or culture of the patient. This book is a radiographic picture of the human condition in Iran, not a touristic photograph of Iranians.

Gohar Homayounpour did not choose the easy way out, and remained faithful to the title of the book: Doing Psychoanalysis in Tehran. This is in fact the account of the experience of a psychoanalyst working in today’s Tehran, an account that continues to grow on you, gets you to know her as an analyst, surprises you, and makes you question your own presuppositions. Imagine how I was pleasantly surprised when I read that the Iranian women in the book do not narrate the injustices and the oppression that they face in our society today, but talk about the internal paradoxes, conflicts, and dualities they experience while coming face to face with their womanhood—just like any other women in the world.

I definitely consider Gohar Homayounpour’s achievement an uncommon one. In the format of a biographical novel, and using psychoanalytic free association, she opens up windows and sheds light onto the darkness of the human soul. She pursues the task elegantly recommended by
Freud: “Now that it is impossible to see clearly, let us try to shed light upon darkness.”

For all these reasons, I would like to congratulate Dr. Homayounpour for the freshness and authenticity of her discourse, and welcome her to my world.

Abbas Kiarostami
Tehran, summer 2011
Preface

Is Psychoanalysis Possible in the Islamic Republic of Iran?

As the title *Doing Psychoanalysis in Tehran* implies, what you are about to encounter is an attempt to write in the format of a psychoanalytic session; an “ideal” psychoanalytic session where both analytic subjects, analyst and analysand, have the courage to face the chaos of their unconscious, to come face to face with the stranger within themselves, and to learn to bear the anxiety of participating in the unknown.

The reader will not find chapters, footnotes, or exact referencing. 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.
In this process one finds oneself far away from the safety provided by a specific structure, the comfort of the certainties associated with categorizing, and the inevitable anxiety that follows in the absence of any frame of reference.

Writing a paper for a scientific journal (without in any way intending to detract from the necessity of such endeavors) is like a patient coming into a session and verbalizing that he has thought about what to say, how to say, and in what order to say the things that must be communicated to the analyst. It is as though he still has the illusion that when using the imperfect tool of language there is such a thing as the possibility of exact communication, and he doesn’t realize that all we are capable of doing is miscommunicating. It is as though he uses the defense of illusory precision to deal with the anxiety of being on the analytic couch.

In a good-enough analytic environment, the analysand slowly becomes brave enough to let go of his symbolic pieces of paper and specific categories, and his desire to know often prevails over the comfort of staying away from the things that his unconscious already knows.

Certainly, there always remains the question of how free one’s free associations actually are. This I will try to address
in the following pages, in which I have attempted to free-associate in Tehran. These pages are nothing but my fantasies and my fantasies alone (not that anyone can get away from doing anything else), where I once again indulge in the challenge of coming face to face with my own unconscious.

In a sense, this is solely a note to myself.

I have been practicing psychoanalysis in Tehran for the last five years. Meanwhile, I have written a number of papers about my experience as a psychoanalyst in Iran, and presented them at international conferences. I have been interviewed by a number of Western radio stations and magazines on this topic, and written the book you are reading. 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 is generally attributed to the French.

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.

In fact, if you are reading this book in order to satisfy your orientalist curiosities, I have to warn you: it will be a disappointing experience.

I know it is popular to eroticize the chador, to use exotic titles such as *Lipstick Jihad*, talk about how Iranian men beat their wives, or eroticize Iranian calligraphy, such as *aleph, be, ce*, using exotic names like *Shehrazad, Syavash, Mahmoud Hussein*. I am not blaming this phenomenon on
the “Other,” we do it to ourselves. We are attached to our oriental reflection in the eyes of the Other.

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 being 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.

Slavoj Žižek, in a recent interview, said that what he admires about Abbas Kiarostami movies is that one does not get any images of daily life in Iran; that they represent universal conflicts. I come from the same school of thought.

Recently I sent a paper, “The Couch and the Chador,” to a prominent Lacanian psychoanalyst for her comments. She wrote back: