A Discussion about the Scientific and Humanitarian Approach of Traditional Persian Medicine to Mental Disorders

87

Abstract

According to ancient times, Iranians were among the first people to recognize mental abnormalities as diseases. They explained the causes of mental diseases using various scientific methods based on observation and experience and suggested practical ways for treatment. The main treatment methods they proposed included the use of medicine and other physical treatments. In some cases, psychotherapy methods were also used to treat mental patients. This study was conducted using the analytical-documentary method, with authentic traditional medical texts, literary and historical works, and other narrative texts that documented the treatment of mental patients as sources. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that the Iranian culture, and particularly Iranian medical culture, has had a rational approach to mental disorders for a long time. Iranian doctors have avoided superstitious beliefs and instead sought scientific and experimental methods for treatment. The findings of this study suggest that, in comparison to approaches of Western medicine to mental disorders in the pre-modern era, which often involved rejecting such patients and not treating mental patients, Iranian doctors focused on the underlying causes of mental disorders. They treated patients using scientific methods while also maintaining a human and compassionate approach.

Key words: Persian Medicine, Mental Disorders, Madness, Melancholy, Insanity, Psychotherapy

Manizheh Abdollahi (Ph.D.)[1]

1- Professor of Persian Language and Literature, Dept. of Persian Language and Literature, School of Paramedical Sciences, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran

Correspondence:
Manizheh Abdollahi
Professor of Persian Language and Literature, Dept. of Persian Language and Literature, School of Paramedical Sciences, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran

e-mail: manijeh.abdolahi@gmail.com

Introduction

Up to the age of wisdom, human beings have considered wisdom and madness on a continuum, never strictly differentiating the point of separation, or the border between the two. In the ancient or mythological era, in an aura of illusions and fantasies, everything was explained through myths. Basic events, such as the creation of the world and the beginning of human life, from the concepts of life and death to more ordinary things, like the discovery of fire, or everyday events, like agriculture and harvesting were all attributed to myths. In that era, there was no causal and clear boundary between illusion and imagination, leading to a lack of distinction between reason and irrationality or wisdom and madness. This is probably the reason why there is no mention of insanity and the attributions of madness in the mythological era[1]. According to James Fraser (1854-1941)[2], after the mythological era, the era of religious explanation of the world began to gain strength in human thought. In the epoch of religious thought, people believed that the world was governed by the will of the gods. Therefore, a person's belief in God was the criterion by which they were evaluated as normal and decent. As a result, in the religious epoch, issues like insanity, and mental disorders were not acknowledged.

Having passed through these two eras, mankind entered a phase of rational thinking, leading to the emergence of philosophical thoughts aimed at providing logical explanations for the universe. These explanations, rooted in knowledge and wisdom, helped human beings to draw a clear boundary between wisdom and unwisdom or rationality and ignorance. In fact, the efforts of ancient thinkers, with Socrates at the forefront, were to debar unwisdom from human society. In this way, with the praise of reason and wisdom, and with the recognition of rational thinking, its opposite concept, i.e., irrationality, and finally madness and its extreme type, insanity, were strongly repudiated and suppressed. In general, the teachers, philosophers, and thinkers of the world in the past renounced the insane and the irrational to enter the utopia of wisdom.

This approach, which was based on excluding the insane from social spaces, persisted until the post-medieval era. Following the Enlightenment and Renaissance, this perspective continued until the 18th century. In Western societies, during the Middle Ages, insane, and mentally ill patients were of-

1- It should be mentioned that there are signs of physical diseases in Iranian mythology. As an example, *Zal* is considered a manifestation of physical illness in Iranian mythology, and for this reason, he is rejected from society at birth, but in the end, he is accepted as an intelligent person, and despite his different appearance, his intelligence and tact are praised.

2- James Frazer (1854-1941) is a famous Scottish mythologist and anthropologist. Frazer's most famous work is the book *The Golden Bough*, in which he discusses myths and religion, examining the common features of religions and presenting the mythology of the People of the World. In this work, Frazer also seeks to show how the early mythological world became the world and religious thought and then describes the transition from religious thought to the era of wisdom. To learn more about the book of *The Golden Bough* and the thoughts of Frazer, refer to: Waterlow, A., 1924. Leaves from the Golden Bough. JAMA, 83(21), p. 1709. doi:10.1001/jama.1924.02660210079039.

ten treated violently. They were shackled and kept in prisons. (Foucault, 2009) In fact, if society were to recognize mental disorders, especially insanity, as diseases, then it would have to consider the rights of those affected. In his book, "*The History of Madness*", Michel Foucault refers to the year 1794, the year of the attack on Bicester Hospital[3], as the turning point in the release of the insane, calling it "*the gradual and progressive discovery of the provable truth of madness*". He acknowledged that before this date, mental disorders or insanity were not officially recognized as diseases. From this, it can be inferred that it took a long time for the West to acknowledge mental disorders as diseases. The West used to view insane individuals as sinful beings, under the influence of evil spirits.

The Iranian Medical Approach to Mental Disorders

If we agree with the theory that the "*treatment of disease is a bio-psycho-social process*" (Erickson, 2018, p. 19) and accept that medicine is a subset of culture (Erickson, 2018, p. 15), in Iranian culture, the approach to dealing with mental disorders has been vastly different from Western societies since the beginning. Mental patients have never been officially excluded from society or viewed as those possessed by evil spirits. According to pre-Islamic texts, Iranian medical texts in the early centuries after Islam, and medieval medical texts, Iranian physicians, unlike Western ones, have always viewed insanity as a kind of curable disease. This perspective has led doctors to utilize various methods and medications to treat the mentally ill. To the best of my knowledge, four major Iranian medical texts support this claim. They show how Iranian doctors used to diagnose mental disorders and how they treated them. Additionally, some authentic non-medical and literary texts provide insight into the treatment of mental disorders, particularly through psychoanalysis.

Examining the Treatment Methods for Mental Disorders in Iranian Medical Works

From the *Avesta* texts, it appears that in addition to the common treatment methods of "*herbal therapy*" which involves treatment through the use of various drugs, and "*medical knife*" which refers to surgical treatment, there was also a third method, known as "*mantra therapy*". This latter method was favored over the other two. As mentioned in the *Vendidad*, Fargard VII, paragraph 44:

3- The Hopital Bicêtre

89

"If several healers offer themselves together, O Spitama Zarathushtra! namely, one who heals with the knife, one who heals with herbs, and one who heals with the Holy Word [manthras], 350 let one apply to the healing by the Holy Word: for this one is the best healing of all healers who heals with the Holy Word; he will best drive away sickness from the body of the faithful…" (Darmesteter, 1995, p. 62)

The word "*mantra*" means speech and reciting Yasnas. Therefore, it can be said that mantra therapy involves treating the patient using Holy Words and oral communication. Additionally, in Ardibehesht Yasht, part 6, the importance and advantages of this treatment method are emphasized:

Some [doctors] should treat with the help of knowledge, some [of the doctors] should treat with a knife, some [of the doctors] should treat with herbs. The most healing of doctors is the one who heals with the holy mantra. The one who cures [the internal diseases of a pious and good man] is the treatment of the best physicians." (Zaraostra, 1996, p. 288)

In line with this, Hintze (2023) points out that according to the *Avesta* mantra therapy is recommended, along with medicinal knowledge, healing with plants, and performing surgery on a person with a knife. The *Avesta* considers healing with a mantra as the most effective way to cure diseases, as stated in Vendidad (Fargard 7, Chapter 7, Verse 44):

When those who have many healing remedies will come together,
O Spitama Zarathustra,
(namely) the one who heals with the knife, the one who heals with the plant, and the
one who heals with the mantra,
they shall here come together to this,
which (is) the life-giving, healing mantra.
For this is the most healing of the healing remedies,
namely the life-giving mantra, the healing one,
which will heal the viscera of the righteous man. (Darmesteter, 1995, p. 62)

As stated in Vivedad, there is no doubt that what is meant by internal diseases are mental diseases and such diseases are treatable with methods comparable to the current psychoanalysis, that is, mostly through conversation or talk therapy, without prescribing medicine. It is said that this method of treating mental disorders with the help of chanting is still popular among Zoroastrian Iranians. (Maqsoodi, and Sediqi, 2020, p. 172)

From what has been mentioned, it can be concluded that the concept of mantra therapy, mentioned in the *Avesta* and other Zoroastrian texts, implies that in ancient Iran, mental disorders were considered diseases (and not the possession of the evil spirit of the affected person or magic and other types of intervention by other elements) with some treatment methods. As the secondary result, it can be assumed that hospitals and other special places of care were also considered for its treatment Although there is no historical evidence to prove this issue, from the structure of post-Islamic hospitals, which is considered the natural sequence of pre-Islamic medicine, it can be assumed that there

90

were special departments for mental patients in pre-Islamic Iranian hospitals.

In general, then, it can be said that ancient Iranians considered mental tensions and disturbances as diseases, requiring special treatment. Accordingly, doctors specializing in these diseases were also known and even preferred over other doctors. In other words, in the ancient Iranian world, mentally ill people were not rejected or considered evil. They were regarded as patients and efforts were made to save them from the clutches of illness and unhealthiness.

1- Investigating the Process of Treating Mental Disorders in the post-Islam Era

The process of recognizing mental disorders as diseases and trying to treat them continued in Persian Medicine after Islam. The evidence, supporting this claim, includes several important and influential theoretical and practical medical texts.

A. Muhammad Ibn Zakariya Razi

Among the oldest texts related to theoretical studies focusing on the human psyche is the book "*Spiritual Medicine*" by Muhammad Ibn Zakariya Razi (died 872-934 AD)[4]. In this book, Razi first explains the place of reason in the mental health of a person. (Razi, 1996, pp. 16-17). In other words, he believes that psychological diseases or mental diseases are caused by lack of or insufficient reason. For this reason, he suggests experimental and scientific ways to deal with it and to fix the deficiencies of rational powers. It is important to note that Zakaria Razi learned this part of his philosophical thoughts about the human psyche from a philosopher named Iranshahri, who excelled in pre-Islamic Iranian philosophy. (Safa, 1964, p. 421) Therefore, it is assumed that what Zakariya Razi put forward and wrote in the book, *Mental Health* (lit. *Tib Rohani*) is the legacy of the thinking of Iranian thinkers, which Razi transmitted to his students and followers, extending in Iranian culture. (Mohaqeq, 1966, pp. 458-465 and 114-129)

B. Avicenna (980-1037 AD)

His treatise, *The Compendium on the Soul*, is the most famous Iranian medical work that has focused on the analysis of the human psyche. In this book, Avicenna, refers to the

4- Before Razi, Ibn Raban Tabari (died around 881 AD) described the brain, dividing it into three parts in his book, "Firdus al-Hikamhzam wa al-Din wa Al-Dawlah". He mentioned mental diseases and their effect on human health. (p. 105) Also, after Zakaria Razi, Ali bin Abbas Majosi mentioned some things in the book "*Kamal al-Sanaa al-Tabiyyah*" about mental disorders and types of mental disorders and their harm to a person. (The third volume, p. 414)

91

"*Wise soul*", as having two facets: one directed towards the divine and the other towards the body. That is to say, according to Avicenna, physical diseases can cause disturbances in the celestial diseases, which in more common terms means mental diseases. On the other hand, mental disturbances can cause physical diseases; (Avicenna, 1952, pp. 48-50) he gives a clear example for this opinion and says: "[For example, the effect of the mind over the body] *is that when someone experiences a lot of fear, he forgets the desire to eat... or if he is angry, he neglects the desire for sex.*" (Avicenna, 1952, p. 51) Hence, it is inferred that to Avicenna mental disorders are treatable because they have physical causes, arising from natural causes. This approach makes the foundation of his innovative treatments for mental disorders, mentioned in various books.

C. Akhawyni Bokhari

Akhawyni Bokhari (Died 983 AD), a follower of Razi, authored *Hidayat al-Mote'allemin fi al-Tibb*, the oldest accessible medical book in Persian. The book, in effect, addresses medical students. In this book, Akhwini provides a detailed exploration of various mental disorders, including, melancholia, madness, hallucinations, and nightmares. Akhawyni Bokhari meticulously classifies these disorders, describes their symptoms, investigates their causes, and provides appropriate treatment prescriptions for each one. That is to say, regarding each disease, he first describes in detail the symptoms of the disease, and in the second stage, he explains the cause(s) of each disease, and in the third stage, he mentions the treatment methods. As an example of topics related to melancholia, which is under the topic of soda predominance, he describes the symptoms that are consistent with mental disorders known today, including bipolarity, and schizophrenic psychosis. One interesting aspect of Bokhari's work is his personal experience treating "*Qatrab*" (Polar disease), a condition akin to acute depression. (Akhawyni Bokhari, 2018, pp. 244-247), treating it with medicine: "*And I am one I cured him of this disease with a lot of oils and... [and because he refused to eat medicine and food, I tied his hands and feet and made a device from the horn of a cow, pouring food and medicine into his mouth. Employing such measures, I succeeded in treating his disease...*" (Akhawyni Bokhari, 2018, pp. 247-248) This approach highlights the early recognition of mental illness as a condition requiring treatment. This example illustrates the historical understanding of mental disorders in Persian Medicine and shows the effort to develop therapeutic solutions.

D. Mir Seyyed Sharif Jurjani

Jurjani (1042-1137 AD), a notable figure in medical history in Iran, authored Zakhireye Khwarazmshahi, a comprehensive compilation of Iranian medical achievements from the ancient times to the Middle Ages. In this work, Jurjani extensively discusses mental disorders. In his detailed articles on mental disorders, caused by Melancholy, he sometimes expresses empathy towards those afflicted (Jorjani, 1376, p. 131). This shows that Jorjani, like other doctors in the Iranian medical school, considered mental disorders as diseases and took a scientific and rational approach to their treatment. While some treatment methods may appear questionable in modern medicine, it is evident that Iranian doctors consider mental disorders as treatable diseases. They dedicated themselves to diagnosis and sought cures, often relying on experimental science in their treatment ap-

proach[5].

2- Treatment Methods for Mental Patients in Non-Medical Texts

In Iranian culture, considering mental disturbances or madness as a disease is not limited to medical scientific books, and people usually hold that mental patients can be treated with compassion. This point is shown in the review of literary books[6] and the anecdotes written about mental patients, especially the stories written about the treatment of patients. One of the prominent examples of these works is the book *Chahar Maqala* (lit. *Four Articles*), a prominent book written by Nizami Aruzi (1172 or 1173 AD). It encompasses four chapters explaining four professions: writing, poetry, astronomy, and medicine. In each chapter, after giving an introduction about each profession, the book offers anecdotes suitable for each. The importance of this book also lies in these anecdotes because one can discern historical information about Iranian society in the 12th century. In the medical chapter, Nizami Aruzi tells stories about the creative treatment methods of the ancient world, including four stories about treating mentally ill patients, Remarkably, these narratives blend elements of psychoanalysis or psychotherapy with the use of drugs and physical therapy methods. (Nizami Aruzi, 2012)

Examining some other Persian works of fiction shows that methods such as story therapy, and music therapy, which encourage patients to express their concerns, bear a striking resemblance to contemporary psychotherapy groups used for treating patients suffering from mental disorders. Perhaps the best example of story therapy for the treatment of mental disorders can be found in the book "*One Thousand and One Nights*". The book is about a king who, due to his wife's betrayal, suffers from mental distress. The king marries a new woman every night and kills her in the morning. The protagonist of the story is a woman named Shahrzad, who willingly becomes the king's wife to save other women. Every night, she narrates a story suitable for the mentally ill king, leaving him in suspense until the following morning. The king, intrigued by the stories, postpones her execution daily. Eventually, Shahrzad manages to cure his acute illness through story therapy. Accordingly, it can be said that Persian Medicine and other works related to medicine, such as doctors' anecdotes, as well as literary texts and folk tales, all have one thing in common: mentally ill patients are not wicked or evil. Hence,

5- In addition to the works mentioned in this article as the main Iranian medical texts after Islam up to the Middle Ages, there are other works, in the field of mental disorders, compiled in the form of monographs. Except for the work of Ishaq bin Imran (900 AD) "Essay on Melancholy", other works left are simply a list of book titles, including the works of Yohna Yen Masuyeh (864 AD), Hanin bin Ishaq 881 AD), Ahmad Ibn Abi Shat (d. 981 AD).

6- The survey of Sufi texts reveals that the concept of madness is often closely linked to that of praise, a topic that falls outside the scope of this study.

93

they should not be rejected by the society or imprisoned and tortured. On the contrary, as reflected in Iranian medical culture and the culture of Iranian people, mental patients, like all other patients, have the right to be treated fairly.

Methods of Treating Mental Patients in Medical Centers

Historical evidence indicates that in Islamic countries, since the establishment of large hospitals, there has always been a section dedicated to the treatment of mental health patients. (Elgood, 2008, p. 206) The first significant hospital in the post-Islamic era was the Damascus Hospital built in 709 AD (Kaviyani, 2013, p. 113). There is evidence suggesting the presence of a mental health treatment center near Baghdad in the third century. Similarly, it is said that in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, there were special departments in hospitals allocated for mental patients. For instance, the hospital in Aleppo had a department for treating mental patients, described as follows: "*In this hospital, there is a small section for the insane, surrounded by flower gardens and a pond. Singers were also present in the center to provide therapeutic entertainment*". (Isa, 1992, pp. 150-151)

In Iran and the eastern regions, reports mention hospitals and medical centers in the cities of Ray, Khwarezm, Shiraz, Isfahan, Yazd, and some other centers. There is a report from Yazd Hospital in 1287 AD, mentioning a department dedicated to mental health patients. In addition, some properties were dedicated annually to the hospital for the treatment of mental health patients. These hospitals used various treatment methods, ranging from providing a suitable environment to massage therapy with essential oils and fragrances, based on the severity and nature of the illness. Harsher methods, like tying patients with ropes or chains, were used only for those likely to cause harm to themselves or others. However, more gentle methods were employed based on the evidence. For instance, gardens and parks were built near the Mozaffari Hospital in Shiraz to comfort mentally ill patients, and music was played in the Qalavon Mansouri Hospital for patients suffering from insomnia. The dedication letter of the Baghdad hospital mentions a place called "*Zarbat*" as the residence of the musicians[7].

In examining this evidence, it is important to note that mental patient wards and treatment centers were typically situated within the same hospital, alongside other hospital departments. This supports the argument presented in this

7- Part of the evidence and documents, mentioned in this section, is based on the notes taken from the speech entitled "*The History of the Establishment of Dar al-Mujanin*" by Mahbobeh Farkhandezadeh at the Second International Conference on the History of Medicine in Iran and Islam (Tehran: 2018).

article that the Iranian medical approach to mental patients has prioritized treatment, regardless of the effectiveness or alignment of this approach with modern methods. Essentially, these institutions operate under the belief that mental disorders, just like any other illnesses, should be treated. In essence, the evidence suggests that the Iranian medical perception of mental illness was both wise and compassionate.

Conclusion

From the oldest writings in Iranian culture before and after Islam, it appears that Iranians were well acquainted with mental disorders and had some methods for their treatment. In Persian medical texts after Islam, as well as the texts written by Iranian doctors in Arabic, there are chapters allocated to various kinds of mental diseases, followed by a description of the symptoms and complications of these diseases, and the ways to treat them. What is remarkable in this article is that based on medical texts or other historical and literary texts, mental disorders were recognized as diseases in Iranian medical culture and tradition. Compared to the culture of other nations, especially the culture of the Western nations, from ancient times to the end of the Middle Ages and until the beginning of the era of new sciences, mental disorders were never recognized, and mental patients were kept isolated, imprisoned, and tortured. In other words, instead of treatment, the system of exclusion prevailed. As from 1656 in France, all the insane were collected from the city of Paris and transferred to residences on the outskirts of the city, and this continued until the onset of the Great French Revolution. Compared to that, this, as evidenced by medical texts and other evidence, in Persian Medicine, instead of imprisonment and exile, they have tried to find the underlying cause of mental disorders. To put it more clearly, in Iranian medical culture, from the earliest times, mental disorders were recognized as a kind of illness. Hence, doctors used to treat them through different methods, such as drug therapy and speech therapy, resembling Psychoanalytic treatments. They were expected to respect the human dignity of mental patients. In addition to the official medical texts that confirm this claim, a large number of non-medical and literary texts and folk tales also support the same point of view. As can be seen from the folk tales, regardless of whether these stories are real or not, they all confirm the point that mental illness is considered curable and a person suffering from mental illness should never be rejected and isolated, but treated with dignity.

Conflict of Interest
None.

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96