

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Freud as a Psychotherapist and Scientist in Iran

Abstract

This study deals with how the Austrian physician, Sigmund Freud, was perceived as a psychotherapist and scientist in pre-revolutionary Iran. The opinions voiced by the Persian critics, authors, and translators in the period under discussion reveals an approach informed by authentic culture or domestically originated thinking and assertions that substantiate the claim that Persian scholars and authors had already touched upon or even elaborated on the concepts brought up by Freud. The study indicates that authors and translators dealing with Freudian ideas are interested in understanding Freud by adopting an “imperialistic” approach in terms of discourse importation theories. Moreover, his discourse is co-opted as a scientific one in the period under discussion. This study may serve as a contribution to history of medicine in Iran – not least, that of psychotherapy – and can indicate how the evolution of a school of thought takes place when it is implanted in or imported to a new context.

Key words: Iran, Psychotherapy, Authentic culture, Freud, Therapeutic

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Introduction

Writing in 1938, Ali Akbar Siyasi refers in *'Elm ul-Nafs* to a problem in teaching and writing about psychology, a concept that was also designated as *ravanshenāsi*. The problem is finding appropriate Persian equivalents for psychological terms. The approach, he asserts, is threefold. "First, we employ the philosophical works written in the East as good sources for equivalents", he states, adding "by and large, one cannot afford to regard with contempt the terms great Persian scholars like Avicenna and Mulla Sadra used, coining new words without ever examining and mooting the issue"¹. The second approach involves the "appropriation" or "combination" of the foreign word. The third one is to turn a blind eye towards terms sounding strange to the Persian ear like *istisha'ar*, *aql-e la-sho'uri*, or *taht-e sho'uri*. The author is cognizant of the lack of appropriate terminology – especially in new sciences like psychology – in Persian as a setback shared by all eastern nations². Not only was the new terminology a great obstacle for the transfer of psychological ideas into Persian but it would also serve as the proverbial tip of the iceberg for such ideational encounters between the West and East in scientific and cultural terms. All authors, commentators as well as translators could not help appropriating the whole scientific discourses into their own discourses which were informed by the general *zeitgeist* or scientific milieu of the receiving language. Freudian discourse in psychology was among those emerging discourses in the 1940s, with which many scholars engaged.

Whereas Freud's ideas were amalgamated with, say, ancient Confucian thought in China³, giving rise to a Freud unique to that region and culture, Iranian translators and commentators incorporated the discourse to a dominantly left-oriented poetics teemed with what was dubbed "authentic culture" in the years preceding the Islamic Revolution. The corollary is that almost all interpretations needed to be made in the framework of the discourse. Freudian thoughts are no exception to the rule – whether Freud is regarded as an intellectual, a physician, or a man of letters. This study aims to discuss the reception of Freudian psychoanalysis as a therapeutic method and a scientific school in the pre-revolutionary Iran in terms of the theories of discourse importation and of how it percolated into, and responded to, the discourses in the receiving context.

Discourse importation

The importation of thoughts and ideas into a culture – either through translation proper or commentary – may cul-

1- Siaysi, 1938: 3–4.

2- Siaysi, 1938: 4.

3- Blowers, 2002: 85.



minate in different reactions and discursive formations to which those ideas or discourses are incorporated. A culture's attitude towards the foreign element may materialize in four ways. The first attitude is "imperialistic" in which the culture co-opts the foreign element – sometimes beyond recognition. The approach, as the name suggests, takes a condescending view towards the other cultures but it does not necessarily have anything to do with imperialism in socio-political terms. The second, "defensive" one, presumes an importation of the foreign but the culture does take precautions in adopting it. If a culture takes the third attitude, dubbed "metadiscursive", the foreign element is not regarded as a "threat" to be dismissed while laying stress on the specificity of the receiving culture. Finally, the "defective" attitude is adopted by those cultures which fail to renovate themselves without the importation of the elements foreign to its existence. The first and last approaches are diametrically opposed since the former looks down on the other cultures and the latter looks up to them⁴.

Given the theoretical approach above, we will discuss some texts related to Freudian psychotherapeutic method in a number of publications linking the Freudian discourse to psychotherapeutic practices in the medieval times and to science in general. The texts belong to the time span covering the 1940s through the 1970s in Iran, following the dissemination of Freudian psychoanalysis in Iran. Our approach does not, however, pass any value judgments regarding whether the authors we comment upon are right or wrong in their take on the issues at hand.

Freud's predecessors in Persia?

In 1976, an article published in the monthly *Armaghan*, entitled "Stricken by love" subtitled "Jalaledin Mulavi (Rumi) as the pioneer of the school of *Irfan*⁵ and illumination / Sigmund Freud, the researcher in the material and empirical sciences" recounts a famous story from *Mathnawi Manawi*⁶, the story of a king and his maidservant. It concludes with this note:

*Rumi – may God bless him – was prolific in both mystical and scientific areas in the seventh century of hegira (thirteenth of the common era). Comparing him with Sigmund Freud in the nineteenth century, one may conclude that Rumi became well-known in the thirteenth century and Freud in 1895 through claiming to have unearthed the secret of *junun*⁷ resulted from sexual deprivation.⁸*

The main idea stated by the author is that Muslims, espe-

- 4- Robyns, 1994: 405–428.
- 5- mysticism
- 6- tr. Spiritual Couplets
- 7- lunacy
- 8- Jenabzadeh, 1976: 224.



cially Persians, had had a scientist who anticipated Freudian ideas many centuries before him. “Persian physicians like Rhazes and Avicenna,” adds he, “were, too, aware of this secret”⁹. Criticising his Iranian fellowmen for having downplayed such a great feat and ignoring their great thinkers, he writes “If the westerners make a fuss over Freud, we Iranians must not act as their mouthpiece”¹⁰.

In 1962, a translator rendering a book by Stefan Zweig entitled *Freud*, asserts “Freud’s teachings are not novel ideas and inventions”¹¹. “In the West”, states he “what is associated with the sex instinct is tunnelled into its right path instead of being concealed as if it were a hideous act” because if obstructed, the instinct will lead to “malady of the soul and decadence of senses”, among others¹². He attributes the recent transformations in the advanced nations to the influence of Freud. While acknowledging Freud’s role in shedding light on sexual matters and dispelling the problems caused by hiding the issues associated with them, he refers to Persian scholars having anticipated Freud’s themes centuries prior. Relating the story of Avicenna with a relative of Qabus Wushmgir. “Earlier scholars”, writes he “were aware of the etiology of such spiritual maladies as a result of their experience”¹³. In a very clear tone, he asserts the cause of all these diseases was “Love”, drawing upon Freud’s theory which states “the sex instinct, the preclusion of which – or, as Freud has it, abstinence – would cause a disbalance in psyche and lead to psychological disorder”¹⁴. Some psychological or, as the translator designates it, “spiritual” problems, occur due to love which is, in turn, rooted in “sex”.

Razi’s introduction to his translation contains a section “Remedying psychological diseases in Iran” where he writes:

*Treating psychological maladies through psychotherapy was in the vogue in the previous centuries and learned people like Avicenna and Rhazes used Freud’s method to treat the sufferers. The same method was applied in the case of two hysteric and schizophrenic patients by these two scholars.*¹⁵

To support his argument, he refers to *Al-Mabdà val Ma’ād* by Avicenna and a work by Nezami Aruzi. The Persian scholars, he states, “were fully aware of the effects of repression” and “free association” which define the pillars of Freud’s theories¹⁶. Many a concepts propounded by Freud, he asserts, have been clearly stated by Persian poets like Atar Nayshaburi who refers to the concepts “conscious” and “subconscious” in a couplet¹⁷.

A paper published in *Farhang-e Naw* in 1952 elaborates on the story of Avicenna and Wushmgir. Quoting Nezami

9- Ibid.

10- Ibid.

11- Zweig, 1962: D.

12- Ibid.

13- Ibid.

14- Ibid.

15- Razi, 1960: 89.

16- Razi, 1960: 101.

17- Razi 1960: 102.



Aruzi's *Chahar Maqala*, the author relates the story of how Avicenna treated Qabus Wushmgir's niece who was suffering from *malikhulia*¹⁸. The scholar is said to have put his fingers on the patient's wrist and proceeded to say the names of the regions in Gurgan, where Avicenna took asylum from Mahmud Qaznavi. He then stated the names of the streets, whereupon the pulses began to be faster. Stating the name of an alley made the patient's pulse even faster. When the names of the owners of the houses were mentioned, the scholar realized that the pulses became "preternatural" because her lover's name was among those mentioned¹⁹. "Although Avicenna seems to never have met Qabus and his niece", concedes the author "one may conclude from his *Qanun* that he did know about the psychoanalytic method, and practiced it, centuries before Freud"²⁰. This is an interpretation that subscribes to the idea substantiating the fact that Freudian ideas had been anticipated by Avicenna.

In "Psychology in the Islamic culture" authored by Mohammad Jenabzadeh (1951), we see an Islamic approach to psychology in general and psychoanalysis in particular. Whereas appreciating the psychoanalytic school championed by Freud as an influential one, of which physicians have made use in treating "spiritual maladies"²¹, he accuses "charlatans" of deceiving people under the disguise of "brilliant works of *elm ul-nafs*". Jenabzadeh asserts "Those dealing with religious knowledge know that the foundation of Islamic culture is robust" and one may find the roots and tenets of issues accorded importance in the advanced world in the "Islamic sciences"²². For him, "religiously oriented education obstructs the formation of most spiritual and physical diseases" because "religious rules and *ahkam* [...] have eradicated these issues which are, one would say, the setbacks of civilization and their being opposed to human nature"²³. The panacea – an old branch of knowledge – is what he calls *elm ul-nafs* which medieval authors dealt with under the headings like "On the virtues of wisdom" or "Fighting caprice, love, jealousy, conceit, and wrath"²⁴. His comparison between "psychology in the culture of materialists" and "religious *m'arifat ul-nafs*"²⁵ reads "Materialists are always heedful of the special chemical and physical effects between objects and human beings while the Islamic culture sees a divine and heavenly force lying behind matter – a force which is tangible despite being invisible"²⁶. This approach to Freud's method is repeated in a number of other studies.

Freudian psychoanalytical discourse and science

*Arzesh-e elmi va amali-e Freud*²⁷ (1963) by Mahmud Navâi,

18- Melancholy

19- Nawayeen, 1952:6.

20- Ibid.

21- Jenabzadeh, 1951: 16.

22- Jenabzadeh, 1951: 13–14.

23- Jenabzadeh 1951: 14.

24- Ibid.

25- knowledge of self

26- Jenabzadeh 1951: 15.

27- The scientific and practical value of Freud



one of the first translator of Freud's works into Persian, begins with criticizing those who "divorce the individual from the society": "most myopic scientists are not wont on accepting these plain truths" and "the writings of these bogus scientists are more like novels and myths than a scientific theory"²⁸. In opposition to these non-scientific undertakings are Freud and his school: "Although the author does not entirely agree with Freud's theories, he believes that Freud could not be pigeonholed as those deliberately trying to distort realities", states Navai, "The core of his research which rests on experiment and reason may constitute the foundations of a new psychology"²⁹.

While Navai too traces some Freudian ideas to the Persian authors in the past, he asserts that they were regarded with much contempt by "those worshipping the outdated thoughts" and followers of metaphysics³⁰. Some criticism levelled at Freud, the author believes, lack a rigorous basis: "Some physicians have unjustly criticised Freud for stealing their thunder" and yet another group has begun criticising him out of "silly prejudices"³¹. He, nonetheless, owns up to the fact that psychology and psychoanalysis are not verifiable and, as a result, they are always open to discussion, granting the concession of "clinical science" to the school³².

In the introduction to *Pesikanaliz va eshgh*³³ authored by Andre Tridon and translated by Mehdi Ghoravi (1952) we read about an infamous criminal of the first Pahlavi period. Known as "Asghar Qatel"³⁴, he was apprehended and sent to the gallows in the 1940s. Given the public opinion on this issue, Ghoravi writes "some people believed that Asghar's brain should have been studied in a laboratory, while some others believed that his corpse should have been preserved in alcohol like harmful animals"³⁵. Rejecting these options, the translator states that the murderer could have been psychoanalyzed to illuminate the psychological problems giving rise to such heinous acts but, since it was not a known school in the world during the 1930s in Iran, no one even thought of such an approach.

In the introduction to *Freud che miguyad*³⁶, compiled and translated by Nasrollah Babulhavaejian, Amir Hossein Aryanpoor, a well-known critic, discusses Freud from four angles: Freudian psychiatry, Freudian research method, Freudian psychology, and Freudian sociology. He sees some setbacks with the first aspect: giving an "enigmatic air" to the dynamism of human character, overlooking social factors, overlooking the bodily factors in diseases, and lack of economic cost-effectiveness due to long treatment periods³⁷. In the research method, Aryanpoor regards Freudian school as

- 28- Navai, 1963: 2.
- 29- Navai 1963: 4.
- 30- Navai 1963: 26.
- 31- Navai 1963: 95.
- 32- Navai 1963: 96-97.
- 33- Psychoanalysis and love
- 34- Asghar the murderer
- 35- Ghoravi, 1952: 6.
- 36- What does Freud say?
- 37- Aryanpoor, 1962: 8.



divorcing the individual from the social space in which they are embedded³⁸. His psychology is chastised by the author as reaching “a series of unscientific and incongruous abstraction” so that “everything a child does – like eating, sleeping, and playing – is implicated”³⁹. As regard the last aspect, he opines,

*Psychoanalysis gradually became less of a therapeutic method [...]. It made inroads into social sciences, education, literature, and arts, turning into an all-embracing philosophical world-view. It thus finally culminated in a novelism – i.e., Freudianism – which would straddle all aspects of the individual and social life.*⁴⁰

The author believes that Freud’s thoughts are “the reflection of a society in which he grew”⁴¹, signifying the Viennese society.

Naqdi bar Freudism az didgahe Ravanshenasi-e elmi^{42,43}, purports to be an analysis of Freudian ideas. The title, a translation of Harry Kohlsaat Wells⁴⁴, is manipulated in the Persian with the insertion of Freudianism and scientific psychology, the very term that implies the translator does not accord a scientific state to Freud otherwise he would not position scientific psychology against Freudian psychoanalysis.

Conclusion

The paper discussed Freud’s ideas in the Iranian context under two wide headings: Freud’s ideas as anticipated in Persia and his scientific reception in Iran. Authors, translators, and commentators had mixed feelings about Freud. Some of them thought Freudian ideas were present in Iran well before the twentieth centuries via Persian authors and scholars like Rumi and Avicenna: of Robyn’s categories of discourse importation, we may see an “imperialistic” outlook which suggests that the discourse is co-opted by the receiving culture, incorporating it to a wider authentic discourse which held that the foreign materials, not least the Western, are not supposed to be superior to the domestic culture. Such a conceptualization is crystalized in the statements indicating that Freudian psychoanalysis was not an entirely new idea and Iranians need not be carried away by the theories proposed by Freud. The reception is not “defensive”, however; elements of foreign Western thought may be allowed into the receiving culture. Tinges of metadiscursive approach can be spotted in the Iranian culture’s seeing the Freudian school in psychotherapy as pre-existent in Iran but welcoming them with no sense of threat. As regards the second heading under which Freudian writings in Persian are analysed, one may notice how the do-

38- Aryanpoor, 1962: 12.

39- Aryanpoor, 1962: 13–14.

40- Aryanpoor, 1962: 17.

41- Aryanpoor, 1962: 27.

42- A critique of Freudianism from the perspective of scientific psychology.

43- Wells, 1977.

44- Wells, 1956.



mestic culture tries to take a “metadiscursive” approach to the issue at hand by allowing the Freudian discourse to enter the Persian context as a sheer scientific approach.

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