

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

“Wild” Psychoanalysis as a Therapeutic Approach in 1960s Iran: A View from a Translator’s Commentary


Abstract

This essay is a critical reading of a preface by an Iranian translator, Mahmud Nava’i, to his translation of a Freudian text. Drawing on the idea of “wild” analysis defined by Freud in 1910 as inappropriate psychoanalysis, the paper attempts to compare Freud’s idea to the translator’s commentary on Freudian psychoanalysis. It demonstrates how an inquisitive, if not erroneous, interpretation of psychoanalysis could result in an embodiment of wild analysis in Iran. Although psychoanalysis was not embraced in Iran as a psychotherapeutic method in the 1960s, such understandings of the method could play into the hands of the detractors of Freud, both in religious and Leftist quarters, who took Freudianism as a threat to Muslim morals and Marxist outlooks, respectively. Also, translating Freud’s theories into the Persian language cannot constitute an essential element in psychotherapy because this type of therapy cannot be learned from books, per Freud’s account of the ‘wild’ psychoanalysis.

Key words: Translations, ‘Wild’ analysis, Psychotherapy, Iran, Mahmud Nava’i

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Introduction

As Freud's ideas were introduced into Persian as fragments in the 1930s, some translators began translating the entire publications of Freud, including his books and essays, in later decades. His psychotherapeutic method, known as *Pesikanaliz* and then *Ravankavi* in Iran, was well received but poorly understood back then. The fragments and commentary published in literary and general interest magazines, such as *Mehr*, paved the way for a fuller introduction to Freudian psychoanalysis, but they fell short of giving a full picture of the discourse, ending up in platitudes either embracing or rejecting it out of hand. "Although the translation of Freud's works into Persian (the language of Iran) began a half-century ago," writes Shoja Shafiqi, "psychoanalysis as a therapeutic method did not develop parallel to the translation process" (Shafiqi, 2005, p. 387).

This paper is an attempt to shed light on parochialism in interpreting the Freudian psychoanalysis reflected in a translator's preface to a book written by Freud. To this end, the translator's explicit understanding of the work will be read in the light of a short essay by Freud, "Wild Psychoanalysis" (1910). The translator's conceptualization of Freudian psychotherapy is an instance of the general reception of the Freudian discourse in the 1980s, as shown in another paper (Khademnabi, Khazaei Farid, and Aghamohammadian Sharbaf, 2021, p. 104).

Mahmud Nava'i (d. 1983) is regarded as a prolific translator of Freud into Persian. His *Dorus-e Pesikanaliz* is supposed to be one of the first translations of Freud's works into Persian. Nava'i also wrote a book on Freudianism entitled *Arzesh-e Elmi o Amali-e Ravankavi* (The Practical and Theoretical Value of Psychoanalysis), where he discusses the importance of Freudian psychoanalysis more openly and explicitly, attaching great value to the school of thought without much criticism against it. Although a leftist thinker, he is keen on Freudianism, which is not typical of the ultra-Marxist thinkers of his time. More importantly, Nava'i is not, and has never claimed to be, a trained psychologist but rather a man of letters bent on "serving" his nation, as he claims in most of his writings (see below). Typical of the period are also intermediary translation practices. As most translators were not familiar with the German language, most translations into Persian were from intermediary languages like French and English.

The translator's preface to the translation is symptomatic of a broader understanding of Freudian psychoanalysis in Iran, which will be elaborated on below.

What is "Wild" Psychoanalysis?

A woman seeks consultation with Sigmund Freud about her anxiety state, asserting that a young physician has referred her to him. She "consulted a young physician in the suburb she lived in, for he informed her that the cause of her anxiety was her lack of sexual satisfaction" (Freud, 1910, p. 219). The physician, having seen her anxiety, advised the woman—a divorcee—to have sexual intercourse as a remedy for her psychological problems, a remedy that, he claimed, was devised by Freud. The woman, troubled by the very thought of having to do such a thing as a remedy, goes to Freud. Surprised at this advice, Freud clarifies his position vis-à-vis the sexual matter in a bid to "prevent others from harming their patients" (Freud, 1910, p. 222), owning up to the fact that such narratives related to patients should not be relied on as the patients, especially nervous ones, may fail to faithfully report what their physician has said.



Giving the benefit of the doubt to his patient's report, Freud finds faults with the young doctor's attitude: one concerns "scientific errors" and the other "technical rules" (Freud, 1910, p. 222). As to the scientific aspect, he writes, "The physician in question was ignorant of a number of the scientific theories of psychoanalysis or had misapprehended them, and thus showed how little he had penetrated an understanding of its nature and purposes." The reductionist, distorted view of Freudian psychoanalysis, also reflected in popular accounts of the discourse, saw "sexual life" as "coitus or analogous acts producing orgasm," while Freud extended the meaning of the term far beyond its common sense:

We reckon as belonging to "sexual life" all the activities of the tender feelings that have primitive sexual impulses as their source, even when those impulses have become inhibited regarding their original sexual aim or have exchanged this aim for another that is no longer sexual. (Freud, 1910, pp. 222-23)

"Psychosexuality" is the term Freud uses for his approach because it highlights the fact that the mental factor must not be forgotten in the psychoanalytic view of sexuality. Also, lack of sexual intercourse does not equate to the "mental absence of satisfaction" (Freud, 1910, pp. 222-23), and lack of satisfaction should not be restricted to a lack of sexual acts. As sexuality goes far beyond the common conception of the term, any expert emphasizing the correlation between sexuality and psychological well-being is not therefore a psychoanalyst proper, per Freud's decree. As a result, one should not "believe that sexual satisfaction in itself constitutes a remedy of general reliability for the sufferings of neurotics" (Freud, 1910, p. 223).

There are, Freud believes, differences between "anxiety neurosis" and "other pathological states that are manifested by anxiety" (Freud, 1910, p. 224). Freud closes his comments on the scientific errors committed by the young physician by criticizing the "three therapeutic alternatives of this so-called psycho-analyst," which "leave no room for psycho-analysis" (Freud, 1910, p. 225).

As for the technical fallacies, he refers to a "long-superseded idea," which states that the neurotic patient is not aware of what goes on in his or her mind and that he or she will be on the path of recovery the moment he or she learns about his or her "ignorance." "[I]f one removes this ignorance by giving him information (about the causal connection of his illness with his life, his experiences and childhood, and so on)," writes Freud, "he is bound to recover" (Freud, 1910, p. 225). For him, the factor causing the suffering in the patient is not ignorance per se but the origin of the ignorance, i.e., the patient's "inner resistances," which the psychoanalyst must neutralize. Shedding light on the patient's ignorance, which is due to his or her having repressed it, [A3] is "only one of the necessary preliminaries to the treatment" (Freud, 1910, p. 225). Knowledge of the unconscious, albeit popularly considered the sine qua non of the therapeutic procedure, is not sufficient because "informing the patient of his unconscious regularly results in an intensification of the conflict in him and an exacerbation of his troubles" (Freud, 1910, p. 225).

Whereas providing this knowledge is of importance in psychoanalysis proper, it cannot be of use unless two conditions are met: 1) "the patient must ... himself have reached the neighborhood of what he has repressed" and "he must have formed a sufficient attachment (transference) to the physician for his emotional relationship" (Freud, 1910, p. 225). Freud's final comments on "wild" psychoanalysis can be summarized thus: the



therapeutic procedure stemming from psychoanalysis requires “a fairly long period of contact with the patient”; the psychoanalyst cannot limit himself to just “a few of the findings of psycho-analysis”; and that “this technique cannot yet be learned from books” (Freud, 1910, p. 225).

It was after the publication of this paper that “in March 1910 at the Second Psycho-Analytical Congress in Nuremberg, of “an International Psycho-Analytical Association, to which its members declare their adherence by the publication of their names” (De Mijolla, 2005, p. 1861).

Findings and Discussion

In 1945, Mahmud Nava’i published a translation of a book written by Freud, *Psychoanalytic Lessons*. As the introductions to translations are a locus of interpretation and (mis) understanding of an author’s intellectual efforts, the preface to Nava’i’s translation will be analyzed critically in terms of the “wild” psychoanalytic practice referred to above.

Nava’i’s piece at the beginning of the book attempts to provide a rationale for translating the Freudian psychoanalytic perspective into Persian. Freud was relatively unknown in Iran in the 1960s, and fragments or rewritings of Freudianism or Feroydism, as was known back then, were the only loci at which the discourse was introduced to the Persian audience. So popular magazines—naturally not specializing in psychology proper—published pieces on a variety of themes directly or indirectly related to psychoanalysis. Those areas included literature, law, and education, among others. Yet, misapprehensions were also rampant.

The preface partakes of the discourse that sought to assign Freudian psychoanalysis to the position of a panacea.

Nava’i writes of his sad experiences in 1936, when he was doing compulsory military service in Iran. He lost his mother and younger brother, leading to his intense psychosomatic sufferings like problems in the kidney and liver, which led to mental issues hindering “his thoughts and speculations.” He later goes to Europe for further studies and sees “Professor Laignel-Lavastine”¹ (Nava’i, n.d., p. 2). It should be mentioned here that what is included below as Lavastine’s ideas are reported by Nava’i, and, just like the woman in Freud’s paper discussed above, the patient’s words must be taken with a pinch of salt as he may have misconstrued the therapist’s ideas.

Upon examining Nava’i, Lavastine asserts that he does

1- All translations from the Persian original are ours.



not have any bodily malfunctioning because his condition is due to “purely psychological causes, not least sexual matters, which render [him] more irritable” (Nava’i, n.d., p. 2). The final verdict is that “you should be socializing with more women,” “music and dance will alleviate your soul”, “you should be having sexual intercourse with women at least twice a week”, and “you should study Freud’s work ... to educate your psyche” (Nava’i, n.d., p. 2).

“Not only will these sufferings end,” the therapist is quoted as saying, “but also can also heighten your psychosomatic pleasures.” Extending the psychological conditions to the entire Eastern sphere, Lavastine is reported to have said: “Most of the people living in Eastern countries are spiritually [rūhan] abnormal and sick because of their sexual deprivation and lose their psychosomatic balance and jolliness in their youth” (Nava’i, n.d., p. 2).² For him, per Nava’i’s report, people from the East are sexually deprived, which results in their psychological problems. Accordingly, the patients should have sexual intercourse to be psychologically healthy.

It is Lavastine, as Nava’i writes, who encourages him to translate the Freudian oeuvre into his mother tongue because there is a benefit in its content for the Iranian people:

You should study the books written by the experts in the science of sexology and offer them as a comprehensive book to your compatriots. The translation of this type of work into Persian will also prove effective and cause a great revolution in your country, changing the dismal and unhappy state of the people. (Nava’i, n.d., p. 3)

The prescription is not complex: by translating and introducing Freud to Iranians, one will be able to effect a great change in their mood, which is not good due to the impossibility of satisfying carnal needs. The words work like a miracle and invigorate Nava’i’s “melancholy soul,” but he cannot do what the therapist recommended him to do because he is “ashamed of the beautiful girls” he encounters in “dance classes.” Yet he manages to gain unprecedented confidence and becomes “jolly and witty,” “optimistic,” successful in making new friends and studies, unafraid of things, and free from despondence (Nava’i, n.d., p. 3).

After World War II begins, he has to leave “that land characterized by knowledge, replete with happiness” to return to Iran, where “the nation’s soul is killed and superstitions have penetrated it” because a “thick wall of chastity and decency” has restricted the youth to conjugal love, which could erode

2- The translator also deviates from the psychoanalytic outlook by equating the psychological to the spiritual, using the adverb rūhan, meaning “spiritually”.



over time. Nava'i's poem about the Freudian outlook is also interesting in terms of his understanding of the discourse. Beginning his poem with an analogy between the girls and boys of the East and West, he uses the simile of an owl—an ominous bird in Iranian folklore—to describe his fellow countrymen and women. Regarding shyness and chastity as the causes of suffering in his nation, he refers to “Doctor Freud,” who recommends that “girls and boys have intercourse after they reach mature age” (Nava'i, n.d., p. 6).

Freudianism in psychology is similar to Darwinism in biology, writes Nava'i. People do not figure out the deeper meaning of Freudian psychology because they do not study it carefully. As a result, they may fail to identify the libido that causes a child to be attracted to his or her mother's breast and that which causes the youth to socialize (Nava'i, n.d., p. 11).

The account given above is how Nava'i interprets Freudian psychology. While Freud's “Wild Psychoanalysis” was written in 1910, it had not been translated into Persian in the 1960s in Iran. If translated, it could have removed much controversy in the intellectual circles of Iran back then. Surprisingly, what we see in the translator's preface corresponds to the “wild” analysis in Freud's opinion.

The whole therapeutic method is streamlined into something very rudimentary: when the translator felt psychologically unwell due to the loss of his mother and brother, he began socializing with women in Europe to get satisfaction, whence comes well-being. This very suggestion is also discerned in the young doctor's advice to the woman who sought consultation with Freud. Reducing everything to the sexual matter in its crudest form is shared in both stories – one by Nava'i and the other by the young physician. As the only reporter of the episode – as we do not have access to what went on in the therapy room – we have to rely on Nava'i's account. We do not see the therapist's diagnosis of his condition. Is he diagnosed with neurosis or anxiety state? What is the role of repression and libido in his current predicament? Does the patient not know or is he not ignorant of his state? Does he not know that he could implement the very suggestions proposed by the therapist before seeing him?

This clinical malpractice is also suggestive of a misapprehension of the technique. Freud explicitly warns against learning psychoanalysis from books because the method requires long contact with the patient. It seems improbable that Nava'i could recover from his mental state with only one session with his therapist, who gave him a magic formula for his psychological problems.

In conclusion, what the translator writes in the preface is not psychoanalysis proper. It is just a simplified form of very complex and time-consuming procedures that can lead to the revelation of the patient's ignorance and unconscious. Furthermore, even if the magic formula works well with one particular patient, it does not mean that one can psychoanalyze an entire nation by translating the psychoanalytic literature into the language of that nation. Just like the woman in Freud's paper – who has resistance to practicing what the young physician prescribed – the Iranian nation in the 1960s could not easily accept the ideas proposed in Nava'i's preface due to a variety of reasons – cultural, religious, social, etc.



Conclusion

The translator as the mediator between languages is assigned the formidable task of introducing new ideas into the target language and culture. This introduction is, however, value-laden, tainted by misconceptions, and characterized by exorbitant gain and loss. As is amply documented in translation research, translation is, at best, an interpretation of the source text. This is because translation replaces all intertextual, intratextual, and paratextual relations within the source text (Venuti, 2009, p. 158-159). The translation studies literature, informed by poststructuralist theories of language and meaning, avoids using terms like “misconception”, “misunderstanding” or “distortion”, highlighting instead the role of the discourses and traditions predominant in the target language and culture. The descriptive perspective therefore lays stress on the reception of foreign ideas in the new context (also see Khademnabi, and Khazae Farid, 2021).

Once applied to the case of Freudian psychoanalysis, the descriptivism mentioned above can shed some useful light on how it was received by the Iranian intellectuals of the 1960s. That Freud thought every and each one of the psychological maladies in human societies can be remedied by sexual intercourse is a fallacy perpetuated in Mahmud Nava'i's explicit commentary on the psychoanalytic method. The result is a prescription that has less to do with the sizable work of the Freudian psychotherapeutic method than with “wild” analysis, which reduces the etiology of every neurosis or anxiety state to a lack of sexual satisfaction. The religious camp, therefore, had all the reason to believe that Freudianism was equal to freedom of sex. As an article in a religiously oriented magazine in 1969 asserted, “Freud annihilated the moral virtues of humanity in the Western societies, reinforcing the nonsensical belief that human character is nothing but a proxy of the animal instincts” (Hakimi, 1969, p. 49).

By examining the role of translation in introducing new ideas into Iranian medicine throughout history, we can gain insights into how foreign medical concepts were received, interpreted, and potentially distorted within Iranian culture. This perspective allows us to understand the complex interplay between different cultures' medical traditions and how they shape healthcare practices in Iran.

Authors' Contribution

Khademnabi has designed the research and carried out the data analysis. Shadman played a role in interpreting the findings, crafting the write-up, and contributing to the revisions. All authors read and approved the final version of the work.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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