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**Comments on S. Kakar’s book *Psychoanalysis and Cultures***

I read this book feeling the impression that an underlying rhythm was accompanying me. At first I thought it was its style, even if in translation. Then I realized that in that rhythm there was a vital breath related to the issues that were developed in the pages.

I had the feeling of listening to a voice reading to me while I was outside, not in front of the screen of my tablet, and a light breeze was moving the leaves of the trees around me. I felt that my imagination was carrying me to India, where I have never been, and my memory brought me back a short story I read a long time ago, *The river*, from which Renoir wrote the screenplay of his movie, also called *The river*. I loved this movie that talks of love and death, of a summer that marks the end of the protagonist’s childhood, and of the meeting of different cultures with the passions and tensions this entails. The movie’s - and the tale’s – story takes place amidst of the colors, smells, religions, and sounds of India and the flowing of the Ganges. Then I realized that the “medley” evoked by my memory ended up forming a single rhythm and was one of the main themes of Kakar’s discourse. In fact, as I went on reading, I thought that what I had considered as suggestions were probably the outcome of the transmission of the idea of life and of mankind in Hindu culture as he described it. I thought that maybe he wrote in constant contact with the natural environment and that that contact with the “open air” had somehow reached me.

And now some comments on the book *Psychoanalysis and Cultures*

Cultural psychology is an area where S. Kakar has developed many reflections. It is a rich research field capable of providing new ideas to today’s psychoanalysis with the aim of widening its theoretical scope and challenging its basic conceptions that were born in a modern Western cultural experience. The author’s intent in exploring this area derives from his early analytical training in Europe, far from his native land, in Frankfurt.

In describing his meetings with his analyst, a man with a different culture and language, Kakar compares this initiatory experience with the expectations of those who approach Indian gurus. The same hidden all-absorbing desire of being accepted and healed that he sees in his Western patients: the vital thrust indispensable to start the psychoanalytic process.

He highlights some basic cultural differences that determine the development of treatment and challenge some theoretical tenets of traditional psychoanalysis.

One difference concerns the importance of family ties. The patients’ families (even refined and cultured families) are often surprised when they learn that the psychoanalytic ideal consists in increasing the range of the patient’s choices rather than integrating him in his family (p. 23). In addition, many patients think that their emotional problems do not reside in the psyche but all disorders and conflicts are the products of a karma from a previous life (p. 79).

Another big difference concerns the body: in Indian culture, there is no difference between the body – a raw form of matter – and the mind, a subtler form. In Western culture, instead, the body is a fortress, enclosed and separate from what surrounds it and even scientific explorations intend to see what is inside an individual body, excluding the natural and meta-natural environment. The quality of the air, the sun, vegetation and animals are considered as irrelevant for the emotional and intellectual development of individuals. For Hindus, the body is deeply related with the cosmos and is in constant change, while the psyche is a subtler body. Communities include spirits and gods. Beings are part of a wider dynamic.

A part of the book is dedicated to the discussion of the Oedipal organizer that is an expression of Western mythology and culture that finds no analogy in Indian culture, where the mother’s power is central in the children’s internal world (p. 45). The main Indian narratives are centered on the power of maternal seduction. The father is not a rival, is located in the periphery, is distant and counters the threat of an oppressive mother. Parricide is never mentioned in Indian mythology just as any form of oedipal alliance is missing.

In his illustration of his theories with clinical material, S. Kakar suggests that the form of the maternal-feminine is more central for Indian patients as compared to patients who lived in a Western culture. From the clinical material presented we see the need to face an intense maternal seduction coupled with the terror of separation and the wish to destroy an intrusive mother accompanied by incestuous desire. Girindrashekhar Bose, the founder of Indian psychoanalysis, theorized that the wish to be a woman could be a solution to the disarray that would threaten to break the union of child and mother.

The role of caregiving female figures and the Indian polytheistic traditions, rich in maternal deities, form a base ground that is quite different from the one that affected Freud’s view of religion rooted in Judeo-Christian monotheism. I think that it is plausible that Freud’s resistance to Indian mysticism, evoked by Rolland’s “oceanic feeling”, and to India in general resided in the female question because he identified India with the maternal figures of the Indistinct and Primordial[[1]](#footnote-1). Freud himself expressed his view of India in his letter to Romain Rolland of January 19, 1930 with explicit reference to his character, when he wrote that under Rolland’s guidance he was trying to enter the Hindu jungle that had been kept at a distance by his Hellenic love for measure, his Jewish matter-of-factness, and his middle-class sensitivity in varying proportions.

Kakar describes how, when he was an engineering student, he read *The* *Future of an Illusion*, a book that proved essential for his own fight for freedom, for his wish to distance himself from Hindu fantasizing, so full of myths and wonders, for his approaching Marxist ideals and taking his first steps in the ideas of the West. Today, analyzing Freud’s book in a different phase of his life and putting on Hindu clothes, he distances himself from his early reading and sees the deep cultural, theological, and historical divide between his own and Freud’s ideas on beliefs and religion. He closes his reflections by saying that he still has faith in Freud’s ironic view of life, although he is less infatuated than he was as a young man.

Another author who studied Freud’s work on culture and religion is Fethi Benslama. Starting from a different perspective, he stresses how Freud’s writings on monotheism did not consider Islam because he attributed its foundation to a re-appropriation of the *Original Father* of Judaism. Benslama instead suggests that the genealogy of Islamic monotheism should be seen in the female area and sees the figure of Agar as central in the establishment of the new religion[[2]](#footnote-2). He suggests that female alterity led to the exclusion of women from the new religion and stresses that Agar, never mentioned in the Koran, is subversive in determining the origin of Islamic monotheism.

Kakar then discusses how an analyst can approach patients coming from cultures different from his own while avoiding that the patient adheres to the analyst’s culture and rejects the cultural part of the self from the therapeutic space. He thinks this can be done if the analyst is able to convey his “openness” that can be reached when one acknowledges his cultural assumptions and their relative basis in space and time. The therapist should be able to be curious without subtracting from analytic discipline. According to Kakar, the dynamic unconscious and the cultural unconscious are inextricably linked. In his opinion, the practice of psychoanalysis is not very different from hat of Indian classical music where a basic musical vocabulary can be shared even if each traditional method implies a different use of tonalities and melodies.

I think Kakar’s approach can be compared to that of Franco Fornari, an Italian analyst that saw psychoanalysis as a science that does not confine itself to exploring the structure of personality but can move to any human activity and give a contribution at social and political level. He thought that psychoanalysis was at the service of society, able to go beyond the analytical room and infuse the courage to face the unknown elements of psychoanalytical interventions in social and political institutions. In his book *The rediscovery of the soul*, Fornari reminds us that for psychoanalysis all knowledge is based on affects. He introduced the term soul in his psychoanalytical vocabulary in its meaning of a natural competence that does not vary and is common to all men and women. He hoped to reconstruct the hope of a support between nature and nurture and saw history as a space where each person is born with a thrust to live that transcends her and at the same time contains the products of the experience of civilization.

In the last chapter of his book, S. Kakar asks himself and the public if psychoanalysis can be a spiritual discipline, meaning by this the possibility to extend Freud’s language of drives to a sacred dimension where a person as a system of soma, psyche and polis can also be the place of a principle of unity that is manifested in the human propensity for altruism, compassion, sympathy. This principle of unity could be a worthy ally in the clinical area (p. 109). If I were asked, I would answer yes. I cannot say why, maybe because I was deeply moved in reading, but also because I think that in our analytical work we have the privilege of touching on an essential mystery that is not a secret nor a hieroglyph that we should interpret but rather a principle of brotherly sympathy and shared humility (Jankelevitch, 1949).

1. Livio Boni noticed that beyond the tone of sarcasm and condescension characterizing Freud’s relation to India, his archeologic collection, now in London, contained quite a few Indian pieces, and more than one Buddha. Rivista di Psicoanalisi, 2001,1 131-159 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Agar was the Egyptian servant of Sara, who offered her to her husband Abraham so that he could father a child with her to guarantee his lineage. When Agar became pregnant, she behaved insolently, so Sara threw her out with her son and had her abandoned in the desert. God had promised that Agar’s son would have generated a great nation and therefore Ismael is considered the noble forefather of the tribes of Arabia and Transjordan. At a very late age Sarah became pregnant and gave birth to Isaac. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)