On Culture and Psyche: The book

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Culture is not an abstract system of ideas but something that informs our activities and concerns of daily life while at the same time it guides us through the journey of life. How to behave toward superiors and subordinates in organizations, the kinds of food conducive to health and vitality, the web of duties and obligations in the family—all these are as much influenced by our culture as are ideas concerning the fulfilled life, proper relationship between the sexes, or one’s relationship to the Divine. Of course, for the individual, his/her cultural heritage may be modified or overlaid by the specific cultures of family, caste, class, or ethnic group. Individual mental life is the end product of a complex interaction between the individual's culture, family milieu and his or her own needs and desire-based fantasies.

We must remember that culture, as a fundamental way of viewing ourselves and the world we live in, is not a later substrate in the formation of the psyche but is present from the beginning of life. On deep, unconscious levels, culture and the psyche co-create each other. Their relationship is like yin-yang, each shaping the other. We know that this kind of relationship is even true neurobiologically.

 Take the example of Muller-Lyer illusion where lines of equal length give impressions of different length, an illusion, created by the orientation of the arrow caps placed at their ends.

This illusion is a consequence of our depth perspective shaped by the rectangular cues of buildings we live in. Children who grow up in round huts rarely experience the Muller-Lyer arrows as an illusion.

In other words, “ … our cultural environment in its everyday structures, practices and aesthetics shapes the way our brains process visual information. And, if this is true for neurobiological non-conscious visual processing, it seems almost certain it would be true for psychologically relevant conscious and unconscious processes.”

 For more than a century, the ‘terroir’ of psychoanalysis, to use my colleague Anurag Mishra’s term, has been and continues to be Western. It contains many Western cultural ideas and ideals that permeate psychotherapeutic theories and practice. Shared by analyst and patient alike, pervading the analytic space in which the two are functioning, fundamental ideas about human relationships, family, marriage, male and female and so on which are essentially cultural in origin often remain unexamined and are regarded as universally valid. (As has been said, if a fish was a scientist, the last discovery it would make would be of water. The analyst-patient dyad usually swims in this shared water)

Now, we know that every form of therapy is also an enculturation. As Fancher(1993) remarks: “By the questions we ask, the things we empathize with, the themes we pick for our comment, the ways we conduct ourselves toward the patient, the language we use—by all these and a host of other ways, we communicate to the patient our notions{Freudian, Jungian, Kleinian, Lacanian etc.} of what is ‘normal’ and normative. Our interpretations {Freudian, Jungian, Kleinian, Lacanian etc.} of the origins of a patient’s issues reveal in pure form our assumptions of what causes what, what is problematic about life, where the patient did not get what s/he needed, what should have been otherwise”(pp.89-90). As we know from the evidence of various kinds of modern psychotherapy and traditional healing, a cure or healing is certainly no evidence of the ‘truth’ of the theory and models which guides the therapist’s work.

In psychoanalysis, as a patient in throes of transference love, one becomes exquisitely attuned to the cues to one’s analyst’s values, beliefs and vision of the fulfilled life, which even the most non-intrusive of analysts cannot help but scatter during the therapeutic process. The analysand is quick to pick up the cues that unconsciously shape her reactions and responses accordingly, with their overriding goal to please and be pleasing in the eyes of the beloved analyst. The analysand’s need to be ‘understood’ by the analyst gives birth to an unconscious force that make her underplay those cultural parts of her self which she believes would be too foreign to the analyst’s experience. In the transference-love, what is sought is closeness to the analyst, including the sharing of his/her culturally shaped interests, attitudes and beliefs. This intense need to be close and to be understood, is paradoxically fulfilled by removing parts of the self from the analytic arena of understanding.

Here let me take only one example of the fundamental role of culture in shaping the psyche and the questions it raises for psychoanalytic theory and practice: the emphasis in Hindu-Indian culture on **connectedness.**

The Indian emphasis on connectedness is reflected in the Indian image of the body, a core element in the development of the mind. For Ayurveda, one of the chief architects of the Indian image of the human body, the body is intimately connected with nature and the cosmos, and there is nothing in nature without relevance for medicine. Look at some of the statements in the Carakasamihta, the foundational text of Ayurveda.

‘The power of digestion is weakened during the rainy season due to gas coming out of earth, increase of acidity of water, rainfall.’

‘Strength of sun’s rays and moonlight are different in different seasons and have different effects on the body.’

‘Marshy lands are dominated by quality of heaviness so it is recommended that their inhabitants eat meat of animals of arid climate, honey etc which have qualities of lightness.’

‘If a patient suffering from *vata roga* is staying in desert or one suffering from *kapha* resides in marshy land, it will be difficult to cure him.’

The Indian body image, then, stresses an unremitting interchange taking place with the environment, simultaneously accompanied by a ceaseless change within the body. Moreover, in the Indian view, there is no essential difference between body and mind. The body is merely the gross form of matter (*sthulasharira*), just as the mind is a more subtle form of the same matter (*sukshmasharira*); both are different forms of the same body-mind matter—*sharira*.

In contrast, the Western image is of a clearly etched body, sharply differentiated from the rest of the objects in the universe. This vision of the body as a safe stronghold with a limited number of drawbridges that maintain a tenuous contact with the outside world has its own consequences. It seems that in Western discourse, both scientific and artistic, there is considerable preoccupation with what is going on ***within***the fortress of the individual body. Pre-eminently, one seeks to explain behavior through psychologies that derive from biology, to the relative exclusion of the environment. The contemporary search for a genetic basis to all psychological phenomena, irrespective of its valuable gains in our understanding, is thus a logical consequence of the Western body image. The natural aspects of the environment—the quality of air, the quantity of sunlight, the presence of birds and animals, the plants and the trees—are a priori viewed, when they are considered at all, as irrelevant to intellectual and emotional development. I sometimes wonder whether the absence of environment in western case histories or theorizing has also to do with the setting of psychoanalysis, its origins in a cold country where the therapist and the patient needed to be enclosed in a warm room and where the older models, of the confessional, also required a closed space. If psychoanalysis had originated in India, I wonder if it would not have followed the traditional the guru-disciple model, where their interaction takes place in the open, under the shade of a tree.

Staying with the body, let me also note how culture even influences its gendered representation; that is, how culture organizes a basic differentiation we first make as infants, the differentiation between the sexes and the profound realization that all human beings are either male or female. This differentiation may be universal but it is our cultural heritage that further elaborates what it means to be, look, think and behave like a man or woman. This becomes clear if one thinks of Greek and Roman sculpture, which has so greatly influenced Western gender representation. Here, male gods are represented by hard muscled bodies and chests without any fat at all. One only needs to compare them with the sculpted representations of Hindu gods or the Buddha where the bodies are softer, suppler and, in their hint of breasts, nearer to the female form. This minimizing of difference between male and female representations finds its culmination in *ardhanarishvara*, the half-man and half-woman form of the great god Shiva who is portrayed with the secondary sexual characteristics of both sexes. We often tend to forget that between a minimum of sexual differentiation that is required to function heterosexually with a modicum of pleasure, and a maximum which cuts off any sense of empathy and emotional contact with the other sex which is then experienced as a different species altogether, there is a whole range of positions, each occupied by a culture which insists on calling it the only one that is mature and healthy.

Connectedness also points to another direction in unraveling the mystery of consciousness, the holy grail of both biology and psychology. In the current high status enjoyed by neurosciences, consciousness is believed to be an epiphenomenon of the brain, arising from processes that are taking place in an encapsulated brain. In the Indian view, the brain will not be not seen as the **originator** of consciousness but as a filter through which an all pervasive consciousness passes to become a personal consciousness. The universal consciousness takes on the qualities of the individual filter to become a personal consciousness although it is possible for spiritual adepts, artists and even others to occasionally bypass the filter and connect with the original, pure consciousness.

From the body, let me come to the ways connectedness leads to the conceptions of the person and the nature of human relationships that differ from the dominant Western view. In contrast to modern West, the Indian view of the self is not that of a bounded, unique individuality. The Indian person is not a self-contained center of awareness interacting with other, similar such individuals. Instead, in the dominant image of the culture, the self is *constituted* of relationships. An Indian is not a monad but derives his personal nature interpersonally. All affects, needs and motives are relational and his distresses are disorders of relationships—not only with his human but also with his natural and cosmic orders.

Corresponding to the cultural image of the body, the Indian person, too, thus tends to experience himself as more of a changing being whose personal psychological nature is not constituted of a stable but a more fluid “sense of identity” that is constantly formed and reformed by his interactions with the environment. The Indian person’s boundaries—between *soma* and *natura*, between self and others, between body and mind— also tend to be less clearly demarcated.

It is not only the body but also the emotions that have come to be differently viewed due to the Indian emphasis on connection. As cultural psychologists, such as Rick Shweder and Hazel Marcus have pointed out, in India emotions that have to do with other persons, such as sympathy, feelings of interpersonal communion, and shame, are primary while the more individualistic emotions, such as anger and guilt, are secondary. The Indian psyche has a harder time experiencing and expressing anger and guilt but is more comfortable than the Western individualistic psyche in dealing with feelings of sympathy and shame.[[1]](#endnote-1) If pride is overtly expressed, it is often directed to a collective of which one is a member. Working very hard to win a promotion at work or admission to an elite educational institution is only secondarily connected to the individual need for achievement, which is posited to be the primary driving motivation in the West. The first conscious or pre-conscious thought in the Indian mind is “How happy and proud my family will be!”

The greater connective or relational orientation is also congruent with the main thematic content of Indian art. In traditional Indian painting, and especially in temple sculptures, for instance, man is represented not as a discrete presence but as intimately linked to his surroundings, existing in all his myriad connections. These sculptures, as the German writer Thomas Mann observed, are an “all encompassing labyrinth flux of animal, human and divine … visions of life in the flesh, all jumbled together … suffering and enjoying in a thousand shapes, teeming, devouring, turning into one another.”[[2]](#endnote-2) A human being, even god Krishna, although at the centre of an Indian miniature paiting, is not central to it. Trees, flowering bushes, cows, peacocks, low hills, other human figures are all important parts of the painting and seem to be connected to the central figure.

The Indian emphasis on connectedness will also push us to reflect on the goals of psychoanalysis. The goal of psychoanalysis, as I understand it, is to lead to an outcome where the person, through an increased self understanding by making the unconscious conscious, attains a freedom to love, work and play, free from inhibitions her mind has gathered over the life cycle, especially from the childhood years. From the Indian view, which emphasizes that each one of us is deeply embedded with other human beings as also connected to animate and inanimate nature, an embeddedness that demands a caring for all that is not self for our own health and happiness, this may not be a sufficient goal. From this vantage point, we would need to view psychoanalysis as a transforming quest for self-knowledge that not only frees us from internal inhibitions but extends the range of our caring. A successful analysis would then be one that leads to self-understanding and growth of a wisdom that enriches our life with meaning and motivates us to act beyond our narrow interests. It will not be content with reaching the Freudian ideal of the autonomous individual but view it as a stepping stone to the **caring** individual.

Let me add that I am not advancing any simplified dichotomy between Western cultural image of an individual, autonomous self and a relational, transpersonal self of Indian culture. Both visions of human experience are present in all the major cultures though a particular culture may, over a length of time, highlight and emphasize one at the expense of the other. What the advent of Enlightenment in the West has pushed to the background for the last couple of hundred years is still the dominant value of Indian identity, namely that the greatest source of human strength lies in a harmonious integration with the family and the group. This widespread consensus asserts that belonging to a community is the fundamental need of man. Only if man truly belongs to such a community, naturally and unselfconsciously, can he enter the river of life and lead a full, creative and spontaneous life.

My own project of ‘translation’ in the last forty years of work with Indian and Western patients has thus been guided by a view of the psyche wherein the individual, dynamic unconscious and the cultural unconscious are inextricably intertwined, each enriching, constraining and shaping the other as they jointly evolve through life. The unconscious exists only when it is expressed through culture. In other words, to keep constantly in mind that the translation of psychoanalysis in a non-Western culture must give equal value to both the languages, of psychoanalysis and of the culture in which psychoanalysis is being received.

For me, it became important to constantly remain aware of the cultural context in clinical work and in my writings but without sinking into traditionalism and becoming the apologist of tradition. On the other hand, because of the presence of many western cultural assumptions in psychoanalysis, as indeed they are in most social sciences, I also needed to critically look at psychoanalytic concepts without junking a discipline which has considerable explanatory power, not to speak of its individual and social emancipatory potential. Even as I question much of psychoanalytic superstructure, I continue to stand on its foundations and subscribe to its basic assumptions: the importance of the unconscious part of the mind in our thought and actions, the vital significance of early childhood experiences for later life, the importance of Eros in human motivation, the dynamic interplay, including conflict, between the conscious and unconscious parts of the mind, and the vital import of transference and counter-transference in the therapist and patient relationship. All the rest is up for grabs and just as we have begun to talk of modernity in the plural, of different modernities, perhaps we will soon be talking of Japanese, French, Chinese, Argentinian and Indian psychoanalyses. Instead of only operating through the history of psychoanalysis with the ideas of many heroes of this history, from Freud to Bion, I hope the next impetus to our theoretically stagnating discipline will come from what Lorena Preta has called the ‘geographies of psychoanalysis.’ This book, I hope, is a small step in that direction.

1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)