

## CROSSING BORDERS. PERSONA, MASK...WHO AM I?

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Broadly speaking, crossing borders often refers to passing through geographical borders. Sociologists tend to think differently in terms of religious, ethnic, socio-economic, and political factors, among others; whereas psychoanalysts know that 'the' frontier has been already crossed straight to one's own shadow zone. They are aware that being always ready to overcome obstacles cannot be avoided, that conquering the resistances that pose as opposition, barriers, limits, or traps often faced is inescapable, whether during one's inner journey or that carried out by patients who are willing to go through this risk with them.

And yet, poets, artists, musicians, dancers, painters, choreographers, and filmmakers are all capable of crossing such borders as they are not encumbered by their persona, not intrinsically attached to their mask, nor feeling that they shall remain chained to their social self. In fact, their unconscious is ready to be open, in an alert state. This allows them to express themselves and their creativity through various universal mediators that are available to them. Artist and creator's freedom is unique and incomparable.

Winnicott (1960) evokes and develops the concepts of false and true self. In the best-case scenarios, the false self can be a kind of social concealing self, protecting but not hiding or repressing the true self. When a person's false self is heavily loaded, opaque, or submitted to trendy images, it leads one to wonder whether it can feature some transparency for reflecting an individual's true self. For instance, feminine models often set a cliché stereotype through media and social platforms, namely through promoting the ideas of eternal youth, body shapes, and dress codes that often become fashion standards, thus concealing and hindering women's original and personalized expression of the feminine appearance.

This said, veils and burqas serve as an example of uniforms. Yet, fashion and display forms often impose restrictions.

### **Are analysts really protected by the frame-setting?**

In terms of analytic practice, we often find ourselves, as of the moment upon which we accept scheduling a first appointment made through direct requests or referrals, committed, even throughout the course of one session, in a relationship whose beginning, course, and end are unknown. We may have gained a sufficient understanding of the relevant theoretical knowledge, armed with experience and good will. However, every first appointment with a patient remains a ready-to-open Pandora's box, an unpredictable adventure yet to discover.

In this respect, I will share the adventure of a unique session I have engaged in. Given its intensity and the rapid crossing journeys gone through by the patient, myself, and the framework, it seemed that this analytical experience required major efforts and availability. In fact, it served as an example illustrating what personas and masks can hide, and paradoxically at the same time,

allow to reveal, a heavy content of inner conflicts, avatars, failures, and distortions imposing themselves on the feminine personality and psychic bisexuality, and the desperate attempt to cross boundaries (Freud 1905d).

The doorbell rings. I startled, although I was notified of the appointment taken by a woman via WhatsApp, where she asked to see me urgently. She was referred by one of my well-known acquaintances, a journalist who works for a TV channel on which I participated in many interviews on mental health and parental guidance. All female journalists working for this channel were veiled, and I was asked to wear a scarf to cover my neck and shoulders, should I have been wearing a sleeveless dress. The TV crew were all very respectful of me, although well aware that I did not necessarily share their viewpoints.

However, upon arriving in the neighbourhood where the TV channel premises were located, I always had the impression that I was entering into a world that was not even remotely connected with the rest of the city, whether in terms of the street odours, the cars and motorcycles movement, sounds, colours, and even clothing... It always seemed to me that the world I was entering was one where masculine domination was widespread and concealing a discreet, almost secret, feminine presence. It always gave me the impression that I was crossing borders, blindly trusting the driver entrusted with picking me up from the location where I had my car parked, to destination.

The studio was located in the basement. Hence, arriving there instantaneously turned me into Jules Verne, discovering what is hidden beneath the surface while being led by my guide through mazes.

Recalling this may lead one to wonder: Why do I even accept going on such adventures which had a dangerous aspect since, three days after I participated in a TV show broadcasted through this channel, their premises were bombed?

Significant childhood memories would offer a better insight. When I was three years old, I held the hand of my cousin who was two years older than me and took him to explore the fields located beyond the village where our families were spending summer vacation. I was closely followed by a sister's birth, and this pushed me out of the space I had remaining.

During the civil war, my family and I moved eleven times across four countries and even locally, where we had to cross a border to escape to a safer region or on our way to the airport, passing through battlefields or snipers' ranges... Yet, those years were not all about facing dangers, they also had a silver lining. It was then that I received a scholarship from the French embassy for pursuing my post-graduate education in Paris. It was then that I grasped the opportunity to undergo specialized analytic training. And in Paris, I was not alone, as members of my family were already there, including my mother who was a naturalized French citizen, perquisite of my father who, at the time, was working for the French, as a military man and a translator. In addition to Greek and Latin, my father knew three other languages. He was capable of crossing linguistic borders! This said, is such intergenerational transmission reflected through our desires and passions? And what does it exactly transmit to us: a better empathy, flexibility, or tolerance? On another hand, escaping or changing our place of residence, our environment, and culture to

which we are exposed, shake our habits and enhance our ability to welcome the other's differences and alterity.

Now, back to our appointment. The profile photo on WhatsApp featured a verse from the religious book of the person who contacted me.

In fact, where I live, having a conversation, rather an insightful exploration through phones, is always better before agreeing to an appointment. Listening helps me identify whether a psychosis has been left untreated and provides me, as a preventive measure, with information on how the patient has been led to me.

On the phone, the patient's voice was not really gendered, it sounded asexual; it could have been a man's voice.

The doorbell rang ceaselessly. I looked through the peephole where I could see two long silhouettes standing, one wearing all black and the other fully dressed in white. I was expecting a woman. I hesitated for a moment before opening the door. Back then, the cleaning lady was in the kitchen. I asked her to remain alert, should I call her to warn a neighbour of a danger I might be in. For some reason, I was scared out of my wits and needed a third party to rescue me if necessary. This was all irrational and yet, perhaps it was not. The city has been quite eventful lately: tensions were escalating, assassinations were here and there, explosions were happening right on the streets and in crowded neighbourhoods. The environment was quite paranoiac and I, myself, was immersed therein.

I had no choice but to open the door. The couple introduced themselves: A sheik and his wife. Being aware of customs and traditions, I did not shake the sheik's hand. His wife was entirely covered with black. Only her eyes were showing. Yet, even those were covered with glasses. She was wearing men's shoes, and her hands were covered with black gloves.

In fact, burqas were not that common in my country. They were only worn by some tourists.

### **Psychoanalysts are often confronted with an unusual situation, a situation with which they are unfamiliar**

Upon confirming that the consultation was for the woman and not for the couple, I admitted her into my office while her husband waited in the reception area.

Zeina began expressing her suffering, starting with the present then visiting her past where she describes herself as a child who was martyred by her brothers. Her family treated her as Cinderella and addressed her aggressively and disrespectfully. She was born in a neighbouring country, to a large family where she always felt different. This made me think of the 'Ugly Duckling'. I realized I was connecting her situation to tales and stories I read as a child. Was it an attempt to connect with her? To translate her situation? Or to dampen emotional overwhelm?

Her words were choked by the thick fabric covering her face. They were barely passing through this veil, serving as a filter for their ferocity, although the hatred for family and the world were often expressed through resorting to raw and violent terms.

I listened, without having the possibility of intervening, to her flow of anger, envy, hatred, doubt, and rage, and I could not help myself but think of her husband: I wondered how he was able to take all these negative feelings and keep his composure, even maintain his calmness. It was as if he was coming straight out of another world: he was tall, white, thin, blue-eyed, and resembling Nordics. He was different. The only thing she found to complain about when it came to him was his sexual demands. She was reluctant about sexual intimacy with him, yet she felt forced to oblige.

In fact, based on a call made by a cousin, this man crossed the borders, along with his family, to propose to his now-wife. They got married a few weeks later, although they barely had the time to get acquainted before marriage. In some conservative areas of the region, it remains common for man to ask woman for marriage without getting to know her. And it is for the males of the family, whether father or older brothers, to decide for women.

I had mixed feelings during the appointment. At times, I felt sorry, kind of empathy, for all the injustice this woman has gone through. At others, I felt unease, annoyed, and even angry, especially when she attempted to block the only visible part of her face, being her eyes hiding behind the glasses, through lowering the veil covering her head and raising the lower veil as to hide the already barely visible area that gave me access to her gaze and expression.

**The psychoanalyst is often confronted by the mystery that is other's desire, often facing the obstacle of reading it during the session, even if the verb is proliferating: The burqa is the metaphor**

Was Zeina viewing me as an aggressor who intends to penetrate her body's space? On another hand, I could not refrain, against all evidence, during the entire session, from asking myself whether she was a man or a woman: she was tall, thin, all covered in black and standing just like the trunk of a palm tree.

While listening to her, memories were flashing in my head: my last meeting with my paternal aunt, which made me think of André Green (2012): the analytic situation can be seen as a return to oneself through the similar other, and I might even add 'to that of strangers' too. The 'associativity' would then play out between otherness and sameness.

I often had terrifying encounters with this aunt. She was always wearing a long black dress which made it look as if she was mourning endlessly. Tall, thin, in a straight posture, she was always capable of petrifying her interlocutor through her sharp tongue, ironic attacks, and accusations. She was a self-proclaimed dictator, granting herself unlimited power, and supported by her four sons, obedient soldiers.

And yet, these cousins, much older than me, all of them colossi, have awakened within me at an early age, a perplexing fascination for men. They were all handsome, yet guarded by this ruthless castrator who established herself as the guardian of women's virtue. The youngest among them, who had offered to comfort me in the aftermath of a particularly painful scene, was not spared her wrath.

Was it then a woman wearing a burqa or my aunt who had returned to haunt me in this office that now looks quite tight to fit both of us? What was it that was making me so powerless and terrorized, reminding me of my teenage years, where I found myself having to represent my family, upon the death of my father, for addressing inheritance matters? She was practically yelling at me: ‘Do you think you are a man?’ She was reminding me that I was, only, a “female” unable to face her who proclaimed herself as the man of the family, supported by five male subjects whose power has been reduced into a collateral position.

The surprise at the end of the session came after an attack against the frame, made under the aegis of the good cause. Zeina’s cell phone alarm went off, stopping the flow of her speech. ‘It’s time to pray’, she said. As astounded as I was, she announced that she was going to accomplish her duty, got up, turned towards Mecca, and discreetly recited her prayer.

This was unexpected. My office was turning into another place. I left it and closed the door behind me. I walked past the reception area where her husband was also praying. For a moment there, I felt like a stranger in his own place, yet I did not let these moments of astonishment last long. I walked straight back into my office where I resumed listening to the speech of hatred and guilt before announcing that only five minutes were left of the session. She stood up, looked me in the eye, intensely excited and enraged, and just like someone who is taken by the dream of an imminent revenge, said: ‘I asked God to grant me another life upon my death, a life where I will be a man, so I can “fuck” all women.’

Zeina chose a stranger to her, to her country, and even to her socio-cultural environment, to express her anger and hatred. She confided in me to express a burning desire and the failure that she is for being born a woman, her dream of a paradise where she would be man, a paradise she would enjoy and endlessly allow all the women of the universe to feel a sense of pleasure, and enjoy an endless orgasm, the heavenly one that she was unable to reach with a man (Lacan 1993). She wants the paradise of pleasure promised to men, her brothers, her father, and her husband.

Zeina crossed the limits and barriers of language. She crossed the borders that were restricting her to a situation she never accepted, that of a woman who is subject to traditions, who is enslaved to a social structure that is resistant to transformation, change, self-discovering, and self-expression.

She overcame the socio-cultural hindering wall upon which her desire was stumbling. However, would have she dared to express her thoughts should the analyst be a member of her community? Choosing a therapist from the same community means risking being subject to prejudices related to the desire of exploring oneself and understanding predetermined factors which, in fact, are decided by God and accepted by believers. It means attacking and criticizing one’s parents, which is already forbidden by the Religious Book, whereby they shall be respected, regardless of who they are.

I have tackled this topic and elaborated upon this clinical vignette because it reflects crossing limits on one hand and on the other, the avatars of the development of a blossoming feminine, an idea often rejected by the archaic social consensus. The evolution of affect and desire finds itself

hindered as of the very beginning of such a process. This leaves such evolution to the only freedom possible: fantasy, which women live in the greatest secrecy.

Dare I even ask, doesn't this apply to homophobia and racism in hostile and repressive families and some social enclaves?

In fact, when the woman-mother assumes her destiny upon considering the respect and dignity of her femininity, rather than being an object of satisfaction whose role is only limited to offering services, regardless of their type, she would not end up hating her biological gender nor that of her daughter, nor would she consider her sons as a substitute to mend her organic cavities and psychic gaps, through fantasy of phallic redemption and power.

Hence, 'penis envy' would be deactivated or reduced, to say the least (Birksted-Breen 1996). However, when society is devoted to hegemonic masculinity often associated with the affirmation of virility, deconstructing gender polarities becomes almost impossible, and the entanglement of bisexuality turns into a hard task, a disaster even.

As a matter of fact, the case of Zeina is a proper illustration of Freud's affirmation: The rejection of femininity often arises for the woman as 'penis envy'. Whereas such a concept is associated with the oedipal register, thus to men, fathers, and male offspring, such envy becomes a desire of the penis (Lacan 1966a). Whereby both genders agree on refusal of the feminine when assimilated to the danger of passivity.

This desire of appropriating the male attribute, when exacerbated and pushed to its extreme, would lead to the failure of the feminine being among women. Finding herself neither a transsexual, nor homosexual, nor even woman, Zeina is then reduced to a negative version of her sexual being, failure of her bisexuality's conjugation. While her husband seems to be in peace and harmony with himself, his masculine being.

Hence, Zeina, first a victim of her childhood, was not able to intricate her inner destructivity. Rather, she takes her revenge by chastising her husband by her frigidity and the hatred of the "real" penis, while simultaneously dreaming of appropriating it.

After having vomited her anger, she prays, perhaps in an attempt to be forgiven, before further diving into her identity paradox, thus transforming her defeat into victory, with the help of God who will grant her what her mother, who brought boys to the world, has deprived her of.

It is worthy to note that countertransference and the analyst transference dispositions assume an essential role in this respect (Khoury 2018).

However, in examining countertransference, shall we refer to Freud or Ferenczi? Shall we become aware of it and get rid of it, thus become more neutral, or shall we feel it, live it, experience it, and invest it within the analytical field, as a spur to our listening and a guide to our interventions and positioning?

Acknowledging one's anger, rejection, annoyance, and curiosity, even tolerating these emergencies without, however, blaming oneself, and abiding by strict, yet absurd benevolent neutrality is essential for ensuring the authenticity of our intervention.

Furthermore, the process requires clearing one's mind of their own prejudice, being aware of the links with one's history, letting oneself be guided by what emerges from one's unconscious mind. The result surely is satisfying, as it translates into a conquest of oneself and opportunity for growth and crossing one's limits, thus fostering fluidity and creativity.

**It is not about preventing oneself from being overwhelmed by strong emotions as a result of the patient's experience. Rather, it is about processing such emotions, thus representing processable affects**

Strangers and psychotics often cause the therapist to find himself in the same situation where he is forced to explore his own archaic enclaves, his 'black holes', and his powerlessness.

They often shake his narcissistic roots, even expanding to his psychic integrity, his 'psychic home' (Kennedy 2014). They push him to his limits and pierce the protective layers with which he envelops himself.

It seems that the psychoanalyst's ego and his psychic apparatus, proceed to cleavage, when working with a patient of a different 'culture'.

On one hand, the transitional space is engaged in the process, as it is created between the 'outer' and 'inner' environments, the other and the sameness. Moreover, creativity and curiosity are often engaged as well through discovering the culture of the other in their diverse sublimatory productions, including art, literature, cooking, dance, and music, among others. On another hand, the 'adaptive' ego, as defined by American ego psychology, is threatened by its inability to seize, apply, and integrate codes and norms, including linguistic, beliefs, and lifestyle criteria.

That is why being cautious and prudent in the context of our intervention should be of utmost importance, along with considering subjecting the individual to what I call the collective body, when having an intransigent superego, as it is often compliant with non-negotiable life rules and beliefs that are reinforced by the familial culture.

As a matter of fact, to leave one's collective body, to think differently, to dress differently, is to betray it, to expose oneself to guilt, even to shame, and in any case to the fear of being condemned by the community, left alone in a world that is strange to the individual, a bosom that has not nourished and carried the subject, and whose codes he has not tamed. The West, upon completing its conquest of individuality and subjectivity, in accordance with secular laws that feature no religious aspects, no longer accepts these codes and beliefs, and no longer accepts returning to a time when kings' powers represented non-negotiable divine wills.

Toward this end, we must refrain from considering our tool, psychoanalysis, as used for liberating individuals from their socio-cultural chains but rather, from their internal prisons, whereby the transformation of internal objects from threatening persecutors to tolerant and negotiable objects of love, is in itself a success of the intervention (Lacan 1966b).

Furthermore, establishing alignment and rhythm with the patients and accompanying them step by step, carefully and respectfully, is based upon the good conjugation of the analyst's psychic bisexuality. Hence, his containment and interventions play at the double maternal and paternal register, thus helping individuals to mend wide rifts and addressing unhealthy projections.

In short, a good entanglement, in the analyst psychic, of life and death drives, and supporting such a process with tolerant and negotiable internal objects, enables him to hold out (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973).

It is obvious that Zeina could have visited another colleague of her same community, yet she has knowingly chosen me. However, should she have engaged in a session with another colleague, one who's immersed and familiarized with her community, would she then have been able to express her suffering as a little girl among her family? As an unhappy wife of a Sheikh boasting a good reputation and enjoying, to some extent, the respect of the environment they live in? Would she be able to let out her cry of rage and desire, just like she did at the end of our session? Would she be able to say: In another life, I want to be a man?!

### **Conclusion**

The abilities of the analyst lie upon experiencing their internal migrations, their psychic mobility, as allowed by a good Eros/Thanatos coupling, a good masculine/feminine or maternal/paternal coupling and containment. This will contribute to the creation of an environment where transitional spaces can be established and blossom, thus liberating and engaging psychic creativity in the way of the possible. However, the hardest task remains facilitating the passage of the patient from an archaic, non-negotiable superego to an oedipal superego, that can certainly be exposed to the risk of being dimmed, but that most surely refers to a third party that extends beyond biological parents and religious or political icons.

Experiencing their conflicts related to the omnipresent family path and leading his own journey, unveiling his desires, and anchoring their milestones at the levels of new objects he can identify with, the individual can select his own developmental path. It means risking making a radical change in terms of the originally idealized objects.

The aforementioned, however, begs the question, how many youngsters will be able to engage in adequate and suitable projects while ensuring their constant development through feeding on the already familiar maternal environment and nurturing?

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