

# The Other language: A few psychoanalytic thoughts about migration, the loss of culture and language

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Quote from Khalil Gibran : The Other Language

“Three days after I was born, as I lay in my silken cradle, gazing with astonished dismay on the new world round about me, my mother spoke to the wet-nurse saying, ” How does my child? “

And the wet-nurse answered, “he does well Madame, I have fed him three times and never before have I seen a babe so young yet so gay”

And I was indignant, and I cried, “ It is not true mother, for my bed is hard, and the milk I have sucked is bitter to my mouth, and the odor of the breast is foul in my nostrils, and I am most miserable.”

But my mother did not understand, nor did the nurse, for the language I spoke was from that world from which I came.”

One of the important aspects of migration whether intended for economic reasons or forced by war and persecution is that the migrant is leaving a familiar and integrated cultural space and is moving into a new one with what it entails of loss, mourning and re- adaptation. The migrant is being displaced suddenly and often violently. I worked years ago in an NGO in Istanbul that welcomed migrants from Iraq, Syria, Ethiopia, Somalia, Darfur and other Middle Eastern countries. Most were fleeing war or persecution because of their political opinions and sexual preferences. They would come to the migration center in Istanbul and wait for months and sometimes years to be registered and offered political asylum abroad. I am a Lebanese psychoanalyst with a Palestinian mother and living and working presently in Turkey. My family and I were subjected to violence of war and exile. I had to deal with my own trauma of exile and migration and bear the trans generational trauma of my mother s history of exile, humiliation and loss. This was a very difficult paper to write as it brought back in après coup many unresolved and painful thoughts especially at a time when Turkey is going through violent events and repression. The possibility of migrating again started haunting me in a compulsive repetition and reenactment of family trauma. One of the aspects that I found very interesting working with migrants in the Center was linked to my nationality and our common language and common history of exile and loss. I found that most refugees wanted to work with me as I was the only one at the time who could speak Arabic. They often said that my voice reminded them of their mother and their homeland. D.Anzieu<sup>[1]</sup> writes about the melody bath (the voice of the mother, her songs) is the first resonant mirror that helps the infant build a self image.

*The war migrant:*

The war migrant does not leave by choice but by force. It’s an expulsion that puts the migrant outside of himself, and alienates him. This is the kind of migrant that I am considering here in my paper.

When the migrant or refugee leaves his country of origin, he also leaves behind a world of tradition and a cultural space without preparation for a future life. Integration into a new reality becomes very difficult because there is nothing seductive in that migration unlike the migrant who leaves for a better

life or economic reasons. So the mourning of the country and language of origin becomes almost impossible, complicated and pathological.

We know from psychoanalytic theory and thinking that any loss is going to retrigger older losses and some primary ones from the beginning of life, namely the loss of the first love object.

The migrant will find himself in a very regressive position, with a narcissistic wound because of loss of identity, job, status and because of having to rely on an NGO for food and survival. This will reenact unconsciously the traumas of the infant dependent on mother for food and shelter.

When the migrant leaves because of violence and war, he will often find himself in a paranoid schizoid position and will have to cope with finding tools to survive. Displacement often induces a traumatic split of the Ego. There will often be a break up of the family structure as mother becomes depressed and fathers castrated so the child often becomes the translator or the “containing parent” blurring and confusing the notion of the difference of generations.

For most war refugees Turkey is a transitional zone not the final destination. It's the “in between”. I often heard migrants describing the feeling of hanging “in between” in a vacuum, “lost in translation”. This “in between “ is a non creative transitional place in which meaning is frozen.

Many patients at the center sank into deep depression or psychosis with acute paranoia and psychosomatic illnesses especially those who were tortured and raped. War traumas are very hard to represent and symbolize. Sometimes the migrant will replace his previous symbolizing capacity with somatic symbolization. The body will attempt to make sense when the psyche is unable to, leading to many psychosomatic illnesses.

In addition, most migrants had to deal with the guilt of leaving and abandoning others behind. The loss of their native country was similar to a very traumatic internal object loss and that often reactivated feelings of ‘unnamed terror’ as described by Bion[2]. As they lost their physical but also psychic container, most would live with the fear of annihilation and disintegration.

One of the dangers of migration is the dissolution of identity and the loss of boundaries in an uncanny world. In *L'etranger* of Albert Camus, the migrant appears to be a non human, a non being, suffering from isolation and alienation.

What happens with the external objects also happens with the internal objects. The exposure to a foreign culture and the “other” is also an exposure to an internal “other”. The contact with a new culture is also a confrontation with the archaic and primitive fantasies on which each culture is constructed.[3]

In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Viola the migrant, shipwrecked on the coast of Ilyria asks” ..What country, friends, is this?...” And in turn, the potential host wonders who it is that is coming.

When the migrants are confronted with the “other, the “stranger” they can also resort to defense mechanisms which could be to abandon or deny our cultural identification in order to better integrate a new group and that in itself can result in a false self.

Psychic work is based on the subject belonging to a cultural group. Freud[4] calls it “die kulturarbeit”, the work of culture.

For J. Bleger,<sup>[5]</sup> culture contains and holds the psyche. It's a sort of a containing frame. Together with losing his culture of origin, the migrant is in danger of losing his language of origin or mother tongue that both had a containing and protecting function. When abandoning his language and culture of origin in order to learn the language of exile and integrate a new culture the migrant will often feel that he is abandoning his parental figures.

In this paper I would like to reflect about the loss of the language of origin or mother tongue and the problems of integrating a new language, the language of the country of exile.

The loss of language:

Lacan considered the psyche to be organized like a language. Language is an envelope, a structuring function of the psyche says Lacan. <sup>[6]</sup>The structuring function of language and culture allows the individual to think, elaborate and process. Language helps to build a transitional and conceptual space that will help the child to organize the world and his thoughts. With the loss of country and culture of origin, the migrant will also lose a transitional space and the capacity to play, create and be alone in the sense Winnicott described.<sup>[7]</sup>

The language of origin or mother tongue is also part of what constitutes the 'Ego Skin' in D. Anzieu's<sup>[8]</sup> meaning. It is the psychic envelop which protects but also repels overload of excitation and drive including the sexual drive but also the attachment drive.<sup>[9]</sup> The attachment drive allows a narcissistic foundation which will facilitate exchange with others. It carries the 'Alpha Function' properties (Bion)<sup>[10]</sup> and plays the role of a boundary between external and internal. The Alpha Function according to Bion is a function of the maternal but also the paternal. It will help the infant digest and process all the raw and aggressive thoughts, affects and senses that overwhelmed him at birth. The Ego Skin is also the interface and filter between the inside and the outside.

Longing for lost sensorial experiences:

Migration often induces the loss of multiple envelopes, space sound and smell. Those are sensorial experiences that help constitute the psychic functioning of an individual. For Winnicott, the relationship between mother and baby and mother's partner, together with the environment plays a crucial role in the holding of the baby. The Ego skin integrates the "holding" function and helps protect the baby against his primary drives. All this is in danger of falling apart when there is exile, migration and loss of external and internal frame. For the migrant, it results in the loss of interaction between container/contained, loss of the capacity for reverie and induces attacks on linking.

The language of origin has a structuring and containing function. It is infiltrated by primary fantasies, incestuous fantasies and fantasies of seduction and omnipotence.

It is the libidinal link to the mother and to lose it and learn another one which can carry the unconscious fear to break that maternal link. Culture is transmitted and introjected through language and the relationship with the mother. Language is a sort of sound envelop that carries mother's voice and her musicality.

In Lebanon, the country of origin is referred to as the country of milk and honey as if referring to mother's body.

The language of origin carries with it the superego and the forbidding rules of the parental couple. It is what organizes social order and it is the first instrument of transmission, translation, processing and

symbolizing.

For the migrant, acquiring the language of the country of exile could be to acquire a language without affects or with violent and aggressive ones as languages carry trans-generational traumas too.

Among my patients who are foreign nationals living in Turkey those who complained of not being able to learn and integrate the Turkish language came from countries occupied for years by the Ottoman Empire.

The work with migrants:

Finally, how can we as psychoanalysts work with migrants analytically? How can we help the un-representable become representable? When the external trauma is so overwhelming, how can one keep the link with the internal? Can such traumas be symbolized and translated? Of course we are all migrants in our internal worlds, we have all suffered loss of the love object, we have all been confronted with unnamed dread, fear of annihilation, separation anxiety and fear of disintegration. We have all faced the uncanny, the “other” and our “other” unwanted parts that we are unable to contain, and that we project on those who are different from us.

In my short experience of working with migrants I felt that I needed to be protected and contained by my own acquired language, my psychoanalytic language which has become part of my ego skin, in order to be able to better contain my own counter transference, my desperation and anger in front of the tragic destiny of a migrant.

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