

# Comparative Study of Persian Indigenous Therapeutic Ritual of “Yaar Araat Gerem” with Psychodrama

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## Abstract

Among the ethnic groups living in Kermanshah Province (Note 2), it is customary to perform a special therapy called (Yaar Arat Gerem) to treat individuals diagnosed with distress and neurosis, which is rooted in ancient indigenous traditions of the region. Effective techniques of this ritual are significantly similar to psychodrama. The supervisor of the group performing this procedure, called “Pary gir”, along with his assistants begins a therapeutic relationship with the patient, based on empathy and emphasizing on the present time. Through looking at the patient’s past and discussing his/her relationships with the important people in his/her life, “Pary gir” tries to understand his/her phenomenal world in order to start a proper treatment through finding the root causes of his/her present problems, and finally utilizes techniques that lead to his/her mental catharsis. In this paper, the researcher explains that psychodrama in its indigenous format, has been used therapeutically for centuries in Iran, through conducting a comparative study of this indigenous therapeutic ritual and modern psychodrama. The comparison highlights the necessity of recognition and revival of these types of indigenous therapeutic rituals, and emphasizes the necessity of their application in the treatment of psychological disorders.

**Keywords:** psychodrama, therapeutic ritual, indigenous psychotherapy, Persian psychodrama

## 1. Introduction

The connection between art and human psyche dates back to the depths of human life. Throughout history, humans have benefited from various forms of art to express their thoughts and feelings, and communicate effectively with each other. It seems that drama which is recognized as the “Mother of arts” and is the evolved form of rituals, myths and rites, has the most effective connection with the human psyche. Language of drama is the language of action and feeling, and creates a situation in which an individual is both actor and spectator. Consequently, it enhances “self-observation” and causes outflow of creativity, spontaneity, empathy and psychological catharsis (Edwards, 2004). In his book “Poetics”, Aristotle considers and names catharsis as the main therapeutic element of the drama, and this was the first deep bond of drama with the psychological science.

Introduction of psychodrama as a scientific therapeutic method is attributed to a Romanian-born psychiatrist and theorist, Jacob Louis Moreno. He began his career in Vienna in 1921 and then developed and expanded it in the United States. He named psychodrama the science of “Truth discovery”. Moreno believed that psychodrama can be used as a useful therapeutic method for the treatment of various mental disorders, even in psychosis and dementia (Blatner, 1996). In psychodrama, which is a dynamic and experimental treatment, the present time and “Here and Now” are greatly emphasized, even when the patient tells his/her past problems. In this therapeutic method, therapist investigates and recognizes the personality structure, interpersonal communications, inner contradictions and emotional problems of the patient, not just through dialogue but with “action” and “active observation”, which leads to the insight, personal growth and treatment of the patient (Chesner, 1994).

“Improvisation” is one of the important elements of psychodrama, in which cognitive analysis is connected to experimental and functional aspects. In practice, implementation of interpersonal interaction in an issue or problem, and involving the body and mind in the events as if they are taking place in the present time, transfer thoughts and feelings to the conscious level of the patient’s mind which is not possible in an ordinary dialogue

about the same problem. Nonverbal aspects, not only are effective in the quality, strength and depth of the relationship, but also provide clues of hidden inner motivations and attitudes. Moreno believed that people need to represent their problems and attitudes in practice, rather than just talking about them (Blatner, 1996).

Psychodrama is used to help self-recognition through stressful and traumatic experiences that may have occurred in the past or present or expected to occur in the future. The basic objective of psychodrama is to facilitate adaptive coping with life events (Blatner, 2007a). New research findings also acknowledge psychodrama as a highly useful treatment with great therapeutic efficacy for disorders like grief, death anxiety, alcoholism, drug abuse (Coleman, 2011; Hamamci, 2006), and a way to reduce anxiety and depression (Somov, 2008; Tomasulo, 2011; Hall, 1977).

Psychodrama is not only focused on the uncovering of inner and emotional conflicts, but also can be applied to develop and flourish the capabilities of individuals. The most important value of this creative approach is that it teaches the skills that are beyond the problem solving method. Using this method, many social and psychological problems which are raised as the result of the lack of skills in areas such as dialogue skills, self-recognition and interpersonal problem solving are resolved (Fogler, LeBlanc, & Rizzo, 1995).

Although psychodrama has its own concepts and a common root with psychotherapy; however, it must be borne in mind that it is not a unique school or idea. Rather, it can be considered as a kind of methodology that provides useful techniques to understand the human nature and human relationships (Blatner, 2000).

## 2. Elements of Psychodrama

1. Protagonist: an individual, around whom psychodrama event is formed to display his/her problems using various techniques and methods. He plays the main role (Holmes, Karp & Watson, 1994).
2. Director: An individual, who guides, coordinates and facilitates the meetings. He has three functions of producing, conducting the treatment and analyzing, and is responsible for all the acting processes (Kellermann, 1992).
3. Alter ego: An individual, who plays a role alongside the protagonist and director and helps the protagonist to review his/her problems during therapy sessions. Alter ego has the responsibility of playing the role of an important person in the life of the protagonist such as his/her spouse, mother, father, son or daughter, etc. or takes the role of another part of the protagonist's own existence (Blatner, 2000).
4. Audience or participants: people who are present during the implementation of psychodrama. These individuals may be members of the treatment group or protagonist's family members. Unlike the audience of a normal drama, with an active role they help the protagonist to recognize and identify his/her feelings (Holmes, Karp & Watson, 1994).

Psychodrama has many efficient techniques including: 1. Doubling, 2. Role reversal, 3. Mirror technique, 4. Sociometry, 5. Soliloquy, and 6. Hot seat.

In the present paper, the technique called "Doubling" is considered very important and therefore is emphasized. In this technique, alter ego appears in the role of a part of the inner entity of the protagonist (Blatner, 2007b). Discharge and outflow of emotions and contradictions of the protagonist is one of the fundamental objectives of psychodrama; and the use of Doubling technique is the most effective way to evoke these emotional conflicts (Moreno, Blomkvist, & Rützel, 2000).

The alter ego follows several purposes in the Doubling method:

1. Stimulating the protagonist to discharge his/her psychological experiences.
2. Establishing a supportive relationship with the protagonist.
3. Inducing effective tips or guidelines, which is the most important function of additional alter ego.

Doubling technique is known as the "heart of psychodrama" (Blatner, 1996). This technique which has significant therapeutic effects and is emphasized by a lot of psycho-dramatists around the world is rooted in indigenous and therapeutic rituals in ancient Iran. One of the most prominent indigenous and therapeutic rituals in Kermanshah Province which has many common features with doubling technique in modern and scientific psychodrama, is the ritual of "Yar Aarat Gerem".

Among the Kurdish ethnic groups living in Kermanshah, implementation of a special ceremony or procedure called "Yar Aarat Gerem" is customary which has an ancient history in the indigenous traditions of the region, and is used for treating a person suffering from distress and neurosis. The process of implementing this procedure is as follows:

Once the patient's close relatives refer to someone who is the director of performers of this type of therapy called "Pary gir", at first, Pary gir asks the patient's close relatives about his/her psychological history, including symptoms, time of onset, events coinciding with the onset of the disorder and the family history of the patient.

After consultation with his assistants about the patient's eligibility to perform the procedure, Pary gir makes the decision. Patient has the central role performing this therapeutic ritual and based on psychodrama literature is called the protagonist. If Pary gir recognizes that the implementation of this procedure is helpful for the treatment of the patient, he and his assistants observe and explore the patient for several days in a covert and subtle manner. Then Pary gir chooses several of his assistants in accordance with the patient's condition, and each is assigned a specific role, the most notable of which is the role of "alter ego". Members performing this procedure, especially the one who plays the role of alter ego should have an active presence until the end of the treatment and be committed to their role. This is a condition emphasized by Pary gir in the process of choosing the members performing the therapeutic ritual.

The role of alter ego is assigned to someone who pretends to be sick and imitates the patient's symptoms and behavior. This role in this ritual is very much similar to the role of "doubling alter ego" in scientific and modern psychodrama. Other members of the group are assigned with a role called "witness role". Members playing this role become active at the appropriate time and at the discretion of the Pary gir. They help the patient in understanding his/her inner feelings and thoughts. The role of "witness" is in accordance with the role of "audience" which is one of the principles of psychodrama. Pary gir guides performers of the procedure and the patient, which is the same as the "director" role in psychodrama.

This technique is performed as follows: the alter ego makes friendship with the patient in a non-suspicious and seemingly accidental manner, and then imitates his/her body movements and behaviors. Alter ego acts as the shadow of the patient, and tries to catch his/her attention and gradually gain his/her trust. After gaining the trust of the patient, alter ego speaks about distress, frustrations and emotional problems to the patient. He/she uses the present tense verbs in his/her discussions with the patient and focuses on their interpersonal relationship. This stage of the ritual has many similarities with the "warm up" stage in psychodrama. During consecutive days of meetings with the patient, alter ego continues to imitate the movements of the body, symptoms and behaviors of the patient and states a wide range of emotional problems and failures of communication on behalf of himself/herself.

In addition to paying attention to the patient's emotions and behaviors, alter ego empathizes with the patient and takes his/her place in order to understand the deeper emotions and condition of the patient. Through the method of "active empathy", alter ego tries to fully understand the phenomenal world of the patient and see the world through the eyes and mind of the patient, and in this way gradually and indirectly stimulates and encourages him/her to talk about his/her life and his/her past. Using the same method, alter ego also tries to identify conflicts, inner contradictions, traumatic frustrations and repressed emotions of the patient. The ability to "improvise" is very important in playing the role of alter ego, because with respect to the actions and behaviors of the patient, alter ego should have an appropriate response to avoid destroying the continuation of the relationship and pave the way for increased confidence.

After the confidence is established and the patient is stimulated by alter ego, he/she speaks about his/her problems, sorrows and emotions. At this point, alter ego tries to explore the patient's relations with the important people in his/her life from the past to the present in order to understand the deeper issues of the patient, and thereby the patient's defective and traumatic relations are understood and explored. In this method the primary focus is on the relationship between the alter ego and the patient, and then the near past relations of the patient, and his/her distant past, and childhood are studied. This procedure is an ancient and indigenous manifestation of "sociometry technique" in psychodrama, the invention and therapeutic application of which have been attributed to Moreno.

Another special way that is used by alter ego to discover the causes of the disorder and help discharges of the patient's emotions is "fire kindling". In this technique, the alter ego prepares various symbols or names of real and imaginary creatures and even relatives of the patient and writes them on the paper. Then kindles the fire and while reading the names or premade symbols, throws the papers in the fire one by one and burns them. The alter ego monitors the patient's responses and reactions. When the patient indicates a certain emotional response to a name or a special symbol, then alter ego speaks about him/her/it to the patient and tries to understand the root of the problem. This method is similar to the "action" stage in psychodrama which leads to the clarification of the problems and the root causes of the disorder. After examining the patient's past and identifying his/her root problems, conflicts and inner contradictions, in the next step of this procedure, alter ego, accompanied by his

assistants (the audience) and through dialogue and dramatic action, helps the patient to discharge his/her suppressed emotions and reach mental catharsis. Through investigation of the patient's interpersonal relationships and his/her traumatic relations, the audience group guided by Pary gir and through role playing, plays a drama displaying the patient's traumatic experience or relationships. One member of the group puts on the clothes of the traumatizing individual or creature and approaches the alter ego. At that moment, the alter ego begins to discharge his/her emotions to concussive individual or creature and creates a situation for stimulating the patient's conflicts and unconscious content of his/her mind, and a situation is provided for the patient to achieve mental catharsis and insight in the conscious level. And through the recovery achieved by this process, becomes ready to re-enter the real world and adapt to the external realities.

In this therapeutic ritual, usually after the treatment, no information is given to the patient about the role enactment and unrealistic nature of the behaviors and problems of alter ego, so that role playing of alter ego as an imitation of the patient is kept confidential forever. The executive group says to the patient that, alter ego has also been recovered. In this ritual, it is believed that indicating the recovery of alter ego to the patient has positive impacts on the continuity of the improvements made in patient's mind and prevents relapse and the return of the symptoms.

### 3. Discussion

Based on the field research of the researcher, "Yar Araat Gerem" therapeutic ritual has an unknown ancient history. It seems that it dates back to the pre-Islamic period because of fire kindling stage and the way it is executed in this ritual. It goes without saying that this therapeutic ritual has been changed and evolved throughout the history; however, it is used in some villages in Kermanshah in the way it was described.

According to the research done over the literature about psychodrama and its available resources, the lack of scientific research on the real origins of psychodrama and its roots in Persian culture is obvious. All modern Latin and Persian sources have introduced the origins of psychodrama in ancient Greek theater and Aristotle's ideas, and they attribute the invention of this therapeutic technique to Moreno. Unfortunately, Iranian researchers have neglected the importance of scientific research for finding the genuine roots of psychodrama and its procedures in Iran, while some medical and indigenous rituals or procedures that are currently used in a number of areas of Iran have lots of similarities and common techniques with modern psychodrama proposed by Moreno.

According to Blatner (1996), psychodrama is a methodology that can be used as a vehicle for therapy in most schools and psychotherapeutic approaches. "Yar Araat Gerem" therapeutic ritual, as well as Psychodrama, has proved its significant capabilities to create a platform for the development and application of psychotherapeutic techniques among natives in Iran by using the techniques such as "fire kindling" and "doubling" used in the treatment of Iranian patients. These techniques can also be used in many treatment procedures including of "group play therapy".

"Yar Araat Gerem" therapeutic ritual has a deep social approach, because in addition to the use of individuals, group and addressing the areas of interpersonal communication, deeply focuses on social sphere and dynamic relationship of the individual with society. Accordingly, many social-psychological theories can make use of these techniques for the development of their theories and methodologies.

One of the theoretical principles psychodrama emphasized by Moreno, is "role theory". This theory is considered as a linkage between experts in sociology and social psychology. Sociologists believe in the "social role theory" and consider it as a way to understand the interaction between human beings. Moreno's point of view and his awareness of this phenomenon is based on the principle that people in their lives not only play different roles but are able to manipulate these roles consciously (Moreno, 1961). In "Yar Araat Gerem" therapeutic ritual, special attention is paid to the "role playing" and "dynamic roles" which stimulate the development of hidden angles of role repertoire in individuals.

Since in the science of psychotherapy, the ethnic, domestic, and cultural characteristics of the patients and their underlying social concepts which have significant impacts on the effectiveness of treatment are much emphasized, and according to the explanations provided in this paper, psychodrama - in its indigenous format - has been used therapeutically for centuries in Iran and ancient Persia which indicates the importance and necessity of recognition and scientific revival of these kinds of therapeutic rituals at least among ethnic groups. Therefore, modern and scientific application of this technique in the treatment of psychological disorders and also conducting scientific research for understanding the degree of its effectiveness should be emphasized more.

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## Notes

Note 1. "Yaar Araat Gerem" I'll find you an auxiliary ego.

Note 2. A province located in the west of Iran.

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