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THE COUCH & THE *CHADOR* - The interpretation of the chador as sign

ABSTRACT

If we were to choose one single metaphor to represent one's personality, one's face, one's cover, one's holding environment, one's container for packing the ego, one's psychic skin, one's mode of self presentation to the world, and one's ambivalence between hiding and exposing the body, we would have chosen the dress. Yet, psychoanalysts have shown little interest in exploring this most potent signifier of the psychic envelope.

We have had some patients in either analysis or as cases in supervision that have began treatment while covering themselves in *chador*, the traditional religious outer garment worn by some Iranian women in public. *Chador* is a full-length shawl that is thrown over the head to partially cover the hair and body. In this paper, we will present some ideas about the psychic function of dress, and *chador* in particular, and about the use of such *clothing* items as transitional objects standing for the container, the holding environment, a second psychic skin and an *object petit a*.

Chador is a pre-Islamic dress code today worn by many traditional, rural or religiously devout women. We have noticed that *chador* tends to function as a part of the ego and also becomes part of the analytic space. Even under the strictest Islamic code, there is no need for a woman to cover anything in front of another woman, so there is no religious prescription behind a woman patient's holding on so tightly to her *chador* in the room with a woman analyst.

Chador as an item of dress is both a social and a phantasy object. As a signifier it travels through different chains and slips under different "signifieds." Western fantastic preoccupation with *chador*, at least at the surface level, comes across as political and ethnocentric. It manifests itself as a single minded logocentric obsession with any *chador* or veil like outfit as the sign of women's oppression in rigid patriarchal systems. Although one can undertake an analysis of *chador* or veil as it is presented in literature, similar to Barthes's (1983) study of the language of fashion magazines, in this paper we are interested in *chador* as an object of desire, a psychic envelope, a container, a transitional object, or a skin ego. We are not interested in the psychology or sociology of wearing *chador* any more than Winnicott was interested in the psychology or sociology of a particular stuffed animal or baby blankets that functioned as a transitional phenomenon. We are interested in the subject's relation to a particular object of fantasy that "holds", "hides", "covers", "veils", or "dresses" the body.

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