

## **The story of the weeping camel: a psychoanalytic perspective**

### **From the early relationship to the analytic listening**

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The story of the weeping camel can be seen from a psychoanalytic point of view from different perspectives and theoretical approaches. I will comment the movie using some of the psychoanalytic theoretical approaches, those more familiar to me, with the attempt to look at how the movie can illustrate the development of the mother-infant relationship and give us some insight into the therapeutic relationship between psychotherapist/psychoanalyst and patient. Keeping in mind the complexity of contemporary psychoanalysis which I will try to (partially) cover by sharing with you some reflections that could hopefully stimulate a further debate.

I will refer to the person asking for a treatment as the 'patient' and the person providing the treatment as the 'psychotherapist'. This might seem an arbitrary choice; for me it comes from a specific attitude and way of thinking about the psychoanalytic work along with an attempt to address the vast majority of the audience. The terminology 'client', much used nowadays in many clinical settings instead of patient, contains the idea of a 'consumer'; if we look at its etymology, it means the one who obeys, the one who listens and therefore follows an-other. It comes from the ancient Rome where it referred to a plebeian under protection of a patrician (patronus); in English, it meant originally "a lawyer's customer," by circa 1600 extended to any customer. Both meanings (consumer/the one who obeys and follows) wouldn't apply to the experience of a psychoanalytic treatment as this is traditionally led by the person asking for it: it is an experience, a journey into someone's inner world; this is therefore unique and depending on the therapeutic relationship between the couple psychotherapist-patient; and the aim is to offer the individual what he/she might go looking for, something that is difficult to describe and generalize, something that has to do with becoming his/her own separate self. Very much like the relationship between mother and baby described in psychoanalysis as the prototype of future relationships.

### **Let's start with the movie**

The movie describes a very difficult, long and painful delivery of a white baby camel, rejected by the mother camel soon after birth, and the impact this experience has on the wider community of nomads.

Amongst the nomads of South Mongolia's Gobi desert, where the story is set-up, camels provide everything for the community: their hair is woven into clothing, milk is widely used as a dietary staple, hides to make shoes and saddles, and droppings for fuel fires. Therefore, wealth is measured by the number of camels a person owns and a mother camel rejecting a newborn is taken very seriously.

The idea for the movie came from an educational documentary about a music ritual involving camels, which Byamabasuren Davaa, a student at the Music Film school in Munich, Germany, had seen as a child in Mongolia.

The film's Italian co-director, Luigi Falorni, says: "It's the story of salvation, of the loss of love and the struggle to win it back. I believe each one of us has gone through the same as the little starving camel at some point in life: feeling estranged, unceasingly searching for protection and needing to belong. [The baby camel's] fate is evidence that no life is possible without love."

Falorni and Davaa, the film directors, made arrangements with a family in Mongolia to produce their documentary, but they got stuck in a wild snowstorm and when they finally arrived at the nomads' ger camp, most of the family's camels had already been delivered. Interestingly enough, the very last birth offered them a great opportunity to film a unique experience: the baby turned out to be white, a one in ten chance occurrence, and when the baby's mother rejected it, the filmmakers knew they had their story; it was fate!

The film starts with the legend of the camel: many years ago, God gave antlers to the camel as a reward for the goodness of its heart; but one day, a rouge deer came and asked the camel to lend him his antlers; he wanted to adorn himself with them for a celebration in the West. The camel trusted the deer and gave him his antlers; but the deer never brought them back; since then, the camels keep gazing at the horizon and still await the deer's return. In essence, the film tells the story of a longing for the lost object; in

psychoanalytic terms, the mother as the primary object, whose resemblance is found in future object relations in life and never fully fulfilled; an experience we all need to come to term with, sooner or later.

Bollas (1987) talks about the “shadow of the object” to describe the experience of the infant of the “unthought known”, the primordial experience not yet ready to be metabolised and therefore symbolised. While Winnicott (1965) describes the holding mother as the environment, as for the infant she represents the whole world, Bollas (1987) considers the object as a “process that is identified with cumulative internal and external transformations” and “the infant’s first subjective experience of the object as a transformational object” (p. 14). The concept of a transformative process will become clearer later on.

The film gradually introduces us to the life of the nomads community, the everyday activities from looking after the animals, preparing the food, looking after the little ones. And suddenly, everything is interrupted, including the mother bathing the child, as the time for a baby camel to be born has come!

Then we, as the audience, are fed with a very evocative image: each camel is standing quietly with a little one on a vast and unlimited space, the land of the blue sky, as it is called.

That’s when we are introduced to the experience of the last camel that hasn’t given birth yet and we can see her struggling with the baby having initially just two legs out of the camel mother’s womb. The whole community is worried but also patiently following the process. The baby camel is finally born but it is weakly breathing and appeared extremely exhausted by the whole process, as the mother.

This is the starting point of the whole experience and the heart of the film: the story of the several attempts made by the baby camel to reconnect with the mother and of the community around them to get the mother camel to nurse her baby, till a musician is called to perform a ritual that will change everything!

The role of the wider community in supporting the mother camel re-establishing a bond with the newborn is a representation of the role of the family around mother and baby, as well as that of a wider social context that can be more or less supportive of little ones and early relationships. I'm referring here to the health care system in place in each country, the changing attitude towards little ones worldwide, the growing knowledge and public awareness of the importance of the first years of life for future development and wellbeing, thanks to numerous researches in the field.

The movie can also be seen as a metaphor of the process of introjection and identification of a 'good object', within the mother-baby relationship, that can function as a stable experience cemented inside in the internal world, as a successor of a 'good enough mother'.

### **The mother-infant relationship and the therapeutic relationship**

The relationship between a mother and an infant develops and unfolds over time, as they gradually get to know each other. The mother can start to experience herself as the carer for another, feeling all possible different emotional states which are related to the infant and trigger her own history, her early childhood experiences and touches on her wishes/ desires in relation to the unborn-soon to be newborn baby. The infant plays his/her role in this process as it comes to the world with his/her own self, otherwise defined as temperament or personality, and complex emotional life; it is now well established that infants have early capacities to interact with the world, including their own body and the environment outside them. But the baby enters the world already invested with feelings, meanings and projections by the parents. Therefore, it is the encounter between each specific mother and each specific child which makes the relational experience between the two so unique.

With reference to the story of the weeping camel, we can say that initially, after birth, the newborn is a 'stranger being' for the mother. A mother comes to the delivery with a 'baby in mind' who is the reflection/condensation of her own fantasies fused with the early relational experiences of the foetus in the womb.

Fantasies play a role in the internal world at any point in time of human's development and life. Pregnancy is accompanied by a fervid and vivid internal work under the most favourable circumstances, whereby the mother can start to fantasise about the unborn by re-thinking about her internal object relations, based on her own experiences.

At the same time, opposite forces are at work in this process allowing a mother to be protected from destructive internal material, early wounds and frailties. The question around being capable of carrying out the pregnancy for a mother comes before any wondering about feeling like a 'good mother'.

Fornari (1981) focuses his study on the dreams of pregnant mothers and explored the mechanism of primary 'paranoia' projected by the mother on the father of the baby as a necessary dynamic that protects psychic birth. When this process is not available, paranoia can be experienced in relation to the child. The baby can then be identified with the bad object, eliciting persecutory anxieties.

A newly mother is faced with a wide variety of anxieties, one being represented by the question: "is the newborn healthy?". This goes beyond the idea of physical health and has more to do with the baby being as a whole, entire, undamaged (from Latin: integer), the baby being alive, in other words that life has won against death.

"The mother must see the baby", says the old man soon after the birth, but the mother camel doesn't want to; that's the first sign of her rejection. The mother is "moaning", they said; then we see the mother actively avoiding any interaction with the baby. The baby camel starts to feel desperate and we observe him roaming around by himself, moaning; the nomads are trying to help him get the milk from the mother but she continues to hold off and to push him away. All efforts are useless as no one can force the mother to bond to the baby. So, finally, they leave them running freely in the desert to see if time and nature would heal the wound and re-establish their relationship. We see the baby camel alone in the desert and then again desperately following the rejecting mother: no matter how bad the object is, it is always better than no object! The only time the baby can have some milk

from the mother is when they tie her legs. In order to survive, the baby camel needs to be fed by the nomads.

Eventually, the two youngest ones of the community are sent to the village to find a musician who can perform a ritual that is meant to help the mother camel to bond with the baby.

In order to keep the baby alive, the mother must accept the baby, first. How well she is able to bond with her baby in this phase varies and depends on the extent of the injuries during pregnancy and birth, her own childhood and biography, and on her partner.

The movie offers us an example of an obstacle to the mother bonding to the newborn, either due to the pain experienced during the delivery or the trauma of the birth, so, different from the expected, usually idealised one. As idealisation protects the mother's developing phantasies about the baby and the future, allowing the (narcissistic) investment (cathexis) of the born-to-be in the womb, it can also slow the process of facing the reality, particularly when the reality is so distant from the (idealised) fantasy. However, the initial rejection shown in the movie can finally be healed thanks to the 'nurturing' intervention provided by the musician. This is an example of a wound that has been able to be healed with a so called 'early intervention'.

According to Michael Rustin (2009), "the emergence of a capacity for experience of the self as separate from its object, and of the body and mind held together with joined-up-ness and intentionality, is a primary developmental task, which depends for its fulfilment on the interaction between a receptive and responsive mother (or equivalent) and an object-seeking baby. If the containing relationship is absent, the infant may turn away from the object, and seek to sustain itself from its own resources. If the infant lacks the innate capacities for object-seeking, there may be similarly devastating consequences. Deprived of containment, or thrown on to its own self-sustaining resources, infants will be unable to sustain the task of creating a coherent body and mind, and will evolve instead substitute modes of bodily survival and continuity, which become barriers to normal development and relationship." (p.14).

Similarly, although briefly summarised, the therapeutic relation between psychotherapist and patient develops at its own pace and is influenced by the history, internal objects and the unconscious of both participants of the couple.

This leads to the central concept of transference and counter-transference in psychoanalysis; although it might take us away from the movie it is worth mentioning here to give an overview of the changes occurred over time in psychoanalytic practice and thinking to show the complexity of contemporary psychoanalysis.

Freud described the transference in different ways at different times of his writing; in 1912, Freud's definition of transference contains the idea of repetition of past relational patterns as well as the possibility of making some changes within these patterns as a result of current experiences and relationships: "This produces what might be described as a stereotype plate (or several such), which is constantly repeated - constantly reprinted afresh - in the course of the person's life, so far as external circumstances and the nature of the love-objects accessible to him permit, and which is certainly not entirely insusceptible to change in the face of recent experiences" (p. 100). In 1914 Freud came to realise that one of the main instruments for psychoanalytic treatment is "the handling of the transference" (...) "for curbing the patient's compulsion to repeat and for turning it into a motive for remembering" (p.154).

Nowadays, great importance has been given not only to the transference neurosis, which has to do with the repetition of past relational experiences and contributes to the perception of the analyst as a transference object, but also to the new and real object of the analyst offering a different experience in the 'here and now' of the therapeutic process. A psychoanalytic intervention (in psychotherapy or psychoanalysis) can offer both experiences, the transference one and interpersonal one, so that they can both contribute to the transformative process achieved during the therapeutic process.

Therefore, a psychoanalytic psychotherapy (and/or psychoanalysis) can offer the opportunity to analyse past unconscious relational patterns, once they are re-enacted by the patient in the relationship with the psychotherapist/analyst, in order for them to be remembered and become a memory, rather than being acted out. At the same time, the

psychotherapist offers a new relational experience. I would like to briefly clarify this concept as it can be easily misunderstood. The 'real' alive 'object' in psychoanalysis refers to the psychotherapist/analyst identified as a new "persona", as defined by Lopez (2005), that is a "synthesis of singularity and universality": an individual, with his/her own history and unconscious reality, and a representative of human beings as well as of the psychoanalytic community.

The movie leaves us exploring different reflections about the specific experience of this particular baby-camel with this particular mother-camel, that is the purpose of any psychoanalytic treatment.

While watching the movie, we are faced with the emotional experience attached to the extremely painful and long journey of this couple to re-connect: at least, this has been my personal experience.

The movie can be seen as a representation of a successful intervention of a parent-infant psychotherapy whereby the violinist-therapist enables the encounter between a depressed mother and her own 'starving for love' baby. The music played by the violinist offers a safe container for the couple to get back together. A woman is singing together near the baby and the mother while the violinist is playing, symbolically representing a therapeutic parental couple; the song doesn't have any 'symbolic' meaning as it is a repetition of the letters H-O-O-S that is meant to have a soothing effect.

Louise Emanuel (2006) describes this 'intervention' as involving a strong combined parental couple, with firm paternal and receptive maternal functions: the violinist sits slightly removed from the dyad as if taking up Britton's (1989) 'third position', and is able to evoke and transform through his music the experience of disaffection and then rapprochement between the mother and the infant dyad, while the nomad woman seems to be putting kind but firm pressure on the mother camel.

The audience in the movie, made out of villagers, can be considered the supportive network of the wider community that enable the couple to function and grow (Emanuel L., 2006). The intervention in this case is the result of an enactment and 'mise en scene' of a



reparative experience between mother and baby. That is the difference between the work that can possibly be offered with under fives, using a psychoanalytic approach, as opposed to working with adults. The interventions focus on the parent-infant work can consider the parents' mental state, the infant's mental state, or the relationship between parent and infant. A specific angle through which the psychoanalytic work with parent and infants/children can be conducted is promoting in the parents the process of 'looking through the child's eyes'. This is what the film does by favouring the identification with each member of the dyad and their 'affective' experience.

However, the music can be similarly seen as the representation of a 'good encounter' in a psychoanalytic treatment between the psychotherapist and the patient. The maternal function of the psychotherapist responding with a musical attunement to the needs of the patients is balanced right from the start with the paternal function offered by the (internal) psychoanalytical frame. In the movie, the music that goes along with a ritual needs to be followed to allow the process to occur: maternal and paternal function are going together hand in hand and both contribute to the successful outcome.

Kohut (1971) has developed the concept of *empathy* as he found that, at his time, psychoanalysis was not sufficiently attentive to the way analysts were responding to their patients by mainly interpreting their responses. For Kohut, empathy is considered as an "informer of appropriate action" that has to do with the possibility to get a broader understanding of what the other (the patient) is bringing into the analytic setting; the knowledge gained can be then used for different purposes.

More recently, Bolognini has devoted a great amount of work to this concept and he came up with the following definition: "True empathy is a condition of conscious and preconscious contact characterised by separateness, complexity, and a linked structure, a wide perceptual spectrum including every colour in the emotional palette, from the lightest to the darkest; above all, it constitutes a progressive shared and deep contact with the complementarity of the object, with the other's defensive ego and split off parts no less than with his ego-syntonic subjectivity." (1997).

Empathy cannot be faked and taught, but can only be experienced first and retrospectively identified. This concept privileges a therapeutic approach that provides initially a warm and nourishing environment for the patient's need for "specular confirmation of split and frozen archaic parts" (Bolognini, 1997); and simultaneously offering a space where wounds can be shared first before they can be interpreted, worked through and become food for thoughts.

Interestingly, Kohut also pointed out that empathy is a necessary prerequisite for the good functioning of an analysis, but it is not sufficient; as this led to numerous misunderstandings of his initial thinking and clinical intentions. Raptures in the analytic situation during a treatment are part of the process, and the psychotherapist will find himself/herself failing the patient sooner or later. It is the reparative process that follows the experience of rapture to be therapeutic in most cases, that is to say the interpretative work that will follow.

As it is in the story of the weeping camel: it is the reparative experience following an initial rejection that allows the process of life (as opposed to death) to be re-established. And this can happen thanks to a combination of maternal and paternal therapeutic functions. Finally, the baby camel can have the milk from the mother for the first time. This experience is accompanied by the mother camel shedding a tear, and we believe that this is related to the intensity of the emotional experience.

The meaning of crying is not very often explored in psychoanalysis. However, this has to do primarily with the central role of 'affects' in the psychoanalytic cure, that makes it so unique and deep in its potential for promoting transformational processes, going back to the beginning at the concept introduced by Bollas (1987) whereby the object is a "transformational object" (p.14).

At the end of the movie, the whole community celebrates the recovered relationship between Ingen Temee and Botok: mother and baby camel.

With these reflections I hope I have been able to share with you some evocative thoughts stimulated by the film in regards to psychoanalytic psychotherapy and psychoanalytic

thinking. My attempt has also been to illustrate those psychoanalytic approaches more familiar to me to share a light on the complex and multi-coloured panorama of contemporary psychoanalysis.

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