

FALSE SELF: The life of Masud Khan

By Linda Hopkins (2006)

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The first night after having begun to read this lively biography of Winnicott's favourite apprentice and later writing collaborator, I dreamt that Simone de Beauvoir's unknown daughter was in analysis with Khan (spelled Xhan), who lived between 1924-1989. What could be the humor of these hints from my unconscious? - perhaps, to fool round in the transitional reality or transitional relationship between fictitious patient and literal therapist. As I read on, someone like Charles Rycroft commented that Masud Khan's first wife, beautiful Royal Ballet dancer Jane Shore, had a sense of humor that Masud totally lacked. Others, I was glad to discover, testified just the opposite to the lucid writer of this excellent biography. Such is the perception of intensive experiences and emotional quality of existential aspiration of being and living in full authenticity.

Together with Michael Balint, Charles Rycroft, Marion Milner, Nina Coltart, D.W. Winnicott and R.D. Laing, Khan was also a member of the Independent Group of the British Psychoanalytic Society, sandwiched as we all know, between the Kleinians and Freudians. Rycroft, ten years Khan's senior, became one of his early friends and for a while they shared a flat. Khan, a rather well-off and very bright Punjabi, came to Oxford in October 1946, to continue his studies in literature. Only 22 years old, he had already an M.A., from the University of Punjab. His mother was the fourth wife of a wealthy landowner, who finally bypassed all the many elder half-brothers of Masud and made him the sole heir to his fortune. Given all these advantages, nevertheless he sometimes felt the blues. Thus, prior to leaving India, he had written to John Bowlby, then training secretary of the British Psycho-Analytic Society, to discuss arrangements for a personal analysis. When he travelled from Oxford to London to meet Bowlby for a first interview, his life was about to be dramatically affected by a surprising mistake. Even though Khan had no background in medicine or psychology, Bowlby assumed that he was applying to become a candidate at the Institute of Psycho-Analysis. Thus Bowlby viewed their meeting as an admission interview for the training program. It is a paraphrasing from p.22 of the book under review, not a quote.

This utterly confused Khan as he was looking for a personal therapy with Edward Glover, who was not on good terms with Bowlby. Personal psycho-politics thus opened a doorway for Kahn and one of the most maverick and bright psychoanalysts of that generation was 'born'. This part of the biography comes across like crime fiction. A patient was "murdered" and from his ashes came a talented training therapist, whose thinking and practicing came straight from D.W. Winnicott. The characteristic feature of DWW's theorising is that, whereas Freud saw conflict as the central issue of human experience, DWW considers paradox (as in coexisting contradictory selves) as the essential human reality. For Freud, resolution of conflict constituted the aim of therapeutic effort, and for DWW it is the realisation of paradox without its resolution that constitutes psychic health and creativity. No quote, paraphrasing Hopkins.

Khan was first in analysis with Ella Sharpe, then John Rickman, but both of these analysts had died by 1951. So Masud entered into analysis with Winnicott, "*who's genius has been destiny for me.*" Prior to starting the analysis, Winnicott insisted that Khan have surgery on his deformed ear: his large right ear was extremely disfiguring. This is one example where DWW (as Khan called him) acted on his belief that the 'real' environment is as important as the transference relationship and was thus willing to intervene outside of ordinary therapeutic boundaries.

Winnicott's hypothesis of the true and false self influenced Khan and a whole generation of analysts. The idea is, that we all have multiple separate selves. A goal for our personal development is to know and accept irreconcilable differences within oneself. As Winnicott's "golden boy" and substitute son, Khan enjoyed a meteoric career after graduating as a child psychoanalyst in 1952. He later became training analyst in 1959, after three failed attempts.

As a studied linguist he tried his hand at editorial work for the IJPA under the guidance of its editor, John Sutherland, director of the Tavistock Clinic. Khan flourished in London for many years, socially, personally and professionally, finally gaining an international reputation as a psychoanalytic theorist.

Hopkins has interviewed quite a few of Khan's analysands from the 1950s. They tell stories about excessive smoking and drinking coffee together in analysis, and Masud asking them to do small errands for him. His feudal self and golden boy image let him, for a time, get away with these transgressions. In his private self, Khan's deepest and most lasting love, was Svetlana Berisova (1932-1998), with whom he was married for 17 years. She was second to the prima-donna ballerina, Margot Fonteyn, at the Royal Ballet. In 1959, Khan had divorced his first wife, the dancer Jane Shore, to be free to marry Svetlana. Despite all the analysis he

had had, Khan was able to express shaming rage, violent disgust and distain at those closest to him. Rage always precedes insight. His practising of ‘regression to dependence’ was not a technique to cure patients, but to bring them closer to health. Yet often, we read, Khan was lacking in basic human responsibility and responsiveness to the analytic process. The outside world and the inside world are co-dependent in the evolution of health.

His contributions to psychoanalysis are collected in his four books, all published after Winnicott had died in 1971. The notion of the ‘True Self’ is still one of the most important contributions to Psychotherapy. In comparison to the often hesitant DWW, Khan, for some colleagues, was the more radical thinker.

“Happiness is the capacity to be able to share oneself with oneself and with others. ... The analytic task is not so much to eliminate an illness or to render it innocuous, as to put a person in the total possession of his affectivity and sensibility, both in its positive sense and negative aspects, so that he can live to the maximum of his potential and in terms of full awareness of the handicap and illness it entails for him.” (Kahn 1974, p.134)

The destructive workings of Khan’s false self is also seen, when he attempts his ‘self-cures’, like using alcohol or marijuana for medication. His addiction and ‘personality disorder’ are developed in order to hide and control anxiety at the expense of the true self. From the mid-1960’s, Khan started to have external relationships with his analytical patients, which were mostly servicing his own needs. Hopkins theorises in her book that Winnicott had probably failed to address the pathological traits that ultimately destroyed his protégé.

The last ten years of his life make a sad story: a lonely alcoholic who had been ousted by the British Psycho-Analytical Society for inappropriate social relationships with analysands. He also disgracefully authored an anti-Semitic tract. Hopkins offers an unnerving and sympathetic portrait of the rising star and the “enfant terrible” of post-war British psychoanalysis.

Kahn M 1974 The Privacy of the Self. London, Hogarth Press