The Middle East: Characteristic Features

The Middle East is a vast area of ancient civilizations, rich in history and heritage. Its major cities are vibrant places where tradition, customs, faith, and values meet with modern lifestyles and diverse societies and worldviews. Religious identity is an important ingredient in the fabric of the Middle Eastern societies (1).

The Middle East is ‘where bombs from the Western world drop down’ as portrayed by the Turkish writer Nihat Genç. This is an imaginary geography implying an area extending from Libya to Afghanistan; including the countries of South-West Asia and North Africa. This area includes many civilizations and cultures that have both similarities and differences with each other. Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, and the North African countries like Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia are all located in this region. This region also encloses Northern India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq in the East, including even some parts of Central Asia and Turkey.

The Middle East is the cradle of the Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Islam is part of region’s common identity, 90% of the people in the countries of the region believe in Islam. Religions enable the interaction between local cultures and countries. Edward Said’s Orientalism details the extent to which the West’s knowledge of Middle Eastern societies was created in the service of either conquering and administering them as colonies or imagining them as exotic lands of freedoms and excesses prohibited in Europe (2). The Orientalists sought to penetrate the ‘Arab mind and character’ and what they
found was unsurprisingly, a negative mirror image of the rational, industrious, self-controlled European mind. On the other hand, Thierry Hentsch (3) rejects the use of the term “Middle East” as being an example of so called West’s ethnocentric evaluation of the Arab World, Turkey, Iran and parts of Northern Africa. It is only “East” compared to self-proclaimed western position and it is qualified as “Middle” East because it is closer to West than the far East—lands such as China and beyond. Bearing this ethnocentric bias in mind, we must say that the first psychiatric hospitals of the world were probably built in the Middle East: Baghdad in 705, Cairo in 800, Damascus in 1270. In Turkey, special psychiatric wards were built onto a general hospital in 1555 and a specific psychiatric hospital was built in 1583. Records show that humane treatments including music therapy, aromatherapy, and bathing were used in these hospitals. Community involved in the applications and procedures for the welfare of the patients (4). Some rural villages were concerned with the rehabilitation and therapy of mentally ill in Anatolia during the Seljukian era and these villages were not taxed (5). The Fool for Love has been an idolatic person for madness, and Majzoob/ who is the person inflicted by love of God has been both a mad and a respected person, blurring the lines of mental well being and illness. Majzoob may be close to God yet his secrets might not be revealed to ordinary people, so diagnosing him as a mentally ill person is problematic in a society where Divine still rules.

“At least do no harm” aptly describes the Ottoman reaction to medicine. Ottomans accepted as unavoidable that sometimes physicians and medicine would harm patients (despite the dictum), or at least not be able to offer any real or concrete comfort. The realistic attitude attests that in the Ottoman case, although a negative association of medicine did exist, it seems to be not the prevalent one; at the same time people did not incline to the other extreme, that of naïve expectation. Illness and death were regarded with acceptance. Early modern Ottomans lived with them as everyday and normal occurrences. Illness could be regarded also as an opportunity. Ottomans were not shy about notifying authorities about other people’s impending death and their wishes to take their place. In Ottoman society as elsewhere, sickness and death were unfortunate events, but they could open new possibilities for others (6).

Mental Health Services in the Middle East

Despite the glorious past of mental health services in the Middle East, one can say that situation is especially worse in war-torn areas. Mental health and conflicts in the region are escalating. Especially in places like Lebanon, there is a clear link between exposure to war and major depression (7). There is a significant dose-response relationship between the number of trauma and anxiety, mood and impulse control disorders (8). Especially there is an outbreak of PTSD and depression as well as problems in the family functioning and social exclusion in Palestine, since the Intifada (9). According to El-Sarraj (10), during Israeli rule levels of antisocial behavior and aggression, including homicide, have increased within the Palestinian population. In addition, drug misuse has spread among younger Palestinians (11). Unfortunately, the war takes toll on the mental health services of Iraq. Iraq’s largest psychological hospital which had more than 1,500 beds - was destroyed in the war. The staff and patients have left because there was no food or medicine, and female patients in particular were subjected to rape. Children in particular are showing behavioral problems and depression at a higher rate than one would expect in a population this size - three times as high in Iraq (12). The situation is not better in the Palestine either. After the first Intifada, nearly half of the population was suffering from a range of mental health disorders (13). Severe and complex problems could not be resolved with debriefing techniques (13). Many people in the troubled areas of the Middle East have suffered and continue to suffer all types of losses, which often result in chronic cases of unresolved grief and complicated bereavement. Past and present losses are compounded by the apprehension of the ‘unknown’ and the anticipation of certain future losses, causing a phenomenon known as anticipatory grief (1).

Understanding Mental Health and Sickness in the Middle East

The description of mental health and sickness in the region is important to understand. Psychiatry is a modernist project and there is a boundary between the normal and the sick. Traditionally in the Middle East, the difference between a person who is deli (insane) and a veli...
(saint) has long posed a problem (14). There is also a
difference between collectivistic and individualistic life-
styles. People in the area are taught to adjust to a
relationship while repressing internal desires to facilitate
interpersonal harmony and unity. That’s why people feel a
socially diffused responsibility where the feelings of guilt
are rare among psychiatric patients. Self-disclosure is not
valued by the society. There is restraint and control on
feelings. Lowness, humility and modesty are favored over
self-serviance and self-focusing. Also spiritual experience
of faith reflects and influences cultural ideals in the
everyday production of well-being. However, focus of
meaning of the Western psychiatry resides in a more
secular realm. In the West, the focus of meaning shifts
towards individual psychology, meaning that the success
of human life lies in the psychological well-being (15). If
you are feeling well and happy, this is a sign that proves
your life to be a successful one. As signs of happiness
might differ, signs of distress might also be different in the
Middle Eastern societies. Idioms of distress vary across
cultures and the Middle Eastern societies have their own
ways of expressing distress. Many Middle Eastern societies
localize distress in the heart as opposed to head and mind.
They describe emotions in a metaphorical way. There are
rich, poetic cultural resources in the form of imagery and
language in describing mental health difficulties. For
example, Kashmiri women tell that their hearth’s burden
would lessen or their hearth’s pain would reduce (16),
while there are some other statements in different areas
including Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and Arabian Peninsula
such like “my heart is worried”, “my heart is anxious”, “my
heart is wounded”, “my heart aches”, “my soul is
trembling”, “heart worry”, “chest tightness”, “ring around
the chest”, and the “distress of heart” (17-21). “Medicine
for the heart” is a Moroccan way of describing the power
of the Quran to heal the heart, an organ and symbol that
links spiritual, emotional and physical experience. The
recitation of Quranic verses offers housewives living in
South Eastern Saharan Morocco a way to manage
emotions that distress the heart and body (22).

Punjabi women participating in a focus group in
London (23) recognized the English word ‘depression’,
but the older ones used terms such as ‘weight on my heart/
mind’, or ‘pressure on the mind’. Throughout the Middle-
East, references to the heart are commonly understood
not just as potential signs of illness but as natural
metaphors for a range of emotions (24). Additionally the
meaning of sadness is somehow different than its meaning
in the West. In Farsi, sadness is associated with personal
depth, a sad person is considered as being a thoughtful
person (motafakker) where the ability to express sadness
in a socially appropriate way is a mark of social competence
(17).

Predominance of Specific Psychopathologies in the
Middle East

There are some common characteristics of mental
patients in the Middle East. Somatization of psychological
problems is common in the region. Each culture has its own
emotional lexicon that encodes socially and morally
significant values and its own idioms of distress – cultural
ways of talking about distress. With globalization, it is likely
that these metaphors will change and different idioms of
distress will be used. Furthermore, it is possible that an
increase in medicalization of depressive symptoms may be
seen (25). There is also an important role of the traditional
healers. There is reliance upon a deity and religious leaders as
a means of coping with mental health issues. Shame and
honor are important concepts in the Middle East (22).
Ethnographies from nearly all Middle Eastern cultures
suggest that the region is characterized by two predominant
value systems and their associated etiquettes and self-care
practices: that of ‘honor-and-modesty’ and that of Islam.
Psychologically, the internalization of these value systems
appears to shape universal emotions, traits and self-
conceptions into culturally specific sentiments, motives and
social selves.

Therapeutic Action: Need for a Different Perspective

The nature of psychotherapy in the region is an issue
to be explored. It is directive, advisory, caring, and critical
where a state of complete autonomy and individuation is
not desirable. The therapist is expected to express more of
his emotions. Models of therapy that do not provide for
spiritual understanding or space for contextualizing
-cultural issues can be fraught with difficulties. That’s why
culture sensitive psychotherapy requires understanding
and adaptation of religious principles as the core of the
therapeutic relationship. The strategy is to deal primarily
with conscious problems, symptoms, thoughts, feelings
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and memories. An important motivation in social interactions is to save face and avoid being shamed. Inner desires, wishes and conflicts that are socially unacceptable must be kept secret. Inner exploration may threaten the integrity of the psyche (26).

Schizophrenia as a mental illness has different connotations. Schizophrenia patients are held less responsible for their negative symptoms compared to West. Belief in fate decreases the tendency to blame patients for their symptoms. Catatonic forms of the disorder are relatively common compared with other varieties (27). Male schizophrenics living with the extended family in Qatar tended to have less chronic symptoms (28). Increased prevalence of catatonia may be due to a delay in help seeking, retardation might not be recognized as a mental illness. Most people attribute their disorder to the evil eye or jinn possession. Envy and evil eye are frequently reported as causes of mental illness. In Turkey, unrequited love, has been perceived as a cause, as in the case of Majnun. Unrequited love gives a very humane explanation to the bizarre behaviors of the schizophrenic and evokes sympathy towards his suffering. This helps him to be kept within the society and be respected for his grief. On the other hand, some changes are on the way, by the modernization process. Some very recent research indicates that the traditional views of schizophrenia change with modernization in Turkey. It is now regarded as a mental illness to be cured by psychiatrists rather than a state of jinn possession. But public still hold the social factors responsible for the etiology of schizophrenia and view help seeking from local healers as positive (29). Insanity is described by the aggressiveness, instability, and nonconformity and as the disorder is being labeled as a brain disorder the stigma attached to it becomes more prominent (28). Social distance studies in Turkey show that majority of the people do not want to live close by to a schizophrenic (30,31). As we know, there is a more benign course of schizophrenia in the developing countries. Families give positive messages where there is less labeling. In Turkey, as the emphasis shifts towards the brain, calling schizophrenia a brain disorder, the stigma of the illness increases contrary to the expected situation.

Depression is also mostly associated with somatic symptoms in the Middle East (32). Depressive mood is part of the depression. Somatization does not exclude affect as a medium for expressing distress. Guilt feelings might be or not. Hamdi et al (18) support the view that guilt feelings are less readily elicited in Arabs and may require higher degrees of rapport between patient and clinician; guilt, as well as loss of libido, they argue, has minimal predictive value for the diagnosis of depression, because relevant questions in the traditional Islamic culture cause discomfort and are considered inappropriate. El-Islam, considers guilt a common phenomenon in Muslim groups (33,34). It has been reported that non-Western cultures emphasize social integration rather than autonomy: Shame is more important than guilt. Also somatic manifestations of the psychological distress are more acceptable and likely to evoke a caring response than vague complaints of psychological symptoms (27). There are alternative explanations for psychological problems. Misery sometimes is expressed through reports of a fallen or painful heart, or as chest tightness or as distress of the heart. Alternative descriptions of unhappiness from other cultures are not conceptually inferior to the concept of depression as a Western medical representation. Sadness is valued as a sign of inner growth, which reminds the finitude of life, the fragility of existence. Sadness is also regarded as a means of sensitivity in Buddhism and Confucianism or as a sign of piousness in Islam where resilience and endurance is promoted (17,35,36).

Psyche and Art in the Middle East

Human life is short through with unavoidable suffering, and that there are fixed limits to human happiness according to Eastern culture. Wisdom resides in understanding and accepting those limits. It is essential to try to improve oneself, by moral effort, as far as one’s nature allows but it is foolish and dangerous to think that nature, or human nature, can be altogether overcome (35). A sense of the tragic in life is associated with depth of the inner self, as opposed to shallowness of the outer self. Also the ability to express sadness appropriately and in a culturally proscribed manner is a mark of social competence as well as personal depth in the region (17). Traditional Turkish poetry also values sadness. According to Traditional Turkish poetry, sadness is a core element in piety and a marker for sincerity towards God. Many poets praise sadness and find a virtue in it. Some poets treat
sorrow and sadness as an honorable guest, who teaches much during his visit. This treatment is portrayed in the following poem of Rumi:

**GUEST HOUSE**

This being human is a guesthouse.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

(37)

Not only poetry but also music played an important role in the rise of depression and value for sadness. This lead to confusion about sadness and depression. Nobel laureate Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk talks about a collective melancholy, ‘the black mood felt by millions of people together’, and huzun of the city of Istanbul. Huzun engulfs the entire ancient city, imparting a particular coloring, mood and zeitgeist (38). ‘Istanbul does not carry its huzun, as an illness for which there is a cure or an unbidden pain from which we need to be delivered; it carries its huzun by choice and with honor’ (38,39).

There are popular songs on the experience of depression that depression also narratives in the media by celebrities and films. By the time depression becomes a popular word and antidepressants are used as a nostrum. In Turkish version of depression, there are both pros and cons in the phenomenon. First of all, people consult to doctors for their depression more easily and there is more public awareness with media now. Somatic idioms of distress are slowly being replaced by psychological idioms. There is more willingness for self-disclosure and depression is not so much romanticized. However there is still less emphasis on resilience. Though the religious tradition favors resilience over giving up, the modern project in its pursuit of an ‘analgesic society’ recommends a ‘tranquility pill’ for every ill. Emphasis is still on the psyche of the individual rather than the context. The buffering of social institutions has diminished where drugs are at times overprescribed. Mohammad Shafii writes about the Sufi way of handling stress: ‘The Sufis, feel the psychic suffering and pain are essential throughout life. The goals of the Sufis are the vision of reality, union with the beloved, and integration of personality. This requires pain, suffering and sacrifice. Alleviation of symptoms and the development of health and well-being are not the goals but the side effects’ (40).

Sufism has also concentrated on humanity and psyche to depict the life and understanding of it. Hence, it teaches that “the heart” lies in the center of man’s being; which is not only a flesh located at the chest; but also a divine and spiritual subtlety connected with the physical heart as the true essence of man (41).

**Predominant Psychiatric Symptoms in the Middle East**

On the other hand other psychological problems present with different symptoms. Dramatic forms of conversion disorder are still prevalent in the Middle East. Hysteria is mostly replaced by somatoform disorders in Turkey (42). Obsessive Compulsive Disorder has its own colorings in the Middle East. In the Egyptian context the most commonly occurring obsessions were religion and contamination (60%) and somatic obsessions (49%) (27). According to researches religious obsessions may be over-represented in the clinical populations of Muslim and Jewish Middle western cultures (43, 44). This may be due to the emphasis on cleanliness and ritual purity, and where the sexual matters can be issues of prohibition, sin and shame (43, 44). Studies of Turkish patients with OCD indicated that religious obsessions are present 11-42 % of patients, and its prevalence showed a tendency to increase...
eastward, reflecting the more conservative and more religious society in the East (45-48). There is also a possible influence of the concept of spiritual purity on OCD phenomenology (49). Patients' attitude toward their illness is also critical. Studies show that there is a delay in help-seeking. Suicide on the other hand is affected by the cultural influence. Intention to kill oneself is not common among Muslims, for whom losing hope from relief by God and self-inflicted death are blasphemous and punishable in the afterlife (27). Wish to die is not uncommon; it usually remains at the level of wishing that God would terminate their life, and does not progress to the wish to kill themselves (50).

**Biological Meaning versus Morality: Perspective on Psychopathology in the Middle East**

Western psychiatry avoids any religious or spiritual perspective or any framework for the meaningfulness of life where traditional and religious healers play a major role in primary psychiatric care in many Middle East countries. The extended families show high level of tolerance to assimilating family members with psychiatric illness. The social change coming with modernization may subject women to conflicting roles and may increase drug and alcohol abuse (23,27,51). The impact of American Psychiatry is built upon the medicalization of human suffering, reification of illness categories and loss of local worlds of meaning.

In sum, the moral meaning of being ill is lost and biologic modeling of mental processes is more valued. This is what Ethan Watters (52) calls, 'the globalization of the American psyche': 'Western ideas of mind are proving as seductive to the rest of the world as fast food and pop music, as we are spreading them with speed and vigor'. And this ends in 'pathologization of everything' (53), which does not let us understand the huzun, the peculiarly Turkish melancholic state surrounding the city of Istanbul, as Pamuk observes, 'feeling that the city of Istanbul carries as its fate'.

**References:**


