

# (Word) Playing and Reality: The Psychoanalytic Glossary From Sterba to Akhtar

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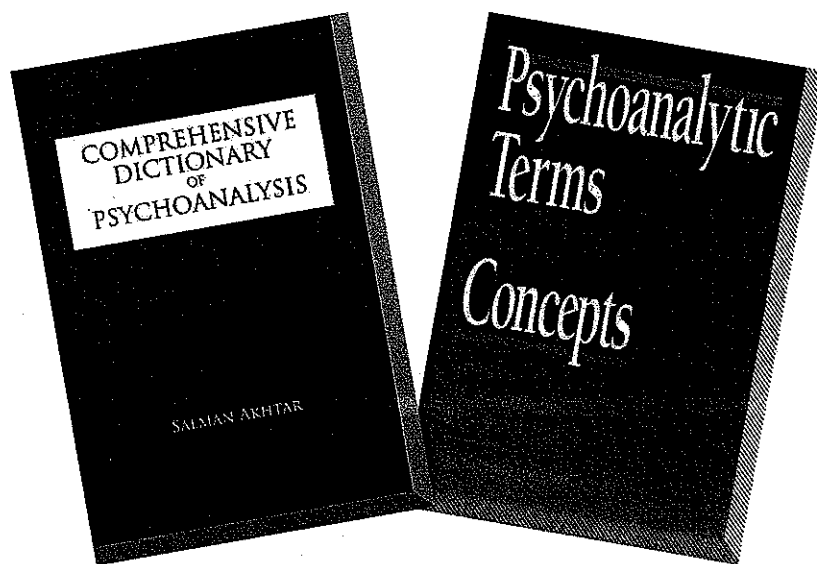
*Ajase complex. Borromean knot. Creative pause. Dream cowardice. Extimacy. Floating couch. Geopsychoanalysis. Headline intelligence. Inactment. Jettisoned object. Kore complex. Listening cure. Mockery through caricature. Narcissism of minor similarities. Objectivation. Placental paradigm. Qualified agreement. Reverberation time. Sculpted creativity. Transitive vitalization. Unconscious phantoms. Von Domarus principle. We-self. Xenophobia. Yearning. Zac's constants.*

These are some of the beguiling offerings in Salman Akhtar's new glossary, *The Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (Karnac, 2009). "Comprehensive" is an apt adjective, for this volume includes 1853 terms. Akhtar joins a distinguished line of authors and editors in the honorable and colossal effort of cataloging the language with which we can try to articulate our clinical realities. Indeed, he does the reader the service of including an annotated glossary of glossaries (a coffee table book about coffee tables, so to speak). I will mention here only two. Richard Sterba's *Handwörterbuch der Psychoanalyse*, published in 1932, was the first psychoanalytic dictionary; there are only 12 copies extant of this handbook of words, or concise dictionary. Concise it was, as Sterba did not advance beyond "G." Freud comments in his 1932 letter to Sterba

(reproduced in the 1936 first installment of the *Handwörterbuch*), "I do not overlook the fact that the path from the letter A to the end of the alphabet is a very long one, and that to follow it would mean an enormous burden of work for you. So do not do it unless you feel an internal obligation—only obey a compulsion of that kind and certainly not any external pressure."

## LEXICON LEGACY

In his introduction, Akhtar acknowledges both the intellectual exhilaration and the inner torment of his journey from A to Z: "The wish



to give up whispered its poisonous lullaby to me more than once." Defying the hazards of a lexically-induced *folie à deux*, Eslee Samberg and Elizabeth L. Auchincloss have courageously undertaken the editorship of the reincarnation of the second glossary I will mention, Burness E. Moore and Bernard D. Fine's classic *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts* (1968, 1990). I am sure I speak for many of us when I say that I have relied on this volume for years as a starting point for research and teaching; I eagerly look forward to this updated and expanded version to be published by APsaA.



Susan S. Levine

There are three comments I would like to make about Salman Akhtar, and each one has two subpoints. My first comment is that Akhtar has presented widely in psychoanalysis and psychiatry and has received numerous awards. Subpoint one: This has included the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association's* Best Paper of the Year Award. Subpoint two: The dictionary is his 10th solo psychoanalytic book; he has edited or co-edited 30 volumes in the clinical literature. My second

comment is that Akhtar has also published six volumes of poetry. Subpoint one: these have been in both English and his native Urdu. Subpoint two: Akhtar suffers not an iota of *publication anxiety* (p. 234). My third comment is that Akhtar is a *training analyst* (p. 289) at the Institute of the Psychoanalytic Center of Philadelphia. Subpoint one: he is renowned as a teacher, supervisor, and speaker. Subpoint two: one of his *character traits* (p. 46) is to present without notes or written text; the audience always smiles,

with affection tinged perhaps by a touch of envy, when Akhtar begins by saying, "I have three comments to make and each one has two subpoints...."

## A TEACHING DICTIONARY

Akhtar's organizational abilities are well suited to the format of a dictionary, and this volume also reveals his deeply held identity as a teacher. Each entry is laid out in a clear fashion, with a summary of the term's origins and past and current usages. Some entries are brief, some amount to appreciative abstracts

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Glossary

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of major papers (for instance, Carlo Strenger's essay on the classic and romantic visions of psychoanalysis, and Lawrence Friedman's on psychoanalytic love). He includes technical remarks on the various concepts, for example, on *fees, gifts, missed appointments, interpretation, and falling asleep during sessions*; candidates and students will appreciate the ways in which he teaches and guides. Scholars will appreciate the succinct and authoritative introductions to such concepts as *neutrality, free association, femininity, guilt, and psychosomatic disorders*. Insofar as Akhtar not only defines but also comments, this could be termed an annotated or even a teaching dictionary.

from an apparently shared psychoanalytic language, we discover that we do not have a shared definition, much less opinion. The fascinating debate between Fred Pine and Samberg and Auchincloss in *JAPA* 54, 2, illuminates some of the dilemmas and decisions editors face in the creation of a dictionary. Akhtar's goal of creating "a civilized order out of a delicious chaos" reflects both the original purpose of dictionaries



Salman Akhtar

be thought of as possessing both particle and wave qualities; it is a moving target. The light or the word can be seen as the *signifier* (p. 266), something we all use; it is the signified that is the tricky bit to nail down, the mental content to which the signifier refers. An edited glossary, such as Moore and Fine, provides definitions arrived at by the consensus of eminent members of our field (including, incidentally, Akhtar). The strength of this approach, I would say, is to define a position of a signifier and its signified as closely as possible at a given moment. Akhtar often provides a range of definitions, a photograph taken with a time exposure function (for instance, *countertransference and enactment*).

Ultimately, a dictionary of psychoanalytic terms is about the very essence of our work—how we go about discerning the *reality* (p. 240) of another person's life, and how we communicate our understanding both to the patient and to our colleagues. We need word-presentations to represent the *thing-presentations* (p. 286) in our patients' *material* (p. 167) and in our own reactions. Thus, a glossary is a noble effort to help us approach the speed of light, the state of a mind, even though it will be impossible to attain it. We function within an existing web of professional language—and we create it ourselves as we go along, as we notice new phenomena, such as the *exit line* (p. 100), that seem to entice us into the act of defining. *APSA*

I do not overlook the fact that the path from the letter A to the end of the alphabet is a very long one.  
—Sigmund Freud

What is difficult to convey is how readable this volume is, written throughout in a personal voice. Akhtar's tone ranges from serious to ironic, from wise to playful, from straightforward to poetic. For those who love language, this is writing to be savored.

One of the other features of this dictionary is the even-handed and respectful treatment of the entire scope of psychoanalytic thinking. There are entries from classical as well as Winnicottian, Lacanian, Bionian, and Mahlerian terminology, references to psychoanalytic syndromes or complexes identified in other cultures, references to long-forgotten (or no longer studied) early literature, references to terms from allied fields, and entries of concepts quite new to our field. Akhtar uses his introduction as a *self-disclosure* (p. 258), an attempt to make transparent his *wish* (p. 307) to be as inclusive as possible in order to enrich and expand the scope of our psychoanalytic vocabulary and thinking.

Many of the political and theoretical difficulties in our field may derive, in part, from our own *intrafamilial confusion of tongues* (p. 54). When we examine concepts closely, terms

as bridges between cultures (as recounted by Samberg and Auchincloss) as well as Pine's emphasis on the benefits of recognizing the essential unities of thought that underlie seemingly disparate psychoanalytic schools and practices. Akhtar does not avoid the political (see, for instance, his entries on *training analysis* and *lay analysis*), but he handles it descriptively and with *neutrality* (p. 187). In many of his entries he attempts to circle around the object, describing its use in as many different ways as he can distinguish along with his opinions about clinical applicability (*practical psychoanalysis, self-disclosure*). This is akin to describing an object in motion, and it is a bit different from describing the history of a concept, which Akhtar also does do for some terms (for example, *femininity, free association, and id*). This dictionary will be indispensable for the scholar and researcher.

Language, like light, is real but evanescent. And, like light, it can

