

Panel: Woman and Psychoanalysis in Germany

**The recovery of emancipation in psychoanalysis in the 1960, 70s and 80s -
Margarete Mitscherlich-Nielsen's contributions**

Before the second world war there was already a lively and controversial discussion within the psychoanalytical movement about the psychosexual development of the woman, as women psychoanalysts began to compare their findings with those of Freud. This controversy was initiated in 1922 during the first international psychoanalytic congress in Berlin by Karen Horney's work "Zur Genese des weiblichen Kastrationskomplexes" (On the genesis of the castration complex in women, 1924).

The questions raised for discussion were

- 'secondary' (Freud) or 'primary' femininity (Horney, Jones, Klein),
- the questionable universality of penis envy (Horney),
- the special features of the female superego and personality structure (Klein, Jacobson).

This discussion reached a provisional end with Freud's paper "Über die weibliche Sexualität" in 1931 and the agreement of the majority of analysts with its views.

Bernfeld attributed this agreement to several factors: Freud's cancer certainly contributed to a wish to protect not only him but also his ideas from attack. In addition there was concern over the watering down of psychoanalytical ideas by dissenting pupils. Further, there came criticism of Freud's prejudices against women, often from circles fundamentally hostile to him which tried to undermine his whole achievement. That made it hard for his followers to approach this subject openly and freely (Fliegel, 1975).

Later works, such as Edith Jacobson's "Wege der weiblichen Überich-Bildung" of 1937 (published in English translation in 1976 as "Ways of Female Superego Formation") appeared in what was already the period of the Nazi regime, a time which saw the persecution, exile and murder of Jewish psychoanalysts. This work was republished for the first time in 1978, during the course of the renewed discourse in PSYCHE on the feminine in psychoanalysis.

After the disruption and partial conforming to Nazi policies of the then DPG, the psychoanalytical groups re-founded themselves after the end of the Nazi dictatorship and of the second world war. The DPG was founded in 1945, and in 1950 the DPV, which in 1951 was accepted into the IPA.

Margarete Mitscherlich-Nielsen, with her husband Alexander Mitscherlich, found her way to psychoanalysis. They did not only investigate the German "Inability to Mourn" (1968), but like him and her own family of origin she had held oppositional distance to the Nazi regime. That brought her closer to us women of the post-war generations, who were confronted with the deeds and destinies of our parents during the Nazi dictatorship and the war, and with the guilt of the German people over the Holocaust.

She was born in 1917 in Graasten a small town in a region of Denmark bordering Germany which had had a changeable history, belonging sometimes to Denmark and sometimes to Germany. Her mother, with whom she strongly identified, was German, a teacher with close connections to the middle-class women's movement. Her father was Danish and a doctor.

Looking back, she saw in this constellation a motive for her later choice of career: "At all events it was often heavy going to see myself being shaped by two parts of the family that thought in such contradictory ways, and nevertheless to build a feeling of inner security. In my youth it was not infrequently the case that scarcely had I identified with one part of the family and its friends when I came into contact with the other part, which represented completely different opinions and positions. I mean that my choice of career can be explained in terms of this situation – namely of being confronted from an early age with two frequently discordant ways of thinking, feeling and judging. Because what was demanded of a psychoanalyst was what the borderland situation demanded of me: on the one hand to identify oneself with one's patients, to empathise with them, and on the other to distance oneself from them, which means understanding them and simultaneously bringing them closer to the unconscious motives for their behaviour, to enable them to look at themselves and their relations with their fellow humans in a different and new way" (1994, 319).

Alexander Mitscherlich founded PSYCHE in 1947 and in 1948 the department of psychosomatic medicine in Heidelberg, where Margarete Mitscherlich-Nielsen also worked. 1960 he took over the direction of the newly established Sigmund-Freud-

Institut, which was set up in Frankfurt. Here psychoanalysts and social scientists carried out research under the same roof. Their dialogue was stimulated by psychoanalyst guests from other European countries, especially England, and from the USA. They helped to bridge over the breach within psychoanalysis in Germany. Like many of her colleagues at that time, Margarete Mitscherlich-Nielsen went to London for her training analysis, in her case with Michael Balint.

Her first publication in *PSYCHE* (1960) dealt with a Balint group session with women doctors from the Society for Conscious Parenthood in England (a branch of the International Parenthood Federation), which advised women about contraception. Many of these women had, however, "to struggle with deep-rooted problems, such as their sexual relations with their husbands in the first place or, what was obviously common, the extremely difficult and tense relationship to their own body" (234). They needed, in this specific consultation situation, the open way of listening and talking which psychoanalysis brought to sexuality, just as it was being developed in the Balint seminars.

In her clinical paper on 'Besonderheiten der Behandlungstechnik bei neurotischen Patientinnen' (1961) (Special features of the method of treating female neurotic patients) she discusses how women fend off their desires for love and recognition in the transference, for example by criticising or devaluing the analyst, because of internalised prohibitions, suppressed aggressions, feelings of inferiority and the need for punishment. She warns at this point against an inappropriate or hasty interpretation of the patient's penis envy, because this only "increases the woman's feeling of her own worthlessness, making her desire for love appear even more hopeless and grotesque, so that she has to defend herself in a yet more self-punishingly aggressive fashion against the analyst and against her own desires" (1962, 674). The aspects of the woman's self-esteem already discussed here, and their inner and outer dynamics, were and remained her subject.

The civil rights movements and the student movement in what was then West Germany in the 60s were directed against the dangers of a revival of National Socialism and fascistic tendencies. The question, of how a National Socialist dictatorship, the Holocaust and the war of extermination had been able to come about at all, occupied and troubled many, but also triggered absolutely massive defence and hence intense conflicts and controversies. In their book "The Inability to

Mourn" (1968) Margarete Mitscherlich-Nielsen and her husband developed psychoanalytical theories about this, and their ideas resonated with the growing interest in political and personal emancipation at that time. Added to this was the significance then ascribed to repressed sexuality for the emergence of the 'authoritarian character' – in the sense of T.W. Adorno and W. Reich – which was deemed to make those possessing it particularly susceptible to submissive ideologies and the Nazi dictatorship. In the 60s and 70s this discourse sparked comparably wide public interest in psychoanalysis, an interest which was carried further by the boom in education at the time. Not the least consequence of this was that not only more children in general but also more girls were staying on at secondary school until the final examination and being accepted for university education. In addition, neuroses were legally recognised in 1967 as illnesses needing treatment, and the health insurance system took on the costs of psychoanalytical treatment – within prescribed limits. Since then most psychoanalysts have participated in the provision of psychotherapeutic care within the framework of the public health care system. The opportunity this created for earning a living as a psychoanalyst with a practice encouraged many adherents of psychoanalysis in the 70s, to undertake psychoanalytical training, so that the institutes enjoyed a real boom during this time.

The interrupted psychoanalytical discourse on femininity was revived in the late 60s, and especially in the 70s, in both Europe and the USA. As was already apparent in the 30s, the relation to the mother in the Oedipal and pre-Oedipal constellations of conflict and relationship in adulthood were now the main focus – as for example in the ideas of Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel (1975) and the collection of essays published by her (1964), which also presented the papers of the interrupted former discourse. The fulcrum of psycho-sexual development and identity formation of the woman shifted on to the pre-Oedipal conflicts with the mother. In addition there came the emerging significance of empirical research in developmental psychology, which at that time was nearly synonymous with the name and work of Margret Mahler and her colleagues. According to their observations, the development and contouring of gender-specific self and object representations occurred alongside the conflictual movements of the psychic symbiosis, separation, rapprochement and individuation between mother and child. Here the father received new significance, the triangulation through him opening up to the child in the pre-Oedipal phase an alternative to the mother.

In what was then West Germany the discourse on the development of the woman received significant impetus from the re-emergent and newly emergent women's movement, which grew out of the student movement. The anti-authoritarian attitude of the student movement created an ongoing awareness of the dynamics of an ideology of submission, suppressed aggression and assertiveness, especially in relations between the sexes.

Margarete Mitscherlich-Nielsen influenced that discourse in numerous lectures and publications, in her journalistic activities and as joint publisher of PSYCHE. As no other woman psychoanalyst, she directed her gaze not only on the inner world, along with its unconscious dimension, but also on the outer world of cultural-social, historical and politico-economic relationships and their unconscious influence on social traditions and gender-related roles and norms. She inspired 'inner-analytical' discourse from the feminist perspective and feminist discourse from the psychoanalytical. To this end she also addressed the interested public at large, not only women. However her psychoanalytical-emancipatory credo was always to make conscious to herself and to others the complexity and the paradoxes of actions which are determined by the unconscious, conflictual and object-related nature of human beings.

While she criticised the psychoanalytical theory of development, she took the psychoanalytical method that Freud had developed to be fundamental because it made it possible to examine and undo the consequences of society's double morality and of the individual's taboos and inhibitions against remembering. Like Karen Horney before her she questioned the anatomical sources and the universality of penis envy. On the basis of more recent research she regarded the concept of phallic monism as being as out-dated as the myth of the vaginal orgasm. She criticised even more the intimidating effect that such theories had on women. And she made clear that the dynamic interrelationship between the woman's sexuality as she experienced it and her internalised conflicts and emotional relationships is far more complex than had previously been recognised. Further, she showed that the triad of masochism, passivity and the turning of aggression against the self is in no way 'typically feminine' and a given of nature.

She stressed the significance which the attitudes, values, moral concepts and phantasms of the parents had for the development of their children's feelings of

inferiority or self confidence, and she was critical of the way that psychoanalysis took these so little into account. She pointed out the persistent, trans-generational chains of unconscious identifications in the handing down of gender-specific images and roles to both sexes. Thereby she hypothesised that masculine aggression and devaluation of the woman derived from the early development of the boy, if a radical 'dis-identification' (Greenson) and an abrupt separation from the mother had intensified his earlier conflicts with her and demanded from him a masculinity in the sense of hardness against himself and others. The identifications of the girl with the mother, on the other hand, are more complex because of the enduring similarity and closeness to the mother, as also because of the often greater mutual ambivalence. Hence it is harder for many women to attain autonomy and self-determination. For both sexes it is the imago of the early all-powerful mother on whom one depends – even if bound up with hate and tendencies towards devaluation – which can provoke strong feelings of guilt and lead to 'moralistic masochism'. From clinical findings she concluded that the fear of castration in the boy and the man corresponds in the girl and the woman to a more intense fear of losing love, which leads to a greater need for recognition and confirmation and to the adoption of parental identifications and blamings. Anal-sadistic conflicts thus receive greater weight and lead to a splitting of idealising and (secret) contempt. "The lower a woman's feeling of self-esteem is now – the less she was able to develop a structured, securely-established self-image – the more she remains dependent on external objects for recognition. That makes her an easy prey for feelings of envy and jealousy, and brings with it the risk of regression to earlier forms of object relation. Identifications then remain close to imitation, or introjections of 'out there' are formed which can result in fear and/or a feeling of guilt, in fragmentations of the self- and/or body-image, which perpetuate the penis envy" (1978, 692).

Her works on the lifelong psychic development of the woman follow a clear line. She subjected not only psychoanalytical concepts but also gender roles to a critical revision which was aimed at examining the so called 'weaknesses' of the woman in terms of the potentials and strengths hidden in them, and at outlining the conditions under which genuinely feminine and potentially self-confident and self-aware women could develop.

She thus gave women the courage to become aware of their strengths, and she posed a great many questions –for example: What are the consequences of women’s unconscious identifications with patriarchal phantasies and traditions? Could feminine attitudes, both individual and societal, turn into regulative male aggression and dominance? In what way can the erosion of gender roles and the better understanding between men and women contribute to a more satisfying way of living together and to the defusing of sado-masochistic conflicts? What could be the implications of the stronger objectal relatedness of women and the milder or else even tougher character of her super-ego? Does this lead to a more flexible way of dealing with rules and laws, less rigorous and rigid, taking more account of human peculiarities – or to more willingness to be accommodating in the search for recognition and confirmation?

She also brought up for discussion the ‘submerged’ constant passive aggression of many women, which they convert into masochistic ‘accuser-victim’ attitudes while unconsciously living out sadistic, controlling or destructive tendencies. She made a very direct plea to question our own attitude of innocence and accusation, to overcome fears of our own aggression and to learn how better to endure and analyse feelings of guilt – rather than to fly into an “illness of hope”, as she called it, which she had observed in many women (1985, 9). This brought her both the charge of being too aggressive as well as the accusation that she was watering down the analytical understanding of the ambivalence and aggression conflicts between mother and daughter and women in general.

Her message of transforming alleged female weaknesses and drawing from them strengths, self assurance and self worth, spoke very strongly to our generations of women, as well as stimulating and emboldening them at that time of breakthrough into emancipation. Because we quite often chose paths which no-one in our families had ever taken. Our own mothers, with whom we struggled, frequently had many of the features of the traditional woman – and we did not want to become and live like them. Margarete Mitscherlich-Nielsen fitted also into our search for new role models.

The resurgence of the discussion about female development in psychoanalysis and the contributions of Margarete Mitscherlich-Nielsen have stimulated a whole range of research activities and works. Standing for many others I would like to conclude by taking a few examples from these. The discourse about femininity in terms of

psychoanalytic theory has been further retraced and deconstructed – especially by Christa Rohde-Dachser (1990, 2003). Originating in the study of the early relationship with the mother, the homosexual relationship of the woman as being of fundamental significance for female development and identity formation, has been researched by Eva Poluda-Korte (1993), for example. The understanding of masochistic phenomena has been decoupled from the conceptual affinity between 'feminine' and 'moral' masochism and the influence of the gender of the analysand and the analyst on transference and counter-transference processes has been looked at by Almuth Sellschopp (1999). Psychic development has increasingly been understood as a lifelong process, in the course of which the basic psychic conflicts, as well as our identity, are again reworked. In this way later phases of life have come into view, such as middle and old age. Gertraud Schlesinger-Kipp (2002) is one of those who has dealt with the transformations in women's internalised conflicts and relationships at the menopause.

My starting point in relating Margarete Mitscherlich-Nielsen's ideas and her significance for the discourse on femininity and the women of the post-war generations was my re-reading of her work. I did this to see what her ideas can teach us about the conflicts and developmental problems of women from mid-life and elderly women. Although to us many of her ideas, which at the time gave rise to controversies, have today become self-evident, the conflicts they describe are still current, even if now and then seen from a different perspective. I found the re-reading very stimulating for the understanding of my older as well as my younger female patients. Because in their families of origin, too, the consequences of war and exile, for example, continue to have an effect alongside family traditions and in the relationships between grandmother, mother and daughter: traditions which for example lead to parental expectations of being taken care of by the daughter for their whole life, and especially in old age, in order to avoid (further) losses. On the daughter's side this also leads to massive fears of separation and loss, grounded in shared or borrowed feelings of guilt and repressed aggression. One finds the lasting effects of identifications with the mother interwoven with specific traditional role expectations in German as well as in immigrant families. The destinies of sado-masochistic conflicts perhaps polarise gender relations less today, or less obviously so, but on the inner stage, even with my younger female patients, they do not

appear to me to have lost their presence and clinical significance. The same is true concerning the vicissitudes of envy-conflicts.

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