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Left alone to hold the baby

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Abstract

This paper reports the observation of a young mother of Bangladeshi ethnicity who grew up as part of an extended family in London and had recently had an arranged marriage to a husband from Bangladesh. It examines some of the difficulties she faced as a new mother in the light of the loss of her own mother when she was a teenager.

Keywords: *Death of mother's mother, Bangladeshi, arranged marriage, loneliness, dislocation*

Introduction

The mother I observed, whom I shall call *Azra*, is part of a Bangladeshi community living in London. Azra was the third child in her family; she has a younger brother and an older brother and sister. Azra was only 15 when her mother died. Her role in the family was one of looking after her older brother's baby son *Fareed*. At the age of 18 she had an arranged marriage to a young man whom I shall call *Javed*. The wedding was in Bangladesh. In the same year her father married a woman in her early 30s from Bangladesh. Azra was 21 when she gave birth to her son, whom I shall call *Zamir*. Azra, Javed and Zamir moved home twice during the course of the observation, first from living with Azra's father into temporary accommodation in a flat on the 15th floor of a tower block, and later to permanent accommodation in a flat in another tower block, again on the 15th floor. Thus, the experiences of change, separation, loss and gain intrinsic to motherhood were accompanied by other changes, also in their way disturbing.

Becoming a mother is a significant change in a woman's life and involves a number of emotional challenges. Her perception of herself changes and her thoughts turn to recollections of how she was mothered. A mother-to-be is also faced with moving from being her own parents' child to being the parent herself and, like all important changes in our lives, this arouses painful feelings of loss. The giving up of being the child, with its concomitant feelings of being displaced, is made easier if there has been an experience of having been emotionally held and contained by a mother in infancy. According to Melanie Klein, impending motherhood stirs up profound longings from one's own infancy. She wrote:

There remains in all of us an unsatisfied longing for an understanding without words, ultimately for the earliest relation with the mother. This longing contributes to the sense

of loneliness and derives from the depressive feeling of an irretrievable loss (Klein 1963, p. 301).

The longing for a perfect symbiotic understanding with one's own mother is revived in a mother-to-be, who phantasises that she herself harmoniously meets the needs of the baby inside her. This infantile phantasy is challenged by the separation involved in birth of the baby, when the mother is faced by the reality of a newborn infant whose needs she cannot completely understand or meet.

The sadness and loneliness involved in mourning the loss of the phantasy of a perfect mother–baby understanding are made easier to bear when the new mother has the presence and support of her own mother. Giving up this idealised phantasy is more painful when the new mother has lost her own mother, particularly when this has happened in childhood. When a mother has died the child feels that his destructive feelings have played a part in his mother's demise. The child feels ambivalent towards his mother for dying, which results in the loss of her as a good object and leads to feelings of loneliness.

The emotional challenges in becoming a mother were particularly difficult for Azra. Her preoccupations with her own mother inevitably brought feelings of bereavement and loss with them. She felt isolated and bereft and found being alone very difficult. Melanie Klein wrote: 'One of the roots of loneliness can be traced back to the infant's need to split off his destructive feelings into the mother, turning her into a persecutory figure and leaving the infant feeling insecure' (Klein 1963, p. 301).

Azra's ambivalent infantile feelings were exacerbated by the subsequent illness and death of her mother in her teens. Because of Azra's insecurity she was dependent on the presence of her family for reassurance and to mitigate her profound loneliness.

The setting

The house that Azra and Javed lived in belonged to Azra's father and was situated in a busy commercial area of London, close to a market, which was teeming with colour and life. Once Azra had married she would normally have lived with her husband's family but because they lived in Bangladesh this was not possible. Instead, Azra and Javed lived with her father and stepmother and their two small daughters. Her younger brother and her father's two foster daughters also lived in her father's house. Her younger brother dressed like any young Londoner – in casual jeans and a baseball cap – unlike Azra and the rest of her family whose clothes were more traditionally Muslim. Azra treated her older sister with a lot of respect and sought her advice about most things, especially when it came to bringing up children.

Azra clung to the familiar environment in which she had grown up. She did not venture out of the immediate vicinity and her comments implied that she felt most safe surrounded by people of her own race and culture. Perhaps she lost the most important point of reference when she lost her mother.

First impressions

I first met Azra two weeks before her due date at her father's house. I was struck by Azra's tendency to say what needed to be said and no more. There was never any small talk and there were long, sad and empty pauses in the conversation. I was not sure whether my presence was a source of comfort or discomfort to her and I felt awkward and a stranger in

her home. I wondered if she had agreed rather passively to being observed, perhaps as she had agreed to an arranged marriage; someone in authority had asked her if she would like to have an observer and she had complied with the request. This might culturally have been seen as appropriate, but I think her compliance was born out of a marked lack of self-esteem. In contrast to my feeling an outsider and not altogether wanted was her wish that I would be a mother figure and particularly a grandmother for her baby. She asked me if I had any grandchildren and when I said, 'Not yet', she seemed pleased.

Arranged marriage

Azra told me that she had had an arranged marriage in Bangladesh when she was 18. She said at our first meeting:

We had gone home to Sylhet and when we were on the beach my father saw a young man. He met the man's family and arranged the marriage.

She spoke in a perfunctory and abrupt manner, which conveyed how she had experienced the process of finding a husband as an abrupt change. Although it is the custom in her culture to have arranged marriages this had happened neither to her older sister nor to her brother, who had married his girlfriend. Her father had married a woman who was not much older than Azra, which might have been why he had wanted her to get married and had found a husband for her. The way Azra spoke conveyed that she felt hurt about being treated differently from her siblings. Nonetheless, Azra was close to her father, seeming in awe of him and keen to please him.

Azra did not talk about her husband much at this meeting and I wondered about her relationship with him. Javed had grown up in a small town in Bangladesh where his parents and most of his family still lived. He deeply missed his family and mother country. Azra did not have her own mother to turn to for support but neither did she have her mother-in-law, because she lived in Bangladesh.

The extended family

In contrast to the subdued conversation between Azra and myself were her young half-sisters who kept coming into the bedroom bringing with them a lively curiosity. Her half-sisters' liveliness was an antidote to Azra's feelings of emptiness and loneliness. When I asked one of the little girls what her name was she looked at me shyly and did not reply. Azra said, 'She is very shy'. I think Azra felt shy in my company and needed the presence of her half-sisters to hide behind and to contain her discomfort. She alternated between acting like a child of a similar age, treating them as if they were rivals, and behaving like an older sister who was put in charge of them.

Azra was soon to become a mother, which would be difficult for her because she would no longer be able to rely on the younger members of her family to contain her feelings of inadequacy and displacement. She said, 'I have looked after my sister's children but it will be different having my own baby'.

I think she hoped that having a baby would lead to her feeling important to her baby and husband and increase her self-esteem. She showed some concern that the reality might be different. Azra's life experience had been different from and more complicated than that of either her half-sisters, who had not lost their mother, or her older siblings, who had not had arranged marriages. Towards the end of the first meeting with Azra she did share her

worries with me. She told me that her placenta was in the wrong place and that she was due to give birth by caesarean. I wonder if she felt unconsciously that being a mother nurturing a baby rather than being nurtured would put her in the wrong place. She said, 'I am going for a pre-operative appointment at the hospital tomorrow', adding rather sadly, 'I wanted to have a water birth ... I wanted to have a normal birth'.

As the birth approached Azra became anxious about what lay ahead. Hospitals aroused fear in Azra because of their association with her mother's illness and death. I asked her what she had seen when she looked at the scan of her son and she replied simply, 'His heartbeat', adding nothing more, as though she was relieved that he was alive and not dead inside her. She told me she was afraid the baby would get stuck. I wondered whether Azra expressed her feelings of being stuck when she told me about her placenta being in the wrong place. Perhaps the conflict for Azra was expressed in her description of her placenta that she was not ready to change and move in order for new life to begin. She was ambivalent about losing a symbiotic relationship with her father and embarking on a new life as a wife and mother. I think she was ambivalent about change because it meant loss and even death.

My first inkling of the way Azra dealt with loss and displacement was in this initial meeting with her when she told me in a flat matter-of-fact tone that her mother had died of lung cancer. This loss had come at a crucial time in her development when her identity was changing and she was becoming a woman. In describing this loss to me she seemed cut off from the feelings of loss and grief associated with the death of her mother. When it was time for me to leave Azra said goodbye abruptly and immediately closed the door behind me. It seemed that she wanted me to experience and contain the hurt she felt whenever there was a separation.

After Zamir's birth

Despite her fears Azra had a straightforward delivery. Although the baby was kept in hospital for a few days because of jaundice, he was otherwise well and Azra had not needed to have a caesarean because the placenta had moved. I visited her when the baby was five-days-old. Zamir's birth was deeply reparative for Azra. She was being a loving mother to her baby, which put her in touch with warm feelings towards her own mother. Her creativity was stronger than her resentful and destructive feelings and her beautiful baby was the living proof. She felt special because with her new baby she was the centre of attention and there was much socialising with both her own and Javed's relatives. I witnessed the beginning of a loving attachment between Azra and her baby. Azra said that she had been pleased to see his face. I sensed her relief at seeing her son alive and well. She said with some pride and pleasure that the feeding was going well.

Zamir at five days:

I could see Zamir's head and he was feeding rhythmically and gently from Azra's left breast. Azra looked calm and peaceful.

Azra told me that since being back in her father's home Zamir had slept well. Azra felt safer and happier there, where she felt cared for by other members of the family and was able to give more attention to Zamir. Apparently he had cried a lot in hospital especially during the night and she had to contain these raw emotions alone, which she found very difficult to do. Consequently Azra did not want Zamir to cry.

Azra said 'sh-sh-sh' when Zamir made a small cry. At the sound of her voice his expression calmed and he looked around the room with curiosity.

Azra wanted Zamir to remain peaceful and contented; when Zamir was in this state of mind there was a close and loving contact between them.

Azra wanted me to see his face and turned him towards me. His forehead creased and his eyes, which had been closed, began to open. His eyes widened showing their whites. [I thought that he looked alarmed.] He looked around the room, still showing the whites of his eyes. He had a slightly yellow tinge to his complexion, which made the skin on his face glow. His gaze was steady and he looked at me. He began to open his mouth as though yawning and then closed it again and repeated this several times. He looked at Azra stretching his head backwards in order to see her.

I was struck by his large dark searching eyes and I was impressed by his lively interest in the world and me. He seemed to be tenaciously trying to find his mother and connect with her, which he did by stretching his head backwards. I wondered whether his intense looking and opening and closing of his mouth were to incorporate his mother and me into himself.

He then began to hiccup, his little body jerking with each spasm, but he did not seem to mind or to be upset. He again widened his eyes so that the whites showed. He seemed removed from the external world concentrating on what was happening within his body. There were some noises and flatulence.

Zamir alternated quickly from being contented to being upset and disturbed by something taking place inside him. I wondered if he was trying to manage two very difficult processes, lovingly taking in something good with his eyes and more violently expelling something bad from his bottom. Zamir surprisingly did not cry and complain about the uncomfortable feeling somewhere in his body but tried to manage the discomfort himself. In this observation I witnessed a loving calm relationship between Azra and Zamir but in contrast the more turbulent feelings were expressed between Azra and her nephew Fareed. The birth of her baby had stirred up in Azra feelings of being displaced and put down. She found these emotions painful and with no internal or external mother to help her with them she deflected them into Fareed.

Azra said 'Fareed was a bit jealous when he first saw the baby'. Azra said to Fareed 'Whose baby is it?' He did not reply and she repeated it. [I found this a bit taunting.] ... Azra said, 'Who is best, Fareed or the baby? Is Fareed first and then the baby? Is the baby first and then Fareed? ... I think it is Fareed first and the baby is your brother'.

The feelings projected into Fareed no doubt matched his own feelings, and towards the end of the observation it became too much and they burst out.

Fareed was holding the curtain cord, which had a wooden handle. He suddenly threw the curtain cord and handle into the corner of the room and it made a loud noise as it hit the wall. Azra was sitting in this corner feeding the baby.

Azra moved out of her father's home when Zamir was 11-days-old. I visited her in her new flat on the 15th floor of a tower block. She felt lonely and cut off from her father who lived some distance away.

Zamir at 16 days:

Azra said, 'It is quiet here after all the noise in my father's home' . . . She sat holding the sleeping Zamir in her arms. She sat in silence looking intently at him. [There were many silences and in them she became detached and the room filled with her loneliness.] Azra smiled at Zamir and then tickled his feet. She smiled at him again and put her finger into his tiny fist, which he held tightly. Azra said, 'I want him to stay awake during the day'. He stirred and his eyes rolled and then they closed. He seemed to be sucked into sleep, which he was unable to resist . . . One of Zamir's hands cradled the other hand. He smiled and Azra expressed her pleasure at seeing him smile . . . He smiled again even though asleep his whole face seemed to transform and light up. He then suddenly turned red and seemed to be defaecating. He moved about disturbed by this violent internal experience. Azra said, 'He does not like it when he does a poo and he cries and shouts. I have to change him immediately'.

Azra looked lost in a sad reverie that wrapped around her and she seemed distant and alone. My presence helped to pull her out of her depressed state of mind and she tickled Zamir's feet to get a lively response from him. Zamir responded to her overtures with loving smiles. I wondered if the way he cradled one hand in the other was an expression of his being held by his mother. These intimate moments were containing for both Azra and Zamir. Azra did not find it so easy to deal with his distress and wanted to remove those feelings quickly, as she did when she quickly changed his nappy. In keeping his distressed and angry feelings at a somatic level he was fitting in with what his mother could manage.

The fourth observation took place during a visit to her father's house and not at her new flat. Her father had been away in Saudi Arabia and had just returned. It had been Christmas and I had taken two weeks off. I phoned Azra to say I would like to come that week but she put me off until the following week. When I arrived to see her at her flat she was not at home, so I left a note saying I had called. She did not ring me so I rang her and arranged to see her. There was a gap of a month before I managed to visit her. It was especially painful for her because she knew that Christmas was a time of celebration and enjoyment. When she was not there when I visited her I felt let down by her. I thought Azra was annoyed with me for not visiting her for two weeks.

Zamir at seven weeks:

I came in and sat on the sofa where Azra had put Zamir who was sitting in his car seat. Azra said, 'Would you like to hold Zamir?' [I wondered if she wanted me to hold Zamir because I had been lost to her by leaving her over Christmas and holding him would have established contact with him and herself.] Azra had left the room to make a cup of tea for both of us. Zamir jerked suddenly and violently, which alarmed me. I wondered if he could catapult himself out of the car seat . . . He moved violently again and I decided to steady the car seat. He struggled and his breathing quickened and then he quietened. Azra came into the room and asked me if I had had a good Christmas.

Zamir's reaction to Azra's departure was powerful. He showed alarm and fear that he tried to eject out of himself through violent movements. However, he did not cry and show his distress so he did not get the comfort of being picked up and comforted by Azra. She talked to me about her Christmas but did not seem to notice Zamir's distress. They seemed to inhabit different worlds.

Azra looked at Zamir and said to me wistfully, 'I shaved his head'.

The custom of shaving a baby's heads happens when they are seven-weeks-old and is thought to help the hair to grow back more thickly. I thought Azra was telling me about her ambivalent feelings about shaving his hair off. She was afraid of hurting him so in the absence of her own mother she had asked her step-mother to shave his head. Azra was able to communicate her sad preoccupations to me ostensibly about removing his hair. Perhaps she had felt her father's absence and mine as a severing of the relationship, leaving her feeling cut off and alone.

Azra said, 'My father does not think Zamir has grown' ... 'He used to weigh six pounds and now he weighs ten pounds'. [Her father's lack of reassurance seemed to have undermined her and added to her loneliness.] 'I feel lonely in my flat and I come here often. It is so quiet in my flat'. She told me that her sister was about to arrive.

Azra expressed a need for a mother to turn to for reassurance and looked forward to my coming, as she looked forward to the arrival of her older sister.

Weaning

Azra was able to enjoy breastfeeding Zamir when her infantile needs were being attended to, as she felt when she lived as part of her father's household. This all changed when Azra and Javed were rehoused and moved into their temporary accommodation. The arrival of Zamir with his needy feelings stirred up the hungry infant inside her and her own needs overwhelmed her. There were now two hungry babies in competition with each other.

Zamir at eight weeks:

Azra had decided to wean Zamir from the breast. Azra said, 'When I only breast-fed Zamir he was always attached to me and I could get nothing done. He was very demanding'. Zamir was feeding quietly and calmly from the bottle while Azra was talking.

Azra felt overwhelmed by Zamir's persistent request for food and attention. She was concerned that she did not have enough to give him and that he was not putting on enough weight. She wanted some distance from his needy feelings and her own. I think it was difficult for her to breastfeed Zamir because the hungry baby inside her felt left out and deprived of that much wanted close relationship. It was a safer arrangement to feed him with formula milk because she felt more separate and in control. The death of her own mother added to the poignancy of the situation. Azra had neither an internal nor an external mother to turn to for comfort and support.

The observer

Azra wanted Zamir not to be too dependent on her and she did not want to feel too dependent on my visits or too vulnerable. When I tried to arrange to see her she frequently cancelled the visits. On one occasion when I arrived to find her not at home I telephoned her father's house and was surprised to find that she was there. She told me she had forgotten that I was coming. I suggested that I come straight away to see her but she told me she was going out and to come another time. I felt hurt and dropped and annoyed at having made a long fruitless journey. I was fortunate to have had an opportunity to share my feelings with the research seminar group leader and the group I was attending as part of the research project. Through the support of the group I was able to process my hurt feelings and to think about them as belonging to Azra and as reflecting her way of communicating them. Whenever there was a separation from me she felt I was treating her disrespectfully. This upset her and she felt compelled to act out these painful feelings.

There were occasions when she demonstrated her attachment to me and valued my visits. My seeing and commenting on Zamir's loving attachment to her increased her self esteem and she felt capable of mothering her son. However, when it was time to leave at the end of an observation I think Azra felt differently towards me. I changed in her mind into someone who did not want to be with her and she was quick to shut the door behind me. The stairwells in the apartment block in which she lived were neglected and I came across some youths taking drugs there. I felt afraid when I left her apartment – suddenly the door would be shut behind me and I was outside. There was no transitional space between the safety of inside and the dangers of outside. I wondered about this abrupt feeling to the ending of each observation and whether this was how she experienced her mother's comings and goings and eventual death.

Azra's withdrawal

I visited when Zamir was two-months-old, just after Azra had attended the funeral of Javed's aunt.

Zamir at eight weeks:

I asked if she was okay. Azra said, 'Yeah, the funeral was last week'. [She did not convey any concern and I was reminded of the detached manner in which she told me of her mother's death.] Azra said, 'Zamir has been grizzly all day'. Zamir was in a baby bouncer on the floor near to where I was sitting.

Being put in a baby bouncer was an encouragement to him to grow up. Zamir seemed keen to leave the helpless baby stage behind him. However, he did not like the baby bouncer because he could not move around in it and he felt trapped and confined.

Zamir started moving his body in jerky movements. He looked at me with his eyes wide open and they had a frightened expression in them. Azra left the room. Zamir's hands were closed into fists and he brought them violently down by his sides. He kicked his legs away from his body with force. He moved one leg at a time and his whole body seemed to writhe as though there was something painful inside his abdomen. He seemed to be trying to expel something uncomfortable and distressing from his body. He began to cry

and then after more violent movements he fixed his eyes on me and calmed momentarily. He again became restless and agitated.

Azra seemed to be projecting her distress into Zamir whom she described as being grizzly. Zamir had to contend both with his own miserable complaining feelings as well as those of his mother. It seemed to me that he experienced them as a pain in his belly. He tried to expel his distress kinaesthetically by violently jerking his body (Bick 1968). He seemed to try hard not to cry, perhaps out of a fear that if he did so he would collapse and fall apart. Zamir searched desperately for a containing object so he tried to hold onto my presence by looking intently into my eyes. This appeared to work but only for a short time. Like Zamir, Azra felt contained and whole when she was with other people but this was difficult to sustain when she was on her own. Azra announced that she was going to have a bath. She anticipated that I would soon be leaving and I think she did not want to feel vulnerable so she took control of the leave-taking and said goodbye.

Azra left the room. I noticed that Zamir became agitated and his arms began moving about. His right hand knocked one of the hanging toys, which leapt into life. Zamir looked at it momentarily. His legs started to move independently of each other but he did not cry. He was sick and brought up quite a lot of milk which dribbled out of his mouth and onto his bib. This happened again and more milk dribbled out. He was still constantly moving about.

Azra's departure had upset Zamir and he turned to his toys to steady his turbulent upset feelings. However, the toys did not contain him but seemed immediately to deflect his agitated feelings back at him. Azra's abrupt speech and restless moving about upset Zamir who felt uncontained and alone. He was sick perhaps because he was unable to digest and process his anger and distress at being suddenly abandoned. I think that Azra felt similarly upset whenever she was left alone.

In an observation when Zamir was three-months-old I saw how Azra imagined that Zamir felt as lonely and cut off as she did. She felt consoled when Zamir was happy and enjoying the company of the extended family. On that occasion I arrived at her flat but she was not there so I rang her again on her mobile to find that she was at her father's house, where I managed to see her. When I arrived Azra told me that her father had gone away for a month on a pilgrimage. I wondered if she felt let down and forgotten by her father, rather as I had felt when I arrived at her home to find her not there.

Zamir at 12 weeks:

Zamir dribbled and she told me, 'In my culture when a baby dribbles the mother's hair falls out and my hair is falling out at the moment'. Azra looked at Zamir and he smiled warmly at her while making soft gurgling sounds. Azra's face lit up and she smiled again at Zamir. Azra said, 'Zamir likes coming to my father's house because there are so many children here. It is like a nursery'.

I found it interesting that it is the baby who dictates what happens to the mother's hair. I wondered if Azra was telling me how affected she was by her son's state of mind. When he was lonely and sad then she was deeply affected and was also lonely and sad. Azra attributed to Zamir her liking of her father's house with all the lively young children who congregated there.

Separation and loss

I had just begun to feel more comfortable about visiting Azra when she told me rather abruptly that she was going back to work soon. I was taken aback because suddenly I felt in danger of losing the mother I had come to observe. I was beginning to feel hopeful that my relationship with Azra was secure and then out of the blue it was disrupted by the threat of a premature separation and loss. There was some pressure on her to go back to work because her husband was unemployed and they were worried about money. Javed was not behaving like her father who ran a successful business and supported his family. The relationship between Azra and Javed was strained. The notion of having to go back to work and leave Zamir had disturbed Azra. I wondered if what I felt was a reflection of Azra's infantile experience of feeling prematurely dropped when separated from her mother. In going back to work Azra feared that Zamir would feel abandoned, as she had done.

When Zamir was five-months-old Azra told me that she had changed her mind and decided not to go back to work.

Zamir at five months:

Azra seemed happier and more settled in this observation. Azra said 'My Dad said I should stay with Zamir for a year and Javed has found a job so it is okay. I will go back to work just before Zamir is a year old. I wanted to go back to work but I prefer to be with Zamir'. She kissed him again. Zamir waved his arms around as though wanting to hold onto Azra.

Azra was pleased not to be going back to work because she was anxious that Zamir would come to some harm whenever she left him.

Intimacy

I visited Azra when Zamir was six-months-old. She told me that she had just got home from having a driving lesson and that she had been anxious about leaving Zamir while she was out, even though it was with his father.

Zamir at six months:

Azra sat down and looked at Zamir who was in his baby chair. Zamir looked intently at Azra and then at me and then back to Azra and again at me. I laughed and said, 'Zamir knows that we are both looking at him'. Azra smiled and said, 'He is normally noisy but when there is someone around he does not know he becomes quiet. My dad says that I was a noisy baby'. Zamir turned away from us and became absorbed in watching the TV. Azra said 'I am worried whenever I leave Zamir'. Azra looked lovingly at Zamir who returned her gaze and then she smiled at him to which he responded with a warm smile. [It was the first time I had seen Zamir's legs and feet in a relaxed position and not pressed hard on the floor.] While we were watching Zamir he was suddenly sick. Azra left the room to get a tissue and Zamir began to hiccup.

Azra was concerned about leaving Zamir because in her mind he would forget her and she would become a stranger to him. Zamir had looked ill at ease and puzzled by the attention given to him by Azra and myself. He seemed to be trying to work out the relationship

between us and I wondered if he felt left out. I noticed that he turned away from both Azra and me to the TV, as I had often seen Azra do when I was engaged in conversation with her. Zamir was sick as though he could not quite manage feeling upset by her absence followed by an intimate interchange with her. I wondered if it was difficult for him to restore her in his mind as a loving mother.

Azra disappeared into the kitchen and Zamir strained his head backwards to see where she was and he began to shout and cry out. Azra came in and put a soother into his mouth. [It felt as though she was putting a stopper into his mouth to prevent his protestations.] Azra roughly pushed his chair near to both where I was sitting and the TV. Zamir dropped the soother out of his mouth and made noises, which had a screeching quality and were not imitating speech. He looked again at the TV and became absorbed in the music emanating from it. Azra bent down next to Zamir who lunged towards her finger and grabbed it firmly. He tried to put it into his mouth. Azra said 'no' firmly. She commented to me that he was grabbing everything. He began to shout and made singing sounds in a loud high tone. He flailed around and Azra responded by picking him up. He struggled and would not sit on her lap. They seemed unable to be close without a tussle. Zamir flailed around lurching from one side of his mother to the other. Azra made him sit down on her lap facing away from her but he did not like this position for long and she put him down. Azra said, 'He prefers to stand up'.

Zamir's anxiety was difficult to contain as he was constantly on the move. Zamir's need to survive led him tenaciously to hold onto his mother to the extent of forcefully grabbing her finger. It was painful to watch the struggle that went on. He seemed not to want to be a dependent baby. He had developed a precocious pseudo-independence through using his strong and athletic body as a means of psychically holding himself together.

Azra was concerned about managing her son's behaviour particularly as he got older. She voiced her concern to me, as she might have done to her mother.

Azra said that a relative had told her that there were always stresses and worries with children and that it gets more stressful as they get older.

Later in the observation Azra shared with me some intimate moments between herself and Zamir.

Zamir began to grizzle and Azra picked him up somewhat roughly and stood him up. After a few minutes she tried to put him down on the floor but he resisted by keeping his legs straight. He sat down and fell over and rolled onto his front. [I was stuck by his need to manage and not to cry and show his vulnerability.] Azra said that he was tired and again picked him up. Again he struggled trying to get away from her. She took him into the bedroom. [I noticed the beautiful and gaily-coloured throws and bolsters in his cot.] Azra said, 'Javed's mother made them all'. [The embroidery on the material was very attractive and must have entailed a great deal of work and dedication.] Azra said, 'It took my mother-in-law two months to make them'. She patted Zamir's back and put on some music – Brahms' Lullaby. I said I would leave the room because my watching him was a distraction. Azra joined me and we stood together just outside the bedroom looking at Zamir through a crack in the door. There was an intimacy between us and we both enjoyed watching Zamir playing gently with his toy duck. He was stroking the duck's face with his hands and making sing-song noises while looking at it. His legs moved about,

kicking the cushions at the side of the cot. His attention seemed focused on his toy, which he held with one hand while waving it about over his head. Azra smiled. I said that he was able to go to sleep on his own now and she nodded.

I was standing close to Azra as we both observed Zamir through the crack in the door. It felt like a grandmother and mother watching together and I realised how much she missed the support of her own mother and her mother-in-law. I think Azra felt contained by my presence and Zamir felt held in his mother's mind so he could bear being alone.

A dangerous world

During a visit when Zamir was nine-months-old Azra vividly conveyed to me her fears of being shut out and abandoned in a hostile and dangerous world in which loving parents were absent and therefore unable to protect their vulnerable babies. She asked me to come to her father's house where she was with Zamir and Fareed. Her father had been away in Saudi Arabia with his household and Azra clearly felt left out, as she was no longer part of his immediate family. As soon as I came in Azra told me that she was afraid of a daddy long-legs in the front room and she asked me to remove it for her. I did so and, in an attempt to reassure her, I said that the daddy long-legs was dead. I quickly realised that her fear was related not to just the daddy long-legs but particularly to a dead one. Fareed was playing with a large and noisy gun.

Zamir at nine months:

Azra said to Fareed, 'The daddy long-legs is sleeping'.

Azra wanted to protect Fareed and herself when she said that the daddy long-legs was sleeping. Her fear was of a dead daddy coming back to haunt her and I was reminded that she was frightened of the cemetery outside the flats.

Azra was looking out of the window waiting for her brother's car. [There was a feeling of loneliness as she stood by the window waiting for him to arrive.] Fareed stood up on the sofa and stepped over me in order to see out of the window. Azra became annoyed and said, 'A daddy long-legs will definitely get you in the night'. Fareed said, 'There are more flies in Dada's house'. Azra said, 'It is because there is a garden and because you are naughty that is why'.

When Azra spoke of the flies in her father's house she quickly continued with the phantasy that these flies or babies were sent to punish Fareed for being naughty. Fareed became afraid and upset about what he had done. I think Azra's own guilt and remorse were being projected into Fareed.

Conclusion

After a few months of the observation, Azra only wanted me to visit her in the flat and not in her father's home. It was in the flat that she felt acute loneliness and needed my presence. She needed a mother figure to help her cope with the transition from living as a child with her father to moving into being an adult living an independent life. I think separating from her father was associated in her mind with losing her place in the family and being shut out.

When she felt forgotten she found Zamir's distress to be a source of irritation; while at other times, when she felt valued and he was quiet and responsive to her, a loving exchange ensued. Zamir had internalised a mother who could not contain his distress and so he rarely cried. Because Zamir did not cry he deprived himself of the comfort that would have strengthened his belief and trust in her as a good object, whether or not she was physically present (O'Shaughnessy 1964). Azra was unable to bear her upset feelings about the ending of the observation and so every time I turned up to say goodbye she was not there. She found it difficult to hold onto my supportive presence: as soon as she became aware of my importance to her she was put in touch with the pain that, like her mother, I would leave her. It was when she was separated from a parental figure that Azra became upset and angry. These feelings filled her with persecutory guilt and she feared that she deserved to be abandoned and left alone to hold the baby.

It took until three months after the end of the observation for Azra to be able to see me. When I arrived at her flat she was evidently pleased to establish contact with me and both she and Zamir demonstrated their attachment to me. I think it was important to Azra that I was resilient and able to take her rebuffs and still want to see her. Zamir was resilient from birth, constantly seeking out his mother and tenaciously holding on to her. During the course of the observation, my persistence in visiting her brought about a change in Azra's attitude towards me. She grew to trust me and this coincided with a strengthening in her relationship with Zamir.

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