'Benign' Regression and Creative Resilience: A Case Study during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The present paper documents and analyses a case attempting to explore the experiential journey of a young Bengali woman during the first wave of covid-19 pandemic and lockdown. The present subject, referred to as 'S', was a young Bengali working woman of 21 yrs, living in Kolkata. Qualitative methodology was followed. Interview method with open-ended questions were opted for, attempting to cover personal experiences, experiences with romantic partner and family, and expectations of the future. The interview was conducted virtually, as there was a complete lockdown in India and any sort of travel was restricted during that time. Transcription and coding have been followed by thematic analysis. Psychodynamic perspective was considered to further analyze the data. The analyses reveal a metamorphosis within the subject from denial to acceptance, from attacking and escaping from reality to protecting herself and closed ones. The global threats, the bouts of trauma and its associated impacts, however numbing and choking her previous coping mechanisms, the creative expressions and a state of 'benign' regression was helpful and guided her to move towards development of resilience and a successful post-traumatic growth.

Keywords: Covid-19; Death anxiety; Creativity; Benign regression; Resilience; Self and object preservative drive

INTRODUCTION

The diverse impacts of COVID-19, being an absolute example of how a biomedical crisis can supersede every functioning system of human civilization, at once, has almost completed its two year anniversary, and still continues to have a lingering presence over broader social functioning. Epidemics have threatened human civilization and survival since ancient times. As Pasini writes,[1] "Plague, smallpox, syphilis, cholera,

tuberculosis, influenza have changed mankind's history for their impact on men's life and health, and their demographic, financial and social effects. The great epidemics created panic and anxiety as they decimated entire populations. If one single person's illness or death represents a tragedy for his/her family, the collective death adds on feelings of impotence and fear concerning men's fate". The outbreak of Covid-19, too, was not an exception.

The present paper, in this context, narrates and analyses a case, reported during the first wave of the epidemic. The authors attempt to portray the vital role of creative thinking and benign regression in developing resilience and self and object preservative drive throughout the journey of experiencing losses, existential anxiety and struggle to combat them. The discussion attempts to observe and document, not to modify or amend the individual's journey.

CASE REPORT

'S' was interviewed in August, 2020 during the partial unlock process in India, after the complete three months lockdown during the first wave of the Covid 19 pandemic. Her office had been closed since March, she got confined to home with her parents, a younger sibling and grandmother. Father, a businessman, had to endure a loss during the lockdown. She expressed, she was experiencing frequent low mood, irritability, lethargy, sleepiness throughout the day, and conflicts with her mother over minor issues during this time.

Three months later, her workplace opened and she came out of her confinement. Her narrative post-unlock consists of walks between workplace and home as boon, spending time with self and mother, being more comfortable than before.

DISCUSSION

The discussion has been segmented under two subheadings: identifying her losses and associated experiences and the internal dynamics.

Her losses and associated experiences

Loss of touch

The essence of life, to 'S', being a performer and music teacher to children, her roots of survival were the 'touch' of quotidian life. As obvious, 'S' experienced distress from social disconnect. Her favorite activities were always seasoned with friendships. In her words, "I like people, [...] eating out" or "cooking at home with a friend". Talking about the changes that took place during lockdown, she mentioned - "I like people and food basically … so both got cut off". Tibère explains the juncture of culture and food,[2] making the culinary environment a symbolic representation of 'Self, Other and living together'. Food and social life, both connecting to the sense of belongingness, food is the element that can be devoured and involves all sensory mechanisms. Food completes the experience of socialization with a vigor, with a sense of fulfillment and pleasure. This whole system produces life energy for her to perform.

She mentioned singing as her second nature. But, says, "when I sing a song, I like to dive into it| dive into it | forget reality | … | but then also connect it with reality". Singing, too for her, needed a real setting, which if might be said, are the audience. Performing arts, which she referred to here, also has a history of collective

action.[3] May be subtle, the social distancing has increased the friction, and may have pushed humans adaptive instincts a little more.

She also pointed her finger at the street dogs of her area, who apparently were missing her touch ("Even the dogs looked sad cuz i was not petting them"). As she tried to articulate what touch means to her, she expressed, "But to lose the touch, that's torture". The fear, she tried to explain, transcending the boundaries of civilized language, a prelingual sensation of intense companionship, cohabitation, directs towards a fear of death.

The core unconscious representation of any contagion is that the enemy (virus) happens to stay among or even be one of us, which consequently give rise to a set of defenses involving splitting and projection. "A ... characteristic of novel, fatal epidemic disease seems to be a widespread fear that the disease may be transmitted through any number of different routes, through touching anything and anyone. The whole environment, human, animal and inanimate may be rendered potentially infectious".[4] Here stems the anxiety that our love will destroy our loved ones.[5] The "good object" instantaneously Turns into a "bad object", familiar becomes unfamiliar, safe becomes unsafe. As it can be seen in 'S's expression too ("I couldn't pet the dogs in my area (…) Out of fear (…) I fed them from a distance". "This can be incorporated in my habit even after we are all covid free …. Not wanting to pet street dogs.").

Loss of privacy and personal space

For 'S', home had painted her life with a melancholic blue as she turns to her closest humans to connect to ("I see my grandma quite often … She is known to be difficult … But I guess I have figured out the secret to deal with her"). Previously an option that had become a necessity for her - communicating with family members (Before I was dealing with differences by avoiding the not so favourite parts and working around it | I am learning how to deal with it by working through it now"). Previously a land with the boundaries defined, had started dissolving, resulting in a gradual fusion of work and personal space. Practice of privacy was at stake ("Plus a sorta lack of privacy arose").

Loss of autonomy and freedom

"…I felt that human beings are gonna lose the natural aspects of life and interaction through this very soon". 'S' had been talking about her thoughts surrounding the socioeconomic and political backdrop of the pandemic while she mentioned "digitization" and in connection came the loss of a 'natural aspect'. The conversation led to her future prospects of higher education and job which - "will be digitized" ("Even my work after that might be digitized and I will be stuck home"). Uncertainty and a feeling of entrapment connected the sociopolitical context with visions of her future under the effects of pandemic ("Personally i felt that the college i applied to for my MBA will be digitized... and i will never be able to leave kolkata and experience new life…"). Control over her future seemed impossible, she felt "hopeless" ("And it's another thing when that something is suddenly not possible to attain, something that u craved and worked for for years, Hopeless is the closest word for it").

Lack of articulation and incoherence

Throughout the journey that 'S' narrated, she was constantly striving to comprehend the situation. Moving back and forth in time, she continued her attempts of assimilating information regarding the pandemic ("I asked my friend (the intern doctor) about the truth of the scenario"). She was presenting her ideas, arguments, as she reviewed and criticized the policies such as announcements of nationwide lockdown, social distancing,

digitization, pointing towards their ineffectiveness, futility, possible negative impacts on individual and society ("So it just feels like a series of events that could've been avoided"). The inability to articulate bore frustration within her.

The internal dynamics

Amidst the lockdown, 'S' began to identify several psychological problems creeping within her. Initially, forms of denial, attacking and escaping were at play. ("...Before I was dealing with differences by avoiding the not so favourite parts and working around it...", "...I am learning how to deal with it by working through it now…"), her existing defense structure had started failing. Her confinement due to the halt in the everyday so called 'normal' world could represent a symbolic psychological death. Creativity was a large part of her pre-pandemic identity. "I ran out of songs because everything was meant for a pandemic free world" - is indicative of a perceived loss of identity, followed by her attempts to rediscover the lost self through the same creative generation, as she mentioned in one of her statements.

Trying to be productive was also not working, as she mentioned "But then that stopped when I was realising that things were not changing..." She began to question her preoccupation with being productive during the pandemic. As days passed by, she started feeling lethargic and at times, desired to escape the harsh reality with slumber sleep ("I was lying around all day"; "I called it hibernating", "it was pointless to wake up early"). This constant cycle of wanting and not wanting to be productive amidst an environment which is unlikely to change in the near future, left her feeling exhausted and fatigued with sleep in mind but not in the eye. This condition persisted for almost four months.

This state of 'S', though apparently looked like depression, was probably a form of regression which may be a self-chosen 'pause' to her life. In her own words "I stopped being productive and just stayed a bit depressed". This phase of "depression", as 'S' represented and explained it, resembles more of a regressive phase than a typical "depressive" one ("Like powering through this and waking up to a new day", as she expressed). Here it can be mentioned quoting Milner that "This might be not only a defensive regression,[6] but an essential recurrent phase of a creative relation to the world". For 'S', this might be a potential space between her inner world and the actual external reality. This space, providing a safe base to play, facilitates her growth, as playing plays an important role in growth and health.[7] As days passed by, around four months later, house-chores were shared by the family, and she, coming out of her passive regressive phase, taking part in the collective existence, started making breakfast, connected herself with the smallest unit of society at her home. This small unit somewhat replaced her unit of friends, and provided some amount of non-virtual socialization, involving touch and other traditionally ignored sensory dimensions. While she entered the kitchen space with her mother, she started empathizing with her mother's mental and physical positions in general ("Most are things they have the right to ask for like doing chores even when I'm exhausted because they are old and they are far more exhausted and if I refuse to do something they can't get out of it") and differences are gradually put aside and treated with sincerity. ("My mom might say I'm more helpful than last winter"; "So I guess I think twice before throwing a tantrum these days"; "I am learning how to deal with it by working through it now"). She learnt to perceive outer reality, the object (pandemic and its consequences) more objectively than before and respond to it rather appropriately.

This phase, which may be referred to as 'benign' regression,[8] was a scope for searching her 'self' too. She yearns to gain autonomy so as to search for her lost 'self'. As she herself expressed "creative expressions became fearless". She learnt to protect herself and others. ("Like doing chores even when I'm exhausted"; "So i understood what sort of burden my father has to carry"; "I am […] Sometimes singing") This self and object preservation are the result of a process of psychic development, steadily building preservative structures, which then limit the power of the death drive.[9]

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