

Mothers of Unseen Children: The Invisible Child

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ABSTRACT: Losing a child is a very traumatic experience and one that creates different nuances in the lives of those left behind. Survivors or tormented is a matter of perspective. Loss of a child many times reside in the realm of silence. Words or silence or a combination of the two seems to connect the 'Mother' to the 'Absent child' (for the world) with the ever 'Present child' (in the world of the 'Mother') who carry 'The Invisible Child,' along with them every day. The current paper will focus on the identity of a 'Mother' who has lost a child to sudden/unexpected death, their grieving process and the representation of loss in their lives through an exploration of the world of mothers through two interviews undertaken as a part of PhD work in the Indian context. Exploration of Tutter and Wurmser's understanding of grief, Lifton's concept of 'Death Guilt' and 'Psychic Numbing,' and Parkes and Prigerson's theory of 'Dual Process of grieving' will assist in understand the lives of mothers engulfed in dealing with their personal losses and continuing to live with/without their children. This exploration includes my personal journey along with these mothers. This paper is an attempt to explore this new world. Mothers were approached directly for participation in the PhD work, context provided and consent was taken to participate and share their life stories of loss of their child/children who provided their accounts largely as a combination of the English and Hindi language.

KEYWORDS: Grief theory, Identity, Loss of Child, Mother, Sudden/Unexpected death

Introduction

How many of you have personally experienced or known about the death of a child in the life of someone? Some of you I'm sure, some of you would have read about loss through news or incidents in the world. Loss of multiple infants in a hospital due to lack of oxygen or death of a child in a hit and run accident or even the murder of a child are not alien to our experiences. The loss of a child is a very traumatic experience and one that creates different nuances in the lives of those left behind. What are the processes that help parents survive the loss of their child? Loss of a child to illness is difficult for parents but when the death comes suddenly and unexpectedly, it jars those alive and creates deadness at the same time. This paper is about loss of a child that remains in the world of parents, sometimes put into words but many times residing in the realm of silence. The two seem to connect the 'Mother' to the 'Absent child' (for the world) with the ever 'Present child' (in the world of the 'Mother').

I use the terms 'Absent child' and 'Present child' deliberately. I use the terms 'The Invisible Child' and the 'Child Who Cannot be Seen' more cautiously. These simple yet abstract terms capture the world of the parents. While rituals may have been involved like burial of a child or cremation what inevitably follows is a world of silence in the world of the parents, where the child should remain a part of the past and the present and future should continue without any reminders of 'the event' or 'the episode.' Some may argue that is not the case in the Indian context. We are more in tune and empathetic to such losses, thus much more supportive. However, I will only ask one question here, "How many of you have broached the topic of loss again when a

parent spoke about their loss without feeling any discomfort?" I would be surprised if a few of you could honestly answer yes to that question.

I lost my child when she was 16 days old in the year 2004. Her name was Aarushi and it will be her birthday anniversary on the 28th of October. It would have been her 15th birthday had she been alive. Her death anniversary is coming up on 13th of November. Both her birthday and death anniversary have a special space in my life, one I remember every year and celebrate, now in the realm of silence as it is expected that I should have gotten over the loss by now. However, I want to emphasize that the loss of child never goes away in the world of a parent, they always remember!

The current paper will focus on the identity of a 'Mother' who has lost a child through a miscarriage, after birth or as an infant, their grieving process and the representation of loss through the lives of two mothers in the Indian context done as a part of my PhD work. This paper will briefly explore Tutter and Wurmser's understanding of grief, Lifton's concept of 'Death Guilt' and 'Psychic Numbing,' and Parkes and Prigerson's theory of 'Dual Process of grieving' to understand the lives of the mothers.

Grief, memory and beyond

A book by Tutter and Wurmser entitled 'Grief and Its Transcendence: Memory, identity, creativity' approaches Grief through the lens of both Tutter and Wurmser. Tutter (2016) refers to the conflict between the need to remember and the wish to forget (Tutter and Wurmser 2016, XXIII) which accurately captures the grieving process in a simplistic way. Tutter states that Freud's experience of death closely shaped his theory in 'Mourning and Melancholia' summarized by him as, 'mourning involves a painful process of reality testing, during which ties to lost objects are slowly withdrawn while the mourner oscillates between remembering them when they were alive, and remembering that they are now dead. It is not difficult to understand why loss must be "remembered" at all: often, the fact of loss is for some time incomprehensible, let alone acceptable. Moreover, when we sustain a loss – whether that of our beloved, our home, or our youth – we lose a part of ourselves, at least temporarily, and in some instances, forever (Tutter and Wurmser 2016, XXVI-XXVII).'

Freud lost his daughter Sophie who was twenty-seven-year old during the Spanish flu epidemic and his grandson Heinz or Heinerle, son of Sophie to tuberculosis. Many state that grieving is only a temporary process and one gets over the loss, I firmly believe that it is not the case. One only learns how to live with their losses. Tutter writes about Freud's experience of loss nine years after the death of Sophie and six years after the death of Heinerle through a letter he wrote to Ernst Jones about his intense grief after the loss of his grandson:

'Sophie was a dear daughter, to be sure, but not a child. It was only three years later, in June 1923, when little Heinerle died, that I became tired of life permanently (Tutter and Wurmser 2016, XXXI).'

Freud experienced the loss of his daughter as well as the loss of a grandchild, the losses are incomparable. Tutter states, 'Freud might have written of the losses as separate in his representation of the same but his concept of *nachträglichkeit* reflects how in losing Heinerle Freud experienced the loss of Sophie yet again which Tutter refers to as another double death. (Tutter and Wurmser 2016, XXXI).'

The subjective experience of loss becomes imperative in understanding the grieving process and memory. As Wurmser states in the same book written with Tutter, 'authenticity in such an exploration is only possible when it is done with great and personal specificity (Tutter and Wurmser 2016, XXXIII).'

This paper is an attempt to be precisely the same kind of work as described by Wurmser in working in the difficult

space of loss, grief, mourning and memory as an end product. Wurmser emphasises, ‘love, which made grief almost unbearable, was at the same time its antidote (Tutter and Wurmser 2016, XXXVI).’

Memory becomes imperative in the mourning process, dealing with and moving on after loss can be helped or hampered by rituals and relationships. Permission to mourn and remember are largely shaped by relationships and if an individual does not find space within existing relationships, it is not uncommon for new relationships to develop including one with one’s own self, a changed self for the world but one that cannot be changed back to what it was before the loss. This at times can result in difficulty in maintaining existent relationships resulting in breakdown of marriages, family ties and friendships. The need to remember and the wish to forget on an individual basis and through one’s relationships, the mourner is caught unaware sometimes leading to breakdown and at other times to a certain pervasive deadness. Wurmser describes the lives of the mothers beautifully by defining trauma as: ‘we can define trauma as an overwhelming, unsolvable external conflict between self and environment that leads to a conscious, but unsolvable inner conflict (Tutter and Wurmser 2016, 124).’ Loss and trauma in the wake of the death is understood as a way of expression of the process of mourning.

An Aerial View on Loss and Grief

Parkes and Prigerson (2010) posit: ‘Bereaved people oscillate back and forth between grieving and the other demands of life, eating, sleeping, caring for surviving children, etc (Parkes and Prigerson 2010, 59).’ Their emphasis on this process of oscillation has been a focus of many and is referred to as the ‘Dual Process of Grieving.’ In their book on Bereavement, they share the story of a tragedy that occurred at Abernethy, in Wales where 116 children lost their lives in a school in 1966. They state: ‘visiting the burial place of the children became an important part of the life of bereaved mothers, and the wish to stay close to the dead children was the reason given by many parents for not moving out of the village (Parkes and Prigerson 2010, 61).’ Murray and Prigerson explore the area of continuing attachment through their book by focusing on how this attachment to the dead person can help in adjustment and also delay or complicate the process of dealing with the loss (Parkes and Prigerson 2010, 68).

Guilt and shame became inevitable presences in one’s life experience. The theme of ‘Death Guilt’ emerges clearly through the work of Lifton seems to bind all the content together. He writes, ‘No survival experience, in other words, can occur without severe guilt.’ While remembering the loss of my own child, ‘death guilt’ and ‘survivor guilt’ took on a whole new meaning. In his writing, he managed to create a distance from his self and his work through a concept Lifton called ‘psychic numbing.’ His concept of ‘psychic numbing’ comes back to me as a lived out reality in the lives of parents who have lost a child to sudden death through the interviews in this work.

The process of mourning described by Freud in the text includes, ‘the survivor’s need to come to gradual recognition of the new reality, of the world which no longer contains that which has been lost (Parkes and Prigerson 2010, 525).’ Andre Green writes in ‘On Private Madness’ in the chapter, ‘The Dead Mother’: ‘...if the mother is in mourning, dead, she is lost to the subject, but at least, however afflicted she may be, she is there. Dead and present, but present nonetheless (Green 1986, 164).’ Duration of the mourning process varies from individual to individual, we enter into this world through the accounts of the mothers.

A glimpse into the lives of mothers

Ms. A lost her 55 day old daughter in 2007. Baby was born in March and died May 14th. The mother had a total of 6 pregnancies and has one living daughter. Ms. A shared, “It is very difficult to explain what really happened (ki kya hua) and then there are so many accusing fingers on you as a mom that you feel what as such did I do (maine aisa kya kiya hain)? Then, my husband said that whatever has happened has happened and you have to get over it fast because you have to. For something that has happened, there is one person here who is getting affected (referring to the living daughter who was almost 7 years old at that time).” Ms A stated, “Picture we keep, actually we’ve kept it at such a central place. I feel like she has been an angel and she’ll come back to us somewhere or she’s taking care of us from there. Every day, when I do my morning prayers, I just look at it for a minute. I look at it every day but others cannot see that (Mein dekhti rooz huin lekin bakiyoh koh nahi dikhta hain). My husband lost his younger brother when he was in class 12. He also lost his father when he was very young. So, my mother-in-law does not really allow to have the photographs everywhere. She will say things like you will not let her go if you keep remembering her. So, I have kept one photograph hidden somewhere but... (Toh maine kahi hide karke ek photograph rakha hua hain but...).”

You can get a glimpse into Ms A’s world after her loss, “I say this child because I have a difficulty in naming her all the time. I am not able to name her. I feel that (Mujhe lagta hain) it was a deity that came through me that I cannot name. You know, this is the first time I have spoken about her and not cried. I don’t know why, I am also wondering because this has never happened (aisa kabhi bhi nahi hua). Yes, I am actually talking about her or maybe it’s the first chance I’ve ever gotten to speak openly. I’ve never been able to, everyone is like leave it, leave it, what is the point of feeling sad about it (chodo chodo, dukhi hone seh kya faiyda) and there are certain people with whom you just don’t feel like sharing because they’re too superficial. People who would not understand what you went through and most of the time I’m careful because my daughter is around so I don’t say anything (toh main bolti nahi hu kuch).”

Accusatory voices of society altered Ms. A’s identity and being. She elaborates, “What they want to think, let them think (Ki jo unko sochnah hain, soche), I stopped bothering about it but then maybe it was affecting somewhere down below. But, then these behavioural things like you must not have made her burp, you must have choked her (tumne burp nahi karaya hoga, tum neh choke kara dia hoga), these were hurting me more. I mean what mother would ever want her child to go especially after she has undergone so much of pain. I would not want her to be unhappy in anyways. That is what used to affect me most (Woh mujhe bohot zada affect karta tha) at that point but I thought it’s futile. People who are not concerned, why they are saying this in front of me, so what explanation do I give to these people (Jinko itni concern nahi hain, ki iske samne kyon bol rahi ho main yeh sab baat, toh inko main kya explanation doin)?, forget it. And I’ve had many deliveries after that, total six pregnancies.”

The absent child remains present in the life of Ms. A. She explains the child had never been seen by her after being taken to the hospital, “Yes (Hain) and they just came back and told me this happened, and this happened (ki aisa hua tha, aisa hua tha). I still fight with him (husband) sometimes that you didn’t even bring her to me even once (tum ek bar bhi lekein bhi nahi aiye), you did not allow me to see. Even now (Abhi bhi), we were crossing that place while coming to it this time, we came via another way. It is very close, just 6 hour drive from the other way. Again, I was thinking about this episode, here, this happened (yaha, yeh hua tha), in fact I told my

husband we will not go to the same hotel.” Her child was buried, last time she saw her child was before she was being taken to the hospital in transit during a journey.

Her identity has altered with the multiple losses she has experienced. Ms. A elucidates the same in terms of her relationship with her mother-in-law and others in the family who find her altered over the years. “It’s just that I have said that she (mother-in-law) is not going to stay with me, in my house. (Starts crying) I would expect a woman to understand all this...All her kids, all five of them are elder to me but they are all like she is childish, she is simple, she is like this (woh nasamajh hain, woh siddhi sadhi hain, woh aisi hain). All the daughters are supposed to be simple and I am supposed to be the wicked one, despite age they cannot understand the things. Okay, fine (Theek hain) I’m wicked, now, that is just fine (bas abh theek hain). I have accepted I’m wicked and you get out of my house, that’s it (bas). That’s what I am. I’m not bothered what anybody thinks.” This is not an unusual experience reflected in the lives of many people after the loss of a loved one, especially the loss of a child. She ends on this note, “They all feel it is okay. But, it’s not okay, it’s not okay. When you are having those live kids, it’s a different story. And when the kids are not there, it’s a different story. There is a loss you cannot explain to others, they cannot feel it.”

Another mother, Ms. UB had eight miscarriages, ranging from one month to 21 weeks old pregnancy. In her voice, “Eight miscarriages happened, in the beginning one month, two three times it was one to three months, after that four months, then five months (Athe miscarriages huin thein, shuru mein one month ka tha, do, thin bar ek seh lekar thin mahineh, uskeh baat thoda char mahineh hua, phir panch mahineh hua). Last one was six months, what I remember, seven months hadn’t been completed. Miscarriage happened at 21 weeks, the last one (Last joh tha, six month ka tha, joh mujhe yaad hain, ki seven month pureh nahi huin thein, do hafteh rehtain thein, 6 ½ kehelo. 21 week mein miscarriage hua tha, last wala joh tha). It was all very painful, I would never wish that anyone goes through this journey, first time it happened we thought because it was because we had sexual intercourse during the pregnancy, that is why it happened, so we stopped being sexually intimate but it was still happening, miscarriage (Baaki toh bohot painful raha hain safar, mein nahi chahugi ki koi, kisi koh bhi is dhor seh guzarnah padhe kyonki first time hua toh humeh laga ki ham log pas ateh hain toh is liye hua, ki hum pas aateh hain toh iski waja seh par humne woh bhi bandh kar diya, toh phir bhi ho raha tha, miscarriage). But, in India, there is no awareness according to me, there is no awareness in the family, even the doctor did not suggest any such thing and then it is also due to one’s economic class also (Par India mein mere hisabh seh awareness toh hain nahi, nah toh family mein awareness hoti, nah doctor neh hi aisa kuch suggest kiya aur kuch yeh bhi hain ki economic class hone ki wajah sein).”

While sharing about her experience Ms UB states, “Many emotions, much efforts, fondness and one dreams that this time it should be fine (Kitneh emotions, kitni mehnat, kitna lagav aur ek sapna hota hain ki is baar theek ho jayega). Each time there is a hope, based on that hope a person can bear all the pain but when one still does not get it (Har bar ek umeed hoti hain, ussi umeed par insaan sabh dukho koh jhel pata hain aur woh bhi na mileh). So, it went on like that continuously (Toh woh chalta raha tha aise lagatar). Each time it would happen that it would break, the water would burst (Har bar yehi hota tha ki burst ho jata tha, pani nikal jata tha). And, once, the Doctor had said, I wish I could put life into it, put a voice because the child was so beautiful, it was a pretty baby boy, just like this (Aur, ek bar toh Doctor neh kaha tha ki kash mein isme praan daal sakhti, awaaz daal sakhti kunki woh baby itna sundar, itna pyara boy tha, bilkul aise). Yes, they showed me, showed the little baby, baby girl also (Hain, mujhe

dikhaya tha, baby bhi dikhayi thi, female bhi). There was one girl, seven boys were miscarried (Ek ladki thi, 7 ladke theh mircarriage mein)."

She describes her absent children, "One time it was really small, but the body is made by three months, can be identified in a three month baby fetus also (Ek bar bilkul chota sah tha par body toh theen mahineh mein baan jati hain, identify ho jati hain theen mahineh wale baby mein bhi). And, the one that was five months, that one looked like it would just make a sound, it just needed some care (Aur, joh paanch mahineh wala tha nah, woh toh aise lag raha tha ki abhi awaaz nikaleh aur abhi thoda sah care ki zaroorat hain). They were beautiful, really fair and such sharp eyes, like a beautiful baby is right (Bohot sundar thein, gora chita aur itneh thekeh nain nah, jaise sundar sah baby nahi hota)? And, when they showed like that, one suddenly felt like what is all this that is happening (Aur jabh unhonein aise dikhaya toh ekdam seh aisa laga tha ki yeh kya ho raha hain). Why in front of oneself, one's own flesh and blood can be seen, so that was very painful, that one (Kyoin apneh hi samneh, apna hi heesa dikh raha ho, toh woh bohot dukh dayik tha, woh wala)."

Ms UB also shared, "In a miscarriage there are pieces and pieces, that is a really bad experience, I don't even want to remember all that (Yeh miscarriage mein toh tukde tukde hotein hain toh bohot gande experience thein, mein toh yaad bhi nahi karna chahati). What is the point of having a pregnancy in which the delivery is not getting completed, when it is incomplete it can only give pain (Bhai uss pregnancy honein ka koin faida nahi hain ki agar time peh delivery nahi ho rahi hain, incomplete hoti hain kyunki woh toh dukh hi deta hain). Reason turned out to be scientific only so I never felt that I needed to wander for the lost, that should happen, I should read some mantra or remember some God (Scientific hi nikla tha toh mann mein kabhi bhi nahi aaya ki mein uske liye bhatku, ki woh ho jaye, mein koin mantra padh lu ya koin bhagwan ko yaad kar lu). I feel that, if I really tell the truth then in the end I felt what I am running after, if it was supposed to be mine it would be with me (Mujhe lagta hain, bhalki mein sach bolo tho mujhe last mein yeh lagneh laga tha ki jis cheeze keh peeche mein bhag rahi hu, agar yeh mera hota toh mere pas rehta). When I pulled myself together, then the thought that my mind gave to me was that these children came to only give me pain, the reason for the pain so I pulled myself together (Jab maine apne aap koh sambhala toh mere mind neh thought yeh diya tha ki yeh bas dukh dene aaye thein bache toh yeh toh dukh keh karan hain, toh maine na apne aap ko sambhal liya tha)."

Her coming to terms with her loss is captured when she shares, "I stayed restless for over a week and after that, I put my heart at rest by making it understand that they were never mine, if they were mine then they would never have left me and gone (Hafta bhar toh pareshan rahi aur baad mein apne dil koh yehi kaheke samjhaya ki yeh mere theyin nahi, agar mere hoteh toh mujhe shodh kein nahi jateh). Only, this one thought I remember, in between there was an incident that I experienced (Bas yeh ek last thought mujhe yaad hain, in between mere saath ek ghatna bhi ghati thi). When I was in the OT, the time I am telling you about, we got late in coming out of the OT (Jab mein OT mein thi, jis bar mein bata rahin hu ki bohot late ho gaye thein hum, bahar aane mein). Normally I would be out by 3 PM, but on that day it was past 6 PM and I also feel that maybe I had died that day (3 bajee mein bahar aaja thi normally par uss din mein 6 baj gaye thein toh mujhe bhi aisa lagta hain ki shayad mein mar gayi thi). And I said yes to myself, that no I want to live, like a thought that came out of my mind that no, I want to live (Aur maine apne aap koh yes kiya ki nahi mein jeena chahati huin, jese thought mind seh nikli thi yeh ki nahi mein jeena chahati huin). Like someone had come to get me and was trying to lift me up, so I told them, I told (Jesse koin leneh aaya mujhe aur mujhe utha raha hain, toh maine useh bola hain, bola hain). That time I was under anesthesia, yes but I remember that this incident happened with

me in the OT (Uss sameh anesthesia tha, hain par mujhe yaad hein ki mere saath yein incident OT mein hua hua hain). But, I knew someone had come to get me and he, my husband, was experiencing the same thing outside, I think (Ki mujhe tha ki mujhe leneh aaya hain aur inko yehi cheeze bahar ho rahi thi ki shayad yeh).” Ms UB’s experiences after multiple losses reflects coming to terms with the loss as well as spiritual/out of body experience to come to accept the losses.

Conclusions: The World of the Mothers

Being exposed to the loss of a child personally as well as through the lives of mothers who experienced the same awakened a desperate need in me as a researcher to understand the real/unreal world of the mothers after the physical death of their child. This paper is an attempt to explore this new world. The women share their losses and how it altered who they were before and after the experience. Ms. A began by sharing the loss of one daughter but multiple losses emerged through the interview. Ms UB shared the experience of loss of pregnancy more than how it affected her life afterwards. Both mothers emerged as being stronger after their multiple losses. The course their lives took before, during and after the experiences cannot be shared completely in this space. For the world, they are a reflection of strong women who came to terms with their losses and what they did with their lives afterwards. Yet, through their experiences what is emphasized is that the losses are a part of them that not only shaped who they are today but remains a part of them for life.

A world of lived out experiences that are 'questionable' to the outside world becomes the new world essential for the survival of the 'Mother' of 'Unseen children.' The paper briefly shows the theoretical frameworks of Tutter and Wurmser, Lifton, and Parkes and Prigerson lived out in the lives of two 'Mothers' through narratives in the Indian context. The lives of the mothers is full of noise and silence, an outer world and an inner world and a special world where the 'Invisible Child' remains present in the lives of 'The Mothers of Unseen Children' for the world at large. The paper has been left open to making your own connections between the theories and the subjective lives of the mothers and in turn, your own subjective experience in the whole process of entering the new world of chaos of the world of 'Mothers of Unseen Children.' This is where they live, this is their reality every day of their lives after the deaths of their children.

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