

# Redefining Dyadic Attachments Post Covid-19- A Psychoanalytic Perspective

## Abstract

While the recent corona virus outbreak continues to take lives every day, threatening the very existence of humanity in different parts of the globe, what is most intriguing for mental health professionals is that it has also been wreaking havoc on the quality of dyadic adjustments ever since. While the growing instances of relational aggression continue to go unreported, one cannot help but notice a remarkable shift in the way one perceives the dyad at least in one's inner fantasy world which is bound to leave us wondering what it would be like, once the initial wave of infections subside.

In this paper, we will reflect on the quality of dyadic attachments during COVID times through the lenses of theoretical models proposed by two prominent Post-Freudian Feminist Psychoanalysts- Melanie Klein and Wilfred Bion, warranting a re-emphasis on the pre-oedipal foundations of personality.

While dyadic attachments here refer primarily to adult conjugal relationships and its significant impact on mental life and living, I would also like to focus on the infantile roots of sexuality, and draw attention to the fundamental infant-caregiver dyads which are in their formative stages during these times of viral invasion, and speculate on the possible long-term consequences it could have with regard to one's choice of love objects later in life.

As Melanie Klein speaks of an infant's attachment to the mother's breast, followed by the identificatory mechanisms of introjection and projection, and the corresponding paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions of the ego, Wilfred Bion deliberates on the role of the maternal alpha function in interpreting the baby's inarticulate emotions, all of which have been strongly impacted by the prevailing pandemic situation.

Likewise, the quality of interactions in adult significant relationships have also undergone a marked transition, owing partly to extreme fears of contracting the infection, and partly to an overriding dependence on virtual networks. This paper would also attempt to highlight the conflicts and contradictions of human interaction within relational frameworks, keeping in mind the far-reaching effects of the COVID situation. We will analyse the threats of the pandemic on intimacy while pinning our hopes on the capacity of the psyche for holistic growth, even in the face of trials and obstacles - of seeking connection and communion amidst confinement, as well as unleashing the real from amongst the virtual.

Feminist Psychoanalysis contends that Freud's notion of female sexuality was heavily loaded with patriarchal notions. Feminist movements viewed psychoanalysis as a discipline centred around differentiation of the sexes- regarding the sexual identity of women only with reference to men. Though initially Freud assumed that psychosexual development in boys and girls were symmetrical, in 1925, Freud recognized the importance of the pre-oedipal phase, in which the mother is the primary love object for both the boy and the girl child, and they both have to relinquish her in favour of the father. The father eventually becomes the object of oedipal attraction for the girl, whereas the boy begins to identify with the father as his masculine identity is established.

The discourse on the importance of the pre-oedipal mother child relationship came to prominence in the post Freudian era, with significant changes and developments in psychoanalytic theory with regard to the origins of feminine sexuality, as not stemming from an anatomical lack (Penis envy), and the later evolution of the object relations school of thought which assumes that an infant's interaction with internal and external objects (persons or parts of a person) are of paramount importance in shaping personality.

According to Melanie Klien, infants form internal representations of objects in the external world, and seek to introject them in concrete physical terms. The first object of attachment for the infant would understandably be the mother's breast- being the primary source of nourishment for him. In the earliest months of life, the baby encounters both the good and the bad breast. Accommodating experiences of both gratification and frustration into the psychic structure becomes difficult, and the ego splits, retaining parts of the life and death instincts, while deflecting

the rest onto the bad breast. On one hand, the infant seeks to control the good breast by harbouring it, and on the other his innate destructive urges create fantasies of biting/tearing or annihilating it. The desire to possess the good breast, and protect it against persecution, makes the infant assume what Klien calls the paranoid schizoid position. From the 5th or 6th months, the child learns to perceive the mother as a separate being having her own needs and desires. He learns to look at the

good and bad breasts as part of a single entity, and eventually becomes more capable of containing some of his destructive impulses. The infant therefore assumes the depressive position. It is however important to note that, these are not stages of development, but positions between which the ego oscillates back and forth. Reiterating what has already been established, the quality of mother child interaction in early childhood, will have longstanding effects on the development of the adult personality.

With the emergence of the COVID situation, while living in a constant fear of contamination could be enough to spark off a train of obsessive thoughts and compulsive rituals for a good part of the population, the archaic fear of the potential loss of a loved one could manifest in a seemingly unexplained difficulty to let go of the tangible, a process which owes its initiation during infancy to his/her attachment to the good breast much before one is able to internalise the maternal entity in abstract terms. The resulting inability to enhance ones capacity for abstraction would lead people to exhibit regressive tendencies more often than not, grappling to find a comfortable position of withdrawal from a conflict-ridden world around.

Contrarily, such a paranoid-schizoid position might surprisingly give way to a heightened tolerance capacity towards the ambivalent responses emitted by the dyadic other used primarily as a protective shield against the anxiety of absence rooted in the strong possibility of an obliteration of existence. This depressive orientation may thus work from the standpoint of protecting a loved one from ones own destructive impulses, originating from an instinctual base. The pent-up aggression that builds within the intimate relationship may come forth in ones interaction with the outside world, often leading to frequent and extreme temperamental outbursts regardless of context. Therefore, a rapid oscillation of this sort may cause the ego to disintegrate very quickly.

Likewise, an obvious consequence of social distancing being called upon as the need of the hour, is a hindrance to the initiation of physicality in any form. The maternal touch which lays the foundation of nurturance and security for the infant, aiding his cognitive faculties to transcend to the abstract, is absolutely necessary for the later developments of ego maturity and resilience.

The very idea of physical isolation coupled with virtual connectedness while helping us stimulate and improve our higher mental abilities, simultaneously leads to the unbridled widening of the gap between reality and fantasy without adequate opportunities for providing checks in between, paving the way for the eventual formation of neurotic symptoms. The person is thus often left scrounging for affection and attention, being unable to find an appropriate object to seek secure attachment with.

Technology, though ever advancing, has its own set of loopholes. A mere possibility of a technical glitch or a delayed/ deprecating response could make one feel isolated and cut off from the rest of the world. The inability to communicate or a feeling of being unheard, even though virtual networks may contribute remarkably to increased levels of stress, anxiety and depression coupled with an acute intolerance for the slightest uncertainty, making solitude look like a bottomless abyss of self-hate and constant negative self-talk. Such an overt dependence on a forum as hypothetical and elusive as the world wide web may create a rapid cycling of euphoric highs and dysthymic lows leaving the psychic structure vulnerable to imbalance and subsequent breakdown.

Looking critically at the fundamental infant-caregiver dyads which are being formed during these troubled times, the building of a corporeal rapport with the mother through the like of holding, nursing or caressing the child, is to a great extent likely to be compromised. The

maternal entity herself being under existential threat fears that the physical language she shares with her baby within the dyad, though intended to be life inducing may in fact turn out to be life threatening, leading to catastrophic consequences. Thus, the complete or intermittent unavailability of the infant's primary love object (i.e. breast)

may give rise to a host of defensive operations, manifested either in aggressive responses towards the object of desire, a longing for the same and parallel tendencies to look out for comparatively

less gratifying substitutes (bottled formula milk, for example) or a complete denial of any sort of distress caused by such a lack. While some seek comfort in projecting the roots of discomfiture onto external causes, others are more likely to redirect the frustrated libidinal energy towards the self, either of which may lead eventually to severe deprivation of resources to mental life in turn having alarming consequences during later years. The internalized despair can further serve to erode one's sense of self or on the contrary lead to a complete reversal of affect, fantasizing of plentitude and abundance even in the face of stark impoverishment. This makes the individual grossly ill-prepared to face the vagaries of life. It is known that the mother's way of relating to the child in the semiotic world conveys the unconscious significance that the infant has for her, in turn accelerating the process of identity

formation. Klien used the term projective identification to describe the phenomenon in which the ego is unable to rid itself of the pain of an unpleasant experience, but instead an identification occurs, with the object onto which the projection is effected. For example, if person A is insecure about his wife's professional success, he unconsciously begins to act in ways that eventually make his wife insecure of her own abilities. Person A is thus able to vicariously establish that his assumption is true. It is important to note here, that while simple projection can occur completely

in one's fantasy, projective identification occurs only in one's interpersonal interactions with significant others. Along similar lines, Wilfred Bion contended, that infants perceive the world in terms of concrete objects or beta elements which are primitive forms of emotional experiences, that must be transformed into thoughts, in order to be comprehended. In other words, the baby projects these unprocessed beta elements onto the mother. The mother experiences the projected

emotions, vicariously identifies with it, and interprets it in a manner that is re-introjected into the baby's psyche, thus endowing an element of meaning and subjectivity. This is known as the alpha function, performed by the mother. For example, if a baby cries in the middle of the night, he projects these feelings of discomfort onto the mother. The mother intuitively experiences the distress and is able to identify it as hunger, and then lovingly feeds the child. Repeated cycles of the alpha function, performed on the baby's unconscious emotions enables his previously fragile ego to develop the faculties necessary for thinking. The process however, is largely unconscious. The failure of the maternal alpha function may result from the mother's inability to respond intuitively to these projections. The mother on this occasion, may unknowingly transmit her surplus anxieties causing the child's vulnerable ego to perceive the triadic world as

unduly threatening to survival and equilibrium (as in the case of the present, covid stricken world) which would understandably stall the separation individuation process. The inability to accept ones own contradictory impulses towards a love object or similar conflictual responses from the external world may considerably deepen an already existing split, making integration extremely difficult, where it becomes even more challenging for the child to perceive and introject the mother's symbolic presence, when faced with a 'real' absence in concrete, physical terms. On the brighter side, this crisis could in time to come deflect the current overpowering focus on the "erotica" to the "Eros" which is the affective component of human sexuality as opposed to the former being the bodily component, leading possibly to the greater appreciation of the nuanced

human qualities like empathy, compassion and sensitivity that cater primarily to the other, though without completely negating the self with a view of consequent ego elevation. It wouldn't be too far-fetched to propose that people would have developed more fluid psychic boundaries and greater emotive capacities in general, during the course of this journey. It is important to note however, that erotica, as a basic element of sexuality though body centric, is by no means synonymous to genitality. A concoction of strong affect-laden bodily connections with the mother therefore accounts for the beginnings of sexuality in the child, as opposed to the popular notion that the oedipal figure assumes an all-encompassing importance. Owing to the current pandemic situation, the eros and erotica are therefore expected to assume a complementary interactive significance to help prevent a reductionist objectification of either the Self or the Other in relationships, in-turn facilitating a holistic acceptance of individuality and overall celebration of personhood.

The 2nd dual instinct theory proposed by Freud in 1920 however provides a larger purview. Eros here refers broadly to the life instinct as opposed to Thanatos, known better as the death drive. The two being in constant antagonistic interaction with each other further contribute to one's developing ego strength. The post COVID-19 era, having resurrected from the ashes quite literally, is almost bound to see a consistent surge in the desire to create and sustain longstanding and mutually fulfilling relationships, seizing to see the 'other(s)' as mere need satisfying entities for self-preservation, thus favoring reconstruction and renewed productivity. Moreover, the harrowing images of human suffering from the world over appears to have appealed strongly to the ego's unconscious to rise above individualistic aims and requirements, hopefully paving the way for collective sublimation and catharsis in the near future. The strong desire to lend a helping hand and to face a crisis as a collective, among today's youth strengthens our belief in the true spirit of humaneness. The spontaneous urge for service to ones community through the like of arranging oxygen supplies/food for the sick shows us how the alpha-function is at work. The unprocessed beta elements in the form of fear, anxiety or aggression projected unconsciously by the larger society is being intuitively sensed by the younger generation, and being transformed into alpha elements of love, compassion and kindness.

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