Zahbia Sarfraz
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The Gaze of the Other

In many cultures, including Pakistan, the gaze of the other is often associated with *nazar* or the *evil eye*: a look believed to bring misfortune, particularly when directed at one's happiness or success. This belief reflects a deeper truth: that being seen by another has power. It can provoke anxiety, vulnerability, and a need to protect the self.

S, a newly married young woman, is extremely anxious. Having spent most of her life feeling invisible within her family of origin, she is desperate to be seen. However, whenever her partner turns towards her – noticing and engaging with her – she shrinks and freezes. The *gaze* she desires is also the *gaze* she fears. She watches her parents-in-law closely, trying to read their mind so she can adjust herself to meet what she imagines are their expectations. But when she performs and they don't respond – they don't *look* - she feels like she might *disappear.* For S, being seen and approved of is essential to her sense of self. The possibility of being seen any other way or not being seen at all is unbearable. The *gaze* holds a lot of emotional charge.

M, a middle-aged woman, has spent most of her life hiding parts of herself from her partner and in-laws. She fears if they truly knew her – her accomplishments and her desires – they would look at her with envy, and that misfortune would follow. To protect herself from this terrifying *gaze*, she shares very little with them. Only her family of origin is allowed to see her fully. As a result, she feels unseen and alone. What was once a great way to protect herself now leaves her isolated and depressed. In M's experience, the *gaze* must be avoided but the avoidance creates intense suffering.

What is less often spoken about, though equally powerful, is the *containing and supportive* function of the gaze. In the Pakistani context, many families live within joint family systems, where not only relatives but also domestic staff are closely involved in daily life. In such settings, the gaze of others: parents, siblings, helpers, can serve to regulate emotional states, diffuse tension, and support the individual or couple in their role as caregivers.

Take, for example, A, a young mother of a toddler: she shared her anxiety about moving to another country with her husband and child. Her concerns weren't only about logistics; they were relational:

Will I feel overwhelmed? Will I lash out at my partner? Will he support me? Will our marriage hold?

In many families, the presence of others often helps hold what would otherwise feel unmanageable. The joint family can provide relief from the intensity of the couple dynamic, and can cushion the demands of early parenthood.

But when that support system is removed the couple may face heightened anxieties. Without the regulating function of "*the third*," tensions between partners can escalate. Emotional reactions may feel unfamiliar or excessive. One partner might say, *"I don't recognize this side of you,"* or *"This isn't who I thought I married."*

These ruptures, while painful, can also be openings. They invite exploration: Who is this unfamiliar part of you? What has it come to express? What might it need?

The unfamiliar parts of ourselves, those that emerge in moments of pressure, distance, or change, may at first feel unsettling. But they can also be seen as invitations: signals from the psyche that something within us is asking to be heard.

In therapy, there is space to receive these experiences with curiosity rather than fear, not to fix or contain them too quickly, but to listen and make meaning. Over time, these moments of rupture can become doorways to deeper self-understanding and connection.

"What we fear most has already happened to us - our own rejection of ourselves."
- June Singer