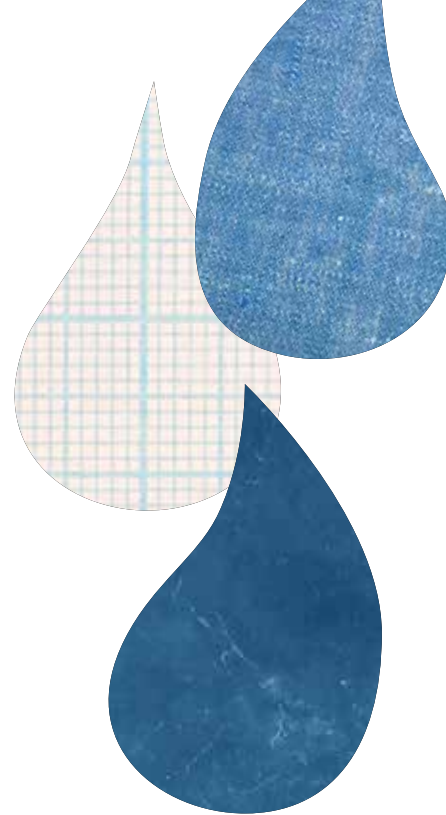


# When **tears** fall

**Sabnum Dharamsi** explores the different meanings of tears in the therapy room



*'We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth.'*<sup>1</sup>

I find tears deeply moving. They express much of my outlook on spirituality in therapy, being both embodied and a window to the heart and soul. This article focuses on Sarra's tears, and different lenses through which we might view them. In seeing each lens discretely, but also noticing how they sometimes overlap, I hope we can see the whole client, with her complexity, situated in all her intersectionality as well as her universality.

## **A biological lens**

In therapeutic work, tears are a regular occurrence – across ages, culture and gender. It amazes me that, though tears are so close to home, the science of them is still a mystery, with current research finding more questions than answers. Maybe tears are unique to human beings; they are certainly universal. Studies show that emotional tears could be chemically different to other tears (such as lubricating tears or those in response to an irritant), possibly containing substances that enable the release of stress hormones.<sup>2</sup> It's complex though, because it is thought that what

brought about the tears and who is with us (or not) when we cry, could impact that composition.<sup>3-6</sup>

## **A psychosocial lens – from a therapeutic perspective**

As I sit with Sarra, watching her tears fall, I am reminded of both the enigmatic nature of tears and how physical they are. Sarra doesn't reach for the tissues, and her tears are the tears of the world. It felt enough in those moments to sit in silence, honouring those tears. The tears are saying, 'This hurts'. My silence is saying, 'I know. And I care'. In talking about my experience of Sarra, I am sharing a way of knowing about Sarra; one that, to me, is one of the cornerstones of therapy; what it *feels like to be with her*.

Sarra came to therapy because she'd experienced financial and emotional betrayals by those closest to her. From the point at which I first met her, I'd been taken aback by her ability to hold it together as she sought to protect herself and her children from the decimation of the family life she'd always known, from the onslaught of judgments of others and their prurient interest in her and her family. I knew the time would come for her to grieve. And, almost one year to the day she started therapy, her tears fell.

Sarra spoke of the many things she had lost. From within her, tender, raw and frightening moments unfolded – the inconsolable enormity of loss manifesting in physical form. Now her tears were saying, 'I've lost too much'.

There have been times when I've not been able to witness the intensity of tears myself: as a child, giggling at funerals, watching my father cry (male strength seemingly crumbling in front of me), then, with friends, older now, desperately offering tissues, blinking rapidly – as if that would silence the pain of the other! In my work training therapists, I'm aware how hard it is to *just be* with tears, in spite of this being our work. I am here with Sarra, not rescuing her from tears which she would normally hide from others, bearing witness to her pain. That is what is therapeutic. It allows her to grieve out loud and to put down her coping and her armour. Her tears are for herself; yet shared with me, they say, 'Maybe being tender can be safe, maybe there's hope'. How relationally significant is this silent sharing of her tears. I feel the sacredness of someone walking on hallowed ground.

Some of the most current research about tears indicates how much they are impacted and even generated by social contexts – how 'relational' they are. Social

scientists consider that sad tears may have evolved as a way of eliciting warmth and signalling that one needs help from others<sup>6</sup> – a way of emotional problem solving and coping.<sup>7</sup> Sarra's tears are calling to me – she needs help, and we are programmed to connect, her tears created in the space between us.

### A seeker's lens

Sessions continued. There were now many times when Sarra questioned the injustice of her situation and how God had allowed this. Islam and religion were a core part of her identity, but now she questioned, to a degree that threatened her sense of OK-ness with the world. This was frightening for her, and she discovered that beliefs she had held for so long – or perhaps the way she held them – were mechanical, a way of managing fear that wasn't now working. In many sessions, we would focus on what it was like not to know, which was hard, because she'd already lost so much. I noticed that in these sessions, she didn't cry. It was like her questions, her truth-seeking, took precedence, giving her a different kind of energy that blotted out tears. Now I sensed that her not crying was saying, 'To hell with vulnerability. I have a sword and I want the truth!' It was important that her tearlessness be met. That her questions, spoken and unspoken, were met. That her fierceness was met. In all of this, I was careful that she knew – explicitly but also viscerally through our relationship – that she could trust me with this intensity, that I was rooting for her, that she could be angry with God and not believe, but also with her more hidden feelings of grief for lost beliefs, her hope for meaning and finding her truth.

### A religious lens

As the sessions continued, I also bore witness to her anger. Coming from a fairly religious Shia Muslim background, she leaned into the powerful and cathartic stories of the women of the battle of Karbala. The battle of Karbala is very significant for Shia Muslims, a minority sect within Islam, and represents how injustice, pain and sorrow were inflicted upon great Muslim leaders,

whose love of God and truth and justice made them stand firm against degrading and relentless oppression. What is also important about Karbala is that its narratives are rehearsed yearly through stories which solicit and value communal crying by both men and women. There were times when Sarra felt very alone, when she was being attacked by former friends and the wider community. At these times, she came to sessions and shared her love and cried for Zaynab, granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammed. This formidable woman is especially remembered by Shia Muslims for speaking truth to power and facing off the tyrannical and powerful Muslim ruler of the time. As Rawand Osman says, 'Her activism was at once religious and political. Zaynab's strong image in the aftermath of the battle of Karbala even makes the men around her fade into the background.'<sup>8</sup> Sarra now identified with Zaynab, and experienced her as both a model and a proxy for the protection and closeness of God. My client was communing with Zaynab through her tears. Like her, she was a strong woman, who protected her family and stood alone against unjust cruelty dealt by other Muslims. Her crying now was cathartic and huge, on a world religious stage. For those reading from a more Western context, though very different, perhaps a way of relating might be collective understandings of the triumph over the Nazis, or the marking of the dead on Remembrance Day. Through her weeping, she was telling me and herself of the enormity of what was happening to her, but she was also able to connect, across time, to a woman whose purity and sacredness were inviolable to her, a safe place in her heart, a place in which it mattered not if you won or lost in this world. She was empowering herself too, by recognising that her struggle was part of an eternal human and sacred struggle for justice, even when that injustice comes from those who are supposed to be on your side. So when she cried, I received her tears as religious, human, universal and significant, culturally specific, communal and individual, spiritual and real.

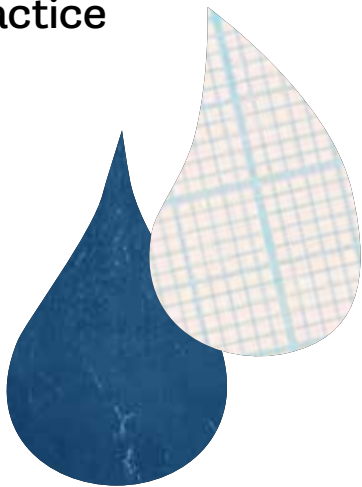
### Cultural differences: no single-story lens

'When we reject the single story, when we realise that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise' – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.<sup>9</sup>

As a Muslim, born into a Shia family, I knew of Zaynab, but vaguely. Though I knew who Sarra was talking about, I had spent my childhood zoning out when hearing these stories, overwhelmed by the collective outpouring of grief. And in my adult life, I've been more focused on what unites Muslims and inner spiritual depth. I've not rejected the label of Shia, nor have I really explored it. There were cultural similarities between us, but also challenging differences – our relationship could not be reduced to a 'single story'. I needed to research her reference points outside of sessions, not wanting to burden her with my own need for information, but also being careful to hold this information loosely, and not lose my focus on her. I was struck by Sarra's fierceness, love and the courage she drew from Zaynab. I noticed how she loved Zaynab even as she challenged her beliefs in Islam and God. I knew the reverence with which Zaynab is held and could hear it in Sarra's voice. I let myself be open to her, though it challenged my quieter, more modest, more individualised, perhaps more 'Westernised', relationship to grief.

I can't help but be aware, as I write this, that many *Thresholds* readers might not have heard of many Islamic teachings and practices, let alone minorities within Islam. The therapeutic profession is still largely made up of white women, who have a predominantly Christian heritage. In the context of Islamophobia, I wonder also whether I can be heard when I share ideas that associate Islam – or me – with ideas of justice or spirituality, whether I can anticipate engagement and empathy. I wonder whether drawing attention to the whiteness/Judeo-Christian ethos of this readership will be experienced as uncomfortable, so that readers will consciously or unconsciously turn the pages over to something easier, more readily accessible. And I realise that

# Practice



however I am received, I have known from the beginning that my purpose is to be authentic and whole; to present my client without apology, and in her truth, to challenge myself and to challenge 'received wisdom'. Like my client, I wonder if both my vulnerability and fierceness can be met. I too am carrying a sword, and like my client, I too have had tears that refuse to fall.

*'Abdur-Rahman bin 'Auf (May Allah be pleased with him) said, 'O Messenger of Allah, you too weep?' He (وسلم عليه الله صلى) said, 'O Ibn 'Auf! It is mercy.' Then he began to weep and said, 'The eyes are shedding tears and the heart is grieved, and we will not say except what pleases our Rabb (Lord). O Ibrahim! Indeed we are grieved by your departure.'"*

## A spiritual lens

I've purposefully left this lens till last because I hope that it can be heard throughout.

As I write, I've been remembering Sarra's tears. I can recall her chest heaving, each intake of breath signifying an inner battle between fear and hope. Her tears were a tender mnemonic of vulnerability and courage – of life that emerges from within.

To engage and connect – to hear pain – is deeply spiritual. For me, it's crucial to let tears be; that is to be a gentle witness to them, and in so doing to be a witness to the inevitability of suffering in life, to accept that as a part of living and loss. But to witness another's tears is also to engage with one's own suffering. Spirituality and religions, in different

ways, sometimes overlapping, teach about the meaning of suffering. They teach that being with pain is to be fought, but also to be borne; that tears can also melt into presence, courage and humility. And they also teach that not knowing can invite a recognition of something deeper; the fragility of earthly attachments and perceptions moving us closer to heavenly truths.

When I worked with Sarra, and as I write this article, I try to continually 'empty my heart', a Sufi/Islamic spiritual practice of letting go of attachments and projections, a practice which can be compared to that in many other spiritual traditions and is central to our therapeutic model. It's important because the heart represents an interspace where human and divine 'meet'. In Arabic, the word for heart is *qalb*, which also means 'to turn'; a spiritually sound heart is one which is continually turning. The practice means a commitment to being aware of and releasing all otherness, with the intention that divine consciousness (absolute, pure, timeless), which is already there, permeates human consciousness (egoic, relative, time/space-bound). It's a part of my professional practice too, a way of being in touch with pain that threatens to engulf, while staying grounded, with the particular, with the differences, engaging with the challenges and discomfort of pain and power, and seeing them as invitations to a more expanded consciousness that is messy and real as well as full of life and light.

I wanted to share Sarra's messy tears with you, so that constricting definitions of what is spiritual and what is religious and what is cultural would gently blur in the truth of her story. I wanted to convey how sometimes spirituality and religion and culture cannot be tidied away into safe categories, where spirituality is equated with good, and institutional religion with bad. I wanted to share how the culture and context and diversity of this therapeutic community are part of this story as well as mine and Sarra's. And I wanted to share how tears – sometimes a drop, sometimes a flood, sometimes inside, sometimes outside, sometimes

signifying simple feeling, sometimes complex and stuck, sometimes you, and sometimes me, sometimes us, sometimes messy and apparently meaningless, sometimes glistening and bright reflectors of light, look like this.

## Biography



**Sabnum Dharamsi** co-founded the first contemporary model of Islamic Counselling in 1997, and now delivers courses accredited to practitioner level. Other initiatives include working with Grenfell Key Workers, Muslim Youth Helpline, Islamia Medics, Bath Analytic Network and OnlineEvents. Sabnum credits Sufi Teacher Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri with the inspiration behind the Islamic Counselling model. [www.islamiccounselling.info](http://www.islamiccounselling.info)

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