

Defacing the Female Personhood: Deconstructing Vitriolage through a Reading of Reshma Qureshi's *Being Reshma* and Meghna Gulzar's *Chhapaak*

MAHIMA DAHIYA

Department of Humanities,
Deenbandhu Chhotu Ram University of Science & Technology (DCRUST)
Murthal, India

REKHA RANI *

Department of Humanities,
Deenbandhu Chhotu Ram University of Science & Technology (DCRUST)
Murthal, India
rekha.hum@dcrustm.org

ABSTRACT

Our bodies act as sites of identity formation as well as association with the world. It is the primary way of establishing a connection with our surroundings. On the surface, skin serves as a protective layer of the body, but it also becomes an embodiment of the person's identity. An acid attack is an act of violence that completely damages this protective shield of the body. The paper addresses the issue of vitriolage- how it disfigures the face and mutilates the very being of a person. The violent physiological disfigurement, especially that of the face, as it is an important front to place and assert oneself in society, leads to a complete disruption of one's socio-personal relationships. The critical study of texts undertaken is an attempt to understand the physical and psychological sufferings and resilience of the acid attack victim/survivor. As an extension of the psychological consequences of the experience, the victim starts comparing the human self with animalistic/monstrous tendencies. Facial disfigurement, in general, tends to arouse some affective response in public, ranging from pity and sympathy to disgust and distress. Drawing on some tenets of Erving Goffman's theory of stigma and Tobin Siebers' disability aesthetics as critical viewpoints, the paper examines the stigmatisation and repulsion in the form of disgust that individuals with disfigurement encounter and their ability to challenge and overcome these societal constructs.

Keywords: Affective response; acid attack/vitriolage; disgust; facial disfigurement; physical deformity

INTRODUCTION

Vitriolage is not only a heinous crime, but also a brutal form of gender-based violence perpetuated onto another human being. This cruel act causes trauma – psychological and emotional – and leaves many adverse effects on the victims/survivors. It shows the gravity of atrocities with gendered dimensions and human rights violations. From physical damage such as hearing loss, loss of vision, disfigurement, and scarring to the deeper penetration of the acid within the layers of the skin, it can even disintegrate the lips, nose, and eyelids, rendering them inoperative. Though the attack is physical, its effect is not limited to affecting the person's body but also strikes a major blow to the person's entire being and completely disorients one's sense of self. Apart from the immense physical pain, the psychological torment caused by the resulting disfigurement and scarring is colossal. The trauma from the incident negatively affects the person's personal and social relationships.

Acid attack victims in India are now included in the list of disabilities in The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD) 2016 as they suffer atrocities and face stigma due to their disfigurement, which in turn hampers their participation in society. The present study tries to understand the discourse of acquired disability by acid attack/vitriolage and its various life-altering consequences, as represented in the text's understudy. *Being Reshma* is a life writing of Reshma Qureshi, an acid attack survivor. Similarly, *Chhapaak* by Meghna Gulzar is a film based on the life of Laxmi Agarwal, who was also attacked with acid. The paper explores gendered violence perpetrated by males against females, the consequent suffering, both physical and psychological, and the trauma experienced by the victim in the journey of recovering from the attack. The objective of the paper is to study the implication of acid attack on the socio-personal status/position of the victim – how the disfigurement of the face/body breaks down one's personhood, what are the implications of disfigurement on the victim's self and her identity and how does she cope-up with the disgust, the negative affective response of others/public after facial disfigurement.

Face is inextricably tied to social identity. It is the visual accessibility of the face that makes it a central point of people's interaction. Thus, the face is both a body part as well as a crucial social symbol, as our faces mark us as unique individuals. Therefore, a threat/violence to the face is directly an attack on the individual's identity and personhood. The phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty states that the body is a place where the self and society interact (Goodley, 2011, p.56). In this interaction, the face becomes a key factor, being the foremost marker of a person's physical identity and social recognition. Erving Goffman defines face as “an image of self-delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (Goffman, 1982, p. 9). Certain phrases such as ‘at face value’, ‘facing the fact’, ‘fly in the face of’, etc. imbue a sense of importance to face as a “locus of self-image and public identification” (Talley, 2014, p. 26). Apart from being a physiological component, the face also serves as a means of communication, a marker of identity and personhood, and an established form of social capital.

The present paper, through an analytical study of Reshma Qureshi's *Being Reshma* and Meghna Gulzar's *Chhapaak*, is an attempt to understand the nature of violence perpetuated in the form of vitriolage and its effect on the person's being and becoming. First, it explores vitriolage as a gender-based act of violence and its various implications on the life of the person under attack. Taking insights from Erving Goffman's theory of stigma, the paper discusses the nature of stigmatisation faced by the person at the hands of society. The narratives undertaken in the study not only ascertain the psychological trauma experienced but also trace the feeling of animalistic resemblance that takes hold in the mind of the disfigured victim.

The second part of the paper looks critically at the changing contours of one's personhood through other's impressions by discussing the affective response of disgust elicited by the sight of a disfigured face/body. Taking insights from Tobin Siebers' conceptualisation of disability aesthetics, the paper discusses the role of aesthetic perception within disability, which gives rise to the overpowering feeling of disgust and how that shapes the perception of the person with facial disfigurement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Acid attack is a harrowing reality and one of the most gruesome forms of gendered violence across the world. Goswami and Handa (2020) list out the causes of acid attacks, such as the male-dominant nature of society, inexpensive and effortless accessibility of acid in the market, domestic violence, peer jealousy, vengeance by rebuffed lovers and safeguarding the honour of

their family. The life of an individual is turned upside down by an attack. Many suffer from isolation, withdrawal, change in life perspective, feelings and behaviour. Kumar (2021) takes up the study of acid attacks in India from a socio-legal perspective, discussing the shortcomings of Indian patriarchal culture and the inadequacies of the legal system. He lays emphasis upon the need to improve the methods for ensuring justice for the victim and prevention of acid attacks. Das and Banik (2019) provide a critical study of the gendered dimension of acid attacks in India and also indulge in a comparative analysis of legal proceedings with some of the other Asian countries.

The psycho-emotional, social and legal consequences of the crime are heavily discussed and investigated within the literature available. However, there remains a lack of an exploration of the affective emotions on the victims of acid attacks. Furthermore, there is also a lack of literature on the interplay between animalistic/monstrous implications and deformed/disfigured subjects.

Considering the relationship between facial disfigurement and identity, Rifkin et al. (2018) discuss the idea of self-concept, which they define as "the self that is constructed based on how one thinks about, evaluates, or perceives oneself as well as on the responses of others to the self" (Rifkin et al., p. 309). The focus on self-concept and disfigurement also highlights the role of the face. The face serves a dual purpose- as a biological organ as well as an organ of identity. Within the context of identity, Goffman (1982) explores the formation of individual identity through the medium of one's face. He states that the face serves as a "positive social value" that is earned by a person within society through "approved social attributes" (Goffman, 1982, p. 5). This mark of approval is naturally lost in the case of a person with facial disfigurement and its implications as they appear in his/her daily social interactions.

The sight of a disfigured face or body generally elicits negative affective responses such as fear, pity or disgust on the part of the onlooker. The relationship between acid attack and negative affective responses becomes a crucial subject area to explore and understand as it provides a glimpse into complex psychological impressions as well as foregrounds the challenges to social integration of the individual with facial disfigurement. Hughes (2012), in his essay "Fear, Pity and Disgust: Emotions and the non-disabled imaginary", states that it is the emotions as they are collected in the non-disabled imaginary that eventually lead to a broadening of the social distance between the disabled and the non-disabled. The social distribution of these discomfiting and negative emotions results in the invalidation of the lives of people considered as deviant, aberrant or anomalous. Within the same context, Ahmed (2004b) also writes, "It is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces and boundaries are made; the "I" and the "we" are shaped by and even take the shape of contact with others" (p.10). One such major negative affective response is disgust, which serves as an intense psychological and emotional response to a person/situation. In *The Anatomy of Disgust*, Miller (1997) delves into the exploration of disgust as a powerful emotion that shapes our behaviours, perceptions and social interactions. Disgust serves as a way to demarcate social boundaries and marginalise certain people while altering our moral judgements and ethical reasoning. Through a critical study of disgust as a major affective response to facial disfigurement, this study adds to the existing body of knowledge within the affective emotions, gender studies and disability studies.

METHODOLOGY

Bodies are relational entities that are produced through relationships with their surroundings. With an aim to contextualise the female deformed/ disfigured body within its socio-cultural arena, this study analyses and explores the psycho-social consequences of facial disfigurement, which arise

in various ways such as stigmatisation, diminished self-image and discriminated societal behaviour. Erving Goffman's theory of stigma affirms a special kind of relationship built between the discredited attributes of a person, such as physical deformity and stereotype (Goffman, 1990, p. 3). A person with facial disfigurement is easily stigmatised in a society wherein a face holds so much social, cultural and influential power. Erving Goffman (1982) says that stigma is attached to a being in accordance with "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (p.13). Goffman views "stigma" as a social phenomenon where individuals create meaning and perceive differences based on certain attributes. Interactions can transform a mark into a stigma, resulting in the exclusion of those with visible differences. Depending on the specific situation and the people involved, a distinguishing characteristic can be seen by others as a negative label, known as stigma, ultimately resulting in marginalisation.

Goffman's analysis of the social construction of stigma highlights that "normalcy" is the key factor which enables the identification of individuals or things that are stigmatised. Normalcy serves as the neutral standpoint from which individuals observe the social disapproval associated with impairment (Titchkosky, 2000, p.204). Goffman mentions three types of stigmas: one which arises from the abominations of the body or physical deformities, second, the blemishes of individual characters and finally, the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion. A stigmatised person "is reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman, 1982, p. 12). When we encounter a disfigured face, we reduce the individuals from their wholeness to their disfigured facial part instead of showing them "that in spite of appearances, the stigmatised individual is, underneath it all, a fully human being" (Goffman, 1982, p. 141).

Thus, stigmatisation has negative implications for the self-esteem and psychological well-being of the person. One such change becomes obvious with the shifting perception of the individual from the human self to an animalistic/monstrous self. The paper traces the journey of the acid attack victims transcending their stigmatised identity and establishing a newly found sense of self.

The second segment of the paper aims to understand how affective responses to deformity/disfigurement are shaped by larger societal attitudes toward appearance, difference, and disability. We affect other people through our emotional responses and are, in turn, affected by them. Tobin Siebers' insights from *Disability Aesthetics* help in the critical exploration of the affective response of disgust to facial disfigurement.

DISCUSSION

An acid attacker mostly targets a woman with the intention of disfiguring her face. In a society that puts so much emphasis on the physical beauty of a woman, face for her is very precious. This precious part of her personhood is so vulnerable that it can be easily vitiated by a simple act of throwing acid on it, and her entire self is hit not only physically but psychologically and socially as well. Her life is completely turned over by that singular act. Acid attacks, which majorly have a gendered dimension, are carried out with the intent of seeking revenge for rejecting love proposals, refusing sexual advances or many other property-related disputes. Acid is used as a "weapon by the men against women in order to mark their masculinity and superiority and to keep women in their place" (Katoch, 2020, p. 213).

Qureshi and Singh's (2018) *Being Reshma* chronicles Reshma's life from the times when she was a young girl to the ones leading to her acid attack and finally to when she overturned all conventional notions of beauty by becoming the first acid attack survivor to walk the runway at the New York Fashion Week in 2016. *Being Reshma* becomes a medium for her to share her pains and pleasures, but more importantly, it is an act of courage and strength wherein she also re-lives her traumatic past and shares the journey she has undertaken ever since. This journey of hers is crucial as it helps her regain her lost sense of identity and eventually stand up and raise her voice against the horrible crime of vitriolage. *Chhapaak*, in a non-linear manner, depicts the post-acid attack life of Laxmi Agarwal and delves into various issues such as the legal fight against the open sale of acid, its easy accessibility, the reconciliation of the victim with her disfigured face and working for the empowerment of other women who suffer and face similar circumstances.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Acid attack becomes an act of encroachment on the boundaries of a woman's body. In most cases, ambitious women are targeted to show them their position in the society. The acid curbs their aspirations and completely annihilates their self-esteem with a direct and violent attack on their face. In Reshma's case, the acid was thrown by Jamaluddin, her sister's former husband, his cousin and his nephew when Reshma was only seventeen years old. Behind the actions of these men lay the intentions of seeking revenge against these women, primarily of Jamaluddin against Gulshan, his former wife. However, on that particular day, Reshma was wearing her sister's burka; therefore, she became the chance victim of this heinous act. In the majority of cases, this violence results from "various kinds of disputes ranging from land, inheritance, dowry or a rejection to one's proposal to marriage" (Katoch, 2020, p. 213). In *Chhapaak*, the acid is thrown on Malti by Bashir Khan, a jilted lover and his accomplice. Bashir wants to punish Malti for rejecting his proposal and to ensure that her 'beauty' is snatched away from her. Malti has to face social ostracism even on her professional front. When she starts working in a beauty parlour, she has to bear with such remarks as "it does not look good if there is not any beauty in the beauty parlour" (Gulzar, 2020, 0:07:25).

The intention behind such acts is to 'disfigure' the conventional standard ideals of femininity standardised as 'beauty'. Despite the concept of beauty being diverse, subjective and one that cannot be described through any idealised form or shape, the conventional patriarchal beauty standards have become a firm part of the collective understanding within the socio-cultural fabric. While discussing how the images of physical beauty are used as a political weapon against women, Wolf (1991) in *The Beauty Myth* writes: "As women released themselves from the feminine mystique of domesticity, the beauty myth took over its lost ground, expanding as it waned to carry on its work of social control" (p. 10). The ideals of beauty defined within a patriarchal world, which dictate how a woman's body should look and act, serve to undermine women's qualities and keep male dominance intact. From a societal perspective, those with facial disfigurement often find it difficult to rehabilitate themselves into society due to the discrimination and marginalisation they face. They also face difficulty finding employment, having daily interactions with strangers, and partaking in social activities.

Reshma's narration of her life lays bare the horrendous reality of the violent crime of throwing acid onto a woman's face and body for the purpose of seeking revenge. In her case, however, the acid was not meant for her. It was planned to be thrown at Gulshan, her sister. As Reshma was wearing her sister's burka, Jamaluddin's cousin and his nephew, mistaking Reshma

to be Gulshan, poured the acid on her face. Reshma tells how "they never even removed the niqab first so they could look at my face" (Qureshi & Singh, 2018, p. 73). The truth remains that it was an act of violence committed at the hands of a man towards a woman. If not for her, it would have been her sister who would have met the same fate. In any case, a woman becomes a subject of male violence. The acid is thrown not simply to deform a woman and damage her identity but also to taint her family's image and honour. Within a patriarchal setup, a woman is a site of family honour. Jamaluddin, with his intention of disfiguring Gulshan's face, wanted to ensure his control over her life's circumstances. He could not reconcile with the fact that Gulshan was able to live without him even after their divorce. Gulshan suffered extreme domestic violence in her marriage. She was constantly assaulted and mentally tortured at the hands of her husband and in-laws, and it was only when she was on the verge of being killed that she sought her parents' help. Gulshan's pathetic situation made Reshma realise, at an early age, the cruelty a wife/woman could be subjected to at the hands of a husband/man. Reshma, hospitalised in the burn injury ward, comes across many women and their horrifying stories of assault and abuse, which helps her understand the ubiquity of violence in the lives of women. As she walks past other patients with burn injuries, the majority of whom are women, she ponders:

These cases were not severe because of the medical situation itself but because of what had happened to them. The patients were all women, abused women. The most common case was that of women being set on fire by their in-laws or husbands. They always make me wonder about Gulshan's possible fate had she not left Jamaluddin's house.

(Qureshi & Singh, 2018, p. 121)

The act of pouring the acid directly on the face of Reshma shows the cruelty and inhumanity of the perpetrators. Jamaluddin's cousin and his nephew grabbed Reshma, tugged at her from over the niqab and pushed her to the ground. As Reshma recounts that "without even removing my niqab, he emptied over my face the contents of a flask he had been carrying" (Qureshi & Singh, 2018, p.72). Her physical strength and retaliation were no match for the heaviness and strength of these men. Reshma recalls that "within moments, I could hear at a distance a strange, terrified, unnatural, desperate scream. It was me. I was on fire, and the haunting screams were erupting from my own being" (Qureshi & Singh, 2018, p. 72). The motive behind this heinous act is to disfigure her face and erase her selfhood in its entirety. The implied message is to reduce her personhood to a mere dependent woman with no independent mind and voice of her own. The suffering of the victim caused by facial disfigurement is physiological as well as psychological in nature. Reshma starts self-blaming for being too indulged in her physical appearance as a young girl. Thinking about the same, Reshma shares the feeling of self-reproach and guilt she felt and blames herself for her preoccupation with beauty as she says, "Jamaluddin probably knew how concerned I was with my beauty and realised it would be the ultimate act of revenge to take mine away" (Qureshi & Singh, 2018, p. 131). Reshma's description of herself right after the acid was thrown upon her is bone-shivering: "I screamed in pain as they poured acid on me. Slithering on the ground, I clawed at the melting niqab like a rabid animal. I screamed in anger, and I writhed in agony over the loss of my dignity. For the first time in my life, I had absolutely no control over my body" (Qureshi & Singh, 2018, p. 76).

The attack changes not only her physiology but also her psychological perception of herself and her body. The spoiled identity is the negative social consequence that arises when an individual is discredited or stigmatised (Goffman, 1990, p. 91). Reshma says, "[e]verywhere I went, people would stop and stare, or avert their eyes in fear. I felt as though I was no longer a human being" (Qureshi & Singh, 2018, p. 159). This is how people's stare and aversion made Reshma feel

reduced in her humanity, making her feel less dignified: "I wish that the embarrassment of being treated like an animal, being pushed to the ground, and having an offensive liquid poured over my face, was all I would have to deal with" (Qureshi & Singh, 2018, p. 72). She recounts her visit to the hospital: "We entered the elevator, and immediately people stared. I was grotesque, even by hospital inmate standards" (Qureshi & Singh, 2018, p. 113). This idea of monstrosity or being grotesque is another significant aspect of disability discourse, the discourse of and about disfigured bodies.

It is not only the society that dehumanises Reshma, but she herself develops a diminished sense of identity after her attack. Right from the moment the acid is thrown at her, her description of herself seems to fall into animalistic comparisons. The implication of this parallelism is that the deformed/ disfigured body is mostly identified as 'the other' or 'the non-human'. Nussbaum (2004), in *Hiding From Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* says, "We need a group of humans to bind ourselves against, who will come to exemplify the boundary line between the truly human and the basic animal" (p. 107). Reshma's preoccupation with her associations with animality also brings to the surface the "uncomfortable reminders of our animal vulnerability" and our similarity with animals in "having fragile body envelopes that, when breached, reveal blood and soft viscera" which also serves as an elicitor of disgust (Barrett et al., 2016, pp. 819-820).

Reshma describes the apathy of the onlookers on the attack site thus: "After the show was over, they turned their backs on me, the way I imagine they ignore injured stray animals every day. A stray dog, living or dead is of no value to most of us" (Qureshi & Singh, 2018, pp. 77-78). On another occasion, she remarks, "charred meat, dead rodents ... they remind me of what I had once been reduced to" (Qureshi & Singh, 2018, p. 97). In various instances, Reshma frequently refers to herself as grotesque, a monster, or as no longer a human being.

AFFECTIVE RESPONSE AND DISGUST

Disfigurement holds a variety of culturally specific meanings in different contexts. The medical model of disability treats disfigurement as a lack and something to be fixed by medical and surgical interventions. The moral model of disability associates disfigurement with one's morality and behaviour. Certain people see it as a sign or mark of immorality. All of these varied associations lead to an outburst of a variety of emotions about disfigurement/disability. In the non-disabled imagination, the negative emotions about disabled people have taken a stronghold, and its result is the social abjection of people with disability. The basic affective responses to disability are marked by fear, pity and disgust. Disgust is one of the major affective, emotional responses to disfigurement or disability in general. As Hughes (2012) says, "Non-disabled people are disposed towards disabled people principally through these three emotions. They form an economy of affects that position disabled people in morally tenuous social landscapes where it is legitimate to be both violent and charitable towards them" (Hughes, p. 91). The idea of disgust is primarily associated with our sense of smell, sight, touch and taste. Disgust is a direct reaction to the objects which one finds repulsive, revolting or abhorrent to any of the senses. As an affective response towards disability, disgust is deeply rooted in the institutionalisation of ableism, "a form of systematic bias and oppression" which privileges and prioritises able-bodiedness (Scuro, 2018, p. xix). The affective responses to disfigurement frame and shape the image of the self within the consciousness of the person with a disfigured face/body. Disgust emerges for a deformed/disfigured body as its sight may be repulsive because of the violated ideal form or exterior beauty of the body/ face. As Miller (1997) states that "disgust is a moral tribunal used to

judge others by assigning inferior status to them" (p. 96). It becomes an emotion which invalidates the other's being and tries to make a point for one's false sense of superiority against the object of disgust. Thus, it creates a hierarchy which is further endorsed by societal attitudes and behaviour.

The skin also serves as a corporeal defence, being the protective layer of the body. The burning away of this protective covering of the body is almost a laying down of all the defence mechanisms of the body. Aesthetically speaking too, the burnt skin becomes a sight of repulsion, disgust, discomfort and humiliation. These emotional responses are connected with the accepted parameters and standards of physical beauty which already constrain a woman in a patriarchal setup.

Reshma and Malti are both highly aware of the disgust their faces elicit from the onlookers. Tobin Siebers (2010), in *Disability Aesthetics*, contends that the human body is the subject as well as the object of aesthetic production. Taking into consideration Alexander Baumgarten's notion of aesthetics, he considers the "human body and its affective relation to other bodies as foundational to the appearance of the beautiful" (Siebers, 2010, p. 1). Aesthetics tracks the sensations some bodies feel in the presence of others: "Taste and disgust are volatile reactions that reveal the ease or disease with which one body might incorporate another. The senses revolt against some bodies while other bodies please them. These responses represent the corporeal substrata on which aesthetic effects are based" (Siebers, 2010, p. 1). Certain bodies elicit a negative response from the senses, whereas other bodies are pleasing to them. These responses are the physical foundations on which aesthetic impacts are built. The negative response of the public to the post-acid attack faces of both Malti and Reshma imbue a sense of being inferior and unsightly within them. Consequently, the responses of disgust further remove these marked bodies from the established ideas of aesthetics/ beauty. Emotions are not simply "psychological dispositions" rather, it should be considered how "they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective" (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 119). Sara Ahmed (2004a) discusses the concept of "affective economies", which explains how emotions are valued, circulated, and accepted within social spaces and power structures.

In a scene from *Chhapaak*, Malti is shown travelling in a bus years after her acid attack. As she exchanges a glance with a young girl sitting opposite her, they both smile at each other. However, instantly, the girl's mother distracts her daughter from looking at Malti's face. This brief shot succeeds in establishing how disgust is not always inherent within a being or an object. Rather, it is attributed to social norms and constraints. The mother does not want her daughter to be in contact with a face which is conventionally labelled as being 'ugly'. Many times, the feeling of disgust does not emerge from the outside; rather, it generates from within as well; as Reshma says, "No one deserved to be burdened by my monstrosity" (Qureshi & Singh, 2018, p.135). Reshma's feelings reflect her internalised sense of inferiority resulting from contempt and discrimination at the hands of society. William Ian Miller (1997), in *The Anatomy of Disgust*, writes:

Some emotions, among which disgust and its close cousin contempt are the most prominent, have intensely political significance. They work to hierarchise our political order: in some settings, they do the work of maintaining hierarchy; in other settings, they constitute righteously presented claims for superiority; in yet other settings, they are themselves elicited as an indication of one's proper placement in the social order.

(Miller, 1997, pp. 8-9)

Disgust often manifests in the form of self-loathing. Strong feelings of contempt, shame and hate all join together to give birth to self-derision. The disgust for her own disfigured facial features by Reshma is revealed when she sees her face in the mirror for the first time after the attack. She could not fathom that the face reflected in the mirror was her own. Her repulsion from

herself is such that she even tries to commit suicide. This is worse than the physical torment of having to go through the immense pain caused by her burning and melting skin. Miller (1997) theorises that shame in an individual showcases a failure “to adhere to communal standards one is deeply committed to” (p. 34). The major cementing force behind this shame is the disapproval of others. Her feelings of self-contempt and disgust are reflected when Reshma says, "I also felt bad that the poor nurse had to remove nail paint from my feet which were probably ugly and disgusting. I wondered how bad I really looked. Why had no one shown me a mirror yet?" (Qureshi & Singh, 2018, p. 132). In Malti's case, the doctor advises her parents to cover up all the mirrors in the house so that Malti does not see her reflection before the surgery. However, led by her anxiety, Malti unveils the mirror and looks at herself. She immediately shrieks loudly as she is horrified by her own reflection. The day after she looks at her disfigured face in the mirror, she discards all her jewellery and ornaments, saying, "I have no nose, no ear. Where will I put these earrings?" (Gulzar, 2020, 0:38:50).

Facial disfigurement results in public gaze/ stare, hate and disgust. Thomson (2009), in her book *Staring: How We Look*, provides a critical interrogation of why we stare, when we stare and what we stare. Her insights are particularly useful in evaluating the disabled person as the object of the stare. She defines stare as characterising "profligate interest, stunned wonder, obsessive ocularity" (Thomson, 2009, p.13). She also differentiates between the stare and the gaze as being entirely different as we gaze at what we desire. However, we stare at what astonishes us. Novelty is what arouses our eyes to stare; it is an ocular response to something that is unexpected. On one level, staring signifies curiosity; it becomes "an interrogative gesture that asks what's going on and demands the story" (Thomson, 2009, p. 3). The curiosity reflected in the act of staring paves the way for further exploration of 'the self' as well as 'the other'. The originating point of this curiosity is the sight of someone who seems unlike 'the self' whose physicality raises questions about different norms and forms of human embodiment. After the attack, both Reshma and Malti became the subjects of such stares in their respective worlds. Thus, what emerges from Thomson's argument is that in some cases, these stares are innocent on the part of the starter as they arise out of curiosity. However, the implications and the effect of the said act are not as innocent.

Both Malti and Reshma find certain catalysts in their life which give them a larger purpose, bring back their lost sense of self, and redefine their outlook towards life. For Malti, it is the filing of the PIL (Public Interest Litigation) in the Supreme Court asking for the regulation of the sale of acid. Alongside, she also becomes a part of the campaign, 'Stop Acid Sale,' through which she gets a chance to connect with other acid attack victims and work with them to garner empowerment through their mutual and shared support.

Reshma was able to gain back her sense of selfhood through her association with the women sharing her situation or age. When she met Ria, the CEO of the NGO – 'Make Love Not Scars' for the first time, she was surprised to see how young Ria was, and she had all praises for the work Ria was doing for numerous acid attack victims like her. Her daily conversations over the phone with one of the members of the NGO helped her revive her sense of being a young girl. Her engagement with the mundane and routine things also helped her feel like a normal being, brought back her curiosity and interest in everyday life, and gave her the hope of going to university one day. She had earlier discarded all such hopes, thinking that these were not meant for her, a disfigured person. She soon became conscious of the changes in her because of these associations and engagement: "I never noticed how I was changing, but everyone around me could see it. I was slowly becoming more confident and sometimes took the initiative to call Ria and Mehr to share what had happened in my day" (Qureshi & Singh, 2018, pp. 170-71). Her shared

and collective experiences and development of socio-personal relationships led to Reshma's resilience in the face of trauma. Family support plays a significant role in the recovery and healing process for a person with disfigurement suffering trauma. Reshma coped with and navigated through her experiences by recognising her trauma and connecting with other women with similar experiences. The physical traces in the form of facial and bodily scars formulate a bond of shared experiences.

Malti, in *Chhapaak*, while working with 'Chaya', an NGO, comes across stories of other acid attack victims – some who succumb to the violence, others who are able to survive the attack and persist. The women and their stories of shared fate transform them into a shared force. In this bond of shared experience with other victims, she simultaneously lives her own past and the memories of the pain of her attack. Her entry into the NGO begins the transformation in her life as she not only uplifts the lives of other acid attack victims but also learns to be more self-accepting and liberating of her identity as a person with facial disfigurement. She starts filling the canvas of her life with the possibilities of freedom, dignified space, will, and choices. Thus, both texts narrate the trajectory of the transformation of these two women from subdued acid attack victims to independent women in control of their lives, fighting their circumstances and societal dejection and hatred with their resilience.

Writing is a political act, and in the act of writing about her life, Reshma is able to shatter the shackles of societal confinement put on her. Life writing for Reshma works as a healing ointment for her bruised, deformed/disfigured being. It presents a sensitive account of her/the victim's traumatised self and its resilience to the world. In her book *Shattered Subjects*, Suzette A. Henke discusses the therapeutic use of writing to process, heal and recover from trauma. She refers to the idea of 'scriptotherapy' which is described as "the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment" (Henke, 1998, p. xii). Reshma's act of writing serves as a way of reinventing the self through the means of scriptotherapy. The trauma of the acid attack, which leaves "marks of unbearable misery" (Taghizadeh & Ghaderi, 2015, p. 140) on the psyche of the person, finds release through the act of life writing. Reshma contends in *Being Reshma*, "I would have liked to have told her myself. My story should be mine to tell" (Qureshi & Singh, 2018, p. 159). The failure to disclose realities to others in their own words rips the individual of their individuality, subjectivity and humanity. It makes them feel like an object. *Being Reshma* shows the life of a woman who creates for herself a renewed sense of self and identity, implying that although our faces/bodies are sites of identity formation, they are not always the locus of identity, as identity can also be reshaped and configured through embodied lived experiences. Reshma puts this in her words thus: "It was the beginning of a global mission to change how certain people were perceived... we were going to redefine how people should be judged" (Qureshi & Singh, 2018, p. 211). Thus, Reshma's writing showcases that the "process of scriptotherapy successfully liberates the author/narrator from her tormented past" (Henke, 1998, p. 101). Her life's journey shows the transition from rejection and hatred to understanding and acceptance of the damaged/disfigured self both at the individual level and the social one.

CONCLUSION

The analytical reading of both the narratives undertaken in the paper leads to the findings that acid attack as a way to disfigure/disable a woman's body serves as a major tool of violence that not only has physical repercussions but also leads to deeper psychological imprints which disorient the image of the self. The study uncovers that a body, thus, by extension, the human being, is discredited through the act of losing its face value. Their resulting stigmatisation often brings about changes in their psychological perception of the self. The public disgust as an important aspect of disability discourse in these narratives makes it evident how the affective responses serve as signs of disapproval and disdain for such bodies which fall outside the boundary of aesthetically pleasing.

Both the stories of Reshma and Malti show a departure from the attitude of looking at the person with disfigurement/disability as a passive agent who is reduced to being an object. They succeed in highlighting how their life is not bereft of substance as they still have a lot to live for, and their identity is not limited to the reality of their attack and its resulting disfigurement. Their life journeys change as they learn to accept their transformed self. The external change expected is that of a social space where acid attack survivors are not ashamed of how they look, where they are not met with "hostile stares, gestures, comments," and are not treated differently (Qureshi & Singh, 2018, p. 218). Both Reshma and Malti are able to regain their sense of self and come to terms with their renewed identity slowly and gradually as their lives advance. In Reshma's case, this change happens through her entry into the world of fashion and media, wherein she redefines the ideals of beauty and appearance for herself and for the rest of the world. Malti, on the other hand, fights openly for a cause that would benefit various other women, and through that fight for justice, she is simultaneously able to acknowledge her worth as well as her actions. Malti's shrugging off the veil from her face at the end of *Chhapaak* is representative of her acceptance of her face and a form of resistance against society's actions of hiding disfigured faces as aversive. With that simple yet bold action, Malti sends out the message of acceptance and space for people with disfigurement and disability in society.

Both narratives take on to challenge the ascribed modes of power and dominance in normative ways of embodiment as well as legal, ideological and social discourses. Taking a cue from Foucauldian perspective on power as rampant in "immediate everyday life" which eventually makes the individual the subject and "marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognise and others have to recognise in him" (Foucault, 1982, p. 781). Both Reshma and Malti fight to overturn the societal constructions which constrict them. Their stories are also signs of their assertion and resistance against the established order, which dictates that their life, along with their desirability, shrinks after the acquired disfigurement. Reshma and Malti refuse to submit themselves to their fate, which their identity as acid attack survivors restricts them to. Instead, they choose to rise up like a phoenix and take charge of their lives and selfhood in their own hands.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We, Mahima Dahiya and Rekha Rani, acknowledge no financial support has been availed by any of us for this paper.

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