

DISCOVERING THE INNER SELF: ACID VICTIMS AS PROGRESSIVE IDENTITIES IN *UYARE* AND *CHHAPAAK*

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ABSTRACT

Acid attack on women is a major issue which is commonly occurring in the current scenario. It is one of the forms of gender-based violence caused against the women by the male dominating society. There are plenty of reasons observed for the acid attack, like the easy availability of acid, rejection of love, disdained relationships etc. This chapter aims a study based on men's desire to disfigure women; analyzing acid attacks portrayed in the select movies. Focus is also given to the legal perspective of acid attack, the relation between society and acid victim and the atrocities faced by an acid victim. Moreover, the chapter looks at the ways through that, these acid victims emerge out of the dreadful situations and pursue their dreams, with special reference to the movies *Uyare*, a Malayalam movie directed by Manu Ashokan and *Chhapaak*, a Hindi movie directed by Meghana Gulzar.

Keywords:

Acid attack, gender- based violence, acid victim, male-chauvinist, double marginalization

Acid attack is a deep-rooted social evil and a burning issue in this era. Over the last decade it has been witnessing an alarming increase in the acid attack especially on women and many of the victims are in their young age too. It is considered as a gender-based crime against women. In addition to causing psychological trauma, acid attacks result in severe pain, permanent disfigurement, subsequent infections and often blindness in one or both eyes. Recent media report says of a Delhi woman who was attacked by a man by throwing acid and the reason for that is said to be the rejection of marriage and she had to give up her life too. Acid attack is used as a weapon to silence and control women by destroying her figure, what is contributed as the primary

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constituent of her identity and the impact is physical, psychological, and social in most of the cases. Archana Arul says: "According to India Today Data Intelligence Unit (DIU) the statistics released by National Crime Records Bureau shows between 2014 and 2018, states that there have been 1,483 victims of acid attack happened in the country" (Arul 1).

This chapter undertakes a study based on representation of women acid victims in films. It is based on two movies titled *Uyare* and *Chhapaak* that attempt to make people understand why is it unrealistic and illogical to relate a woman's self-esteem with her perpetual beauty. The acid attack not only gives the characters, Malti and Pallavi, grievous bruises on the face and neck, but also a savage blow to their self-reliance and ambition to become a singer and pianist respectively. However, the courage they exhibit in the face of the adversities in their lives is inspiring. The acid couldn't wear down their spirit and they seem to try their best to go on fighting for their justice and ambition by regaining their confidence.

Though women constitute a major share of the society, they are often looked down. Whenever a woman decides to raise her voice against her unacceptable position in the patriarchal society, she is evaded by different means: either by acid or physical abuse or by burning her to death. Some of the brutalities remain unreported because of the fear and stigma of women and their family in the society. It has been generally said that from her cradle to grave, she is subjugated to everlasting and ceaseless amount of violences. The truth is that even though India has got independence, the women are still dependent on male chauvinist society, which affect the independence of women often.

Both the movies select for the study, portray the reason for acid crime as the love which turned later to revenge. In most of the acid attacks the motives behind the attack are rejection, patriarchy, misogyny and unrequited love and ending of romantic relationship by females. The root causes of this crime are embedded in our social culture where men feel the need to react when they are denied the things they want from women. Social norms tolerate and perpetuate patriarchal values where the sense of 'male privilege' and 'male entitlement' bear a strong

foothold in our daily interactions, where women have no agency in the matters of love, sex, relationship, marriage and money. It can be said that acid attacks are used by man as a medium to establish their superiority and control over woman and to keep them always in a state of fear that they have no any role in society and social fabric except to accept the reality.

The movie *Uyare* is a tale of women empowerment, women determination, courage and will. When Pallavi, the protagonist was affected by the acid attack by her boyfriend, she decides to approach life fiercely and boldly. The survival journey wasn't easy for her. Here no one but Pallavi saves herself. She rises again on her feet after the acid attack. The people around her especially her friend and father focused on rebuilding her will power and self, right through the very same ambition that drove her from early ages.

Vishal changed the idea of beauty in society and said to the media that Pallavi who is an acid victim will be the airhostess. At first, she refused it but soon accepted as she should come out from the four walls and face the world. When Govind was there as a passenger in the airplane she travelled, he started to get irritated and she pours water on him too. He filed a complaint against her. Vishal asked her to publicly apologize on this issue if she wants to remain in her job in the company but she refuses to do and quit. This shows that she is now able to face any obstacle in her life.

During her last journey as airhostess there happened an incident. The pilot of the flight went out of consciousness and the flight went out of control. During that situation Pallavi took over the pilot's seat even though she had only a rejected license. The air traffic controllers were concerned about her ability and asked her to get out of the cockpit. After many breath-taking minutes, Pallavi was able to make the flight land safely and save the lives of all passengers. Even though she lost one of her eyes, because of her courage she was able to do this.

If Pallavi, an acid attack victim can be approved by her customers in a job that emphasize beauty, there should be nothing that stops other acid attack victims from achieving anything they dream. So, *Uyare* is a powerful story about determination, about kicking oneself back to life, looking at the brighter side and continuing a dignified living, despite hardships. This film is a tribute to the indomitable spirit of every acid attack survivor who fight against all odds to hold their heads high.

In *Chhapaak* the protagonist Malti not only rebuilds own life but also fights for the needs of fellow acid victims. She is not able to find a better job and joins the NGO, from there she realized the miserable conditions of other similar victims and decided to fight for the whole victims. Malti's fight is punctuated with her determined smiles, the pain in her eyes and her indomitable spirit. As support from her family dwindles owing to her brother's illness and father's death, it is Malti's lawyer Archana who stands by her in her arduous journey.

She fights for the justice and issue a PIL to reduce the sale of acid. After a long day of fight she gets the success as the court issue the ban on sale of acid. Malti had to face a lot of obstacles as her father died and her brother fell ill, and thus she needed to get a better job. Even in this condition she doesn't lose her hope, instead she fought for her justice and attained it as the PIL was considered and her perpetrators got the maximum punishment too. Then she joined as an anchor in a program and she made the fact that beauty is not the matter, and what matters is the willpower. After becoming an anchor her life got positively changed and the society also started to accept her. Malti's story is truly heroic, that she lends her voice to protect others from this heinous crime. Malti is a survivor not a victim. Her post acid attack journey is a survivor's journey from victimization to a role model. Thus, both the movies portray the acid attacked women victims as powerful selves who are not victims any more but survivors.

Lakshmi Agarwal (the victim of acid attack) mentioned in one of her interviews that pain is not only internal but also external imposed by the comments and the ridicules of the society. Society does not accept this victim as a normal human being. These victims continue to face discrimination from society for years even though they themselves are in no way the reason for their disfigurement. They are not able to leave their homes thinking they would be made fun of. They fear the inimical attitude of the general public towards them. Same thing happens to Malti and Pallavi in the movies. They need to come out but the society's attitudes put them back to the four walls. The confidence of these victims is put out by the attitude of the society around them.

The appearance of the person becomes so dreadful and frightening that victims become socially outcast, either by the society or by themselves. Often, they hide themselves covering their face even though they wish to uncover it. In the movie *Uyare*, though Pallavi removes her scarf unfortunately one of the passengers ask her to wear it back because they are afraid. Greater number of acid attack victims are forced to give up their education, occupation and carry out normal activities of life due to their physical disabilities. In *Uyare*, Pallavi's dream to become a

piolet has been lost due to acid attack. The most appalling part is that, they are made to hide their faces and the affected parts of their body and have to bear the brunt of the society. There is always a sense of trepidation, scorning and scoffing of the people around them, by which they are not able to forget the disgusting looks of the society at large. All these things build so much of inferiority complex among the victims that they themselves shun away from the society.

The society is also hesitant to accept such people and evades their company and shun them, sometimes due to strange and nauseated feelings and also due to blotch attached to such people. People also associate their melancholies and desolations to the misdeeds of the victims and consider them wretched and unfortunate. These attacks usually leave victims handicapped in some way, rendering them dependent on either their spouse or family for everyday activities, such as eating and running errands. This is truly portrayed in the movies where these women are dependent on their family for their basic necessities. These dependencies are increased by the fact that many acid survivors are not able to find suitable work, due to impaired vision and physical handicap. Moreover, acid survivors who are single, when attacked almost certainly become ostracized from society, effectively ruining marriage prospects. They are embarrassed that people may stare or laugh at them and may hesitate to leave their homes fearing an adverse reaction from the outside world. This is so pathetic that even though the state is developing gender justice, the people are less inclusive and social exclusion still continues as a threat.

These victims do not get a job notwithstanding being qualified, as they cannot meet up to the expectation of their employees perhaps, since acid attack acts as a blow on the personality of victims. It happened to Malti. When she went to an interview the interviewer asked her, why didn't she mention about the attack in the bio-data, she replied that there is no such column to acid victim if it was there, she would have written. This happens to every victim. Often, they are not able to find a better job. Discrimination from other people, or disabilities such as blindness, make it very difficult for victims to find suitable job opportunities for themselves and they become dependent on others for food and money. The acid attack survivors witness discrimination at every single stage of their life.

No one can deny the fact that, the established norms in the society especially; towards women; are prejudiced. These norms always expect more obedience from women in comparison to men. Shalini Mittal et. al in their study on trauma caused by acid attack says: "Social dominance in the form of the superiority of masculine gender over the feminine gender in terms

of influence, physical strength, and authority also emerged as a significant source of trauma. Often the culture by design leads to the oppression of women and the experience of sexism” (Mittal et al 1). One should always keep this thing in mind that before a survivor accepts herself, it is the society that needs to accept her first. Instead of helping the victim, the people make their life more annoying, as the people don't like to look to their face. However, this approach needs to be changed as they are suffering not for their wrong deeds, but due to the fault of some savage acts of some men, roaming around the society freely. In the movies it is evident that the victims have to suffer while the victimizer is living a peaceful life. Thus, it is seen that women acid victims have to face double marginalization in the society; being women on one ground and as being acid victims on the other ground.

The government, social media and private agencies can play positive role to eradicate the acid attack. It is the electronic era, so the media such as Facebook, Instagram, twitter etc., could help these victims in many ways. Our society is lacking the sense of belongingness which results in insecurity and instability of the people- especially women. Social support is vital for the proper and complete rehabilitation of acid burn victims. Acid attack can be eliminated from the society by imposing strict punishment to the perpetrators. The enhancement of punishment and compensation to the victim and ban on sale of acid are extremely important development needed in the case of acid violence. The compensation is very vital as the victim had to undergo several surgeries and various medical treatments. This compensation helps many victims for their treatment. The minimum punishment is ten years of imprisonment and it can be extended up to life imprisonment with a fine. Now, the acid victim can claim reservation in the government jobs and other institutions and it should be made mandatory for the state to create equality life measures. Justice can never be delivered to the victim unless the law is properly implemented.

In an interview with India New England News in September 2017, Qureshi, an acid survivor, was asked if she had heard from her attacker. She stated, “I haven't spoken to the attacker or his family as such, but I met him two months back in the court. I instinctively wanted to rip his throat out. When he saw me, he told his lawyer and people, she has become so big and a model, she is a good position so please release me”. This is how all the attackers should feel ashamed for their evil work.

Currently there are changes in the reception of many acid survivors by the society as one sees them working in various fields like High Court, hospital, railway etc. Sultana, one of the