ACID AESTHETIC:

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, DISFIGUREMENT, AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION IN INDIA

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

In this work I investigate the new aesthetic form that has been emerging in India, post-Nirbhaya case. This aesthetic is centered on representations of acid-attack survivors. Using disability studies as the framework for this research, I described how acid disfigurement should be considered a form of disability given the physical, psychological, and social consequences of this form of crime. In order to seek social justice, survivors not only explore the visibility of their scars through artistic and digital platforms, but also form coalitions with non-disfigured artists through solidarity. These coalitions are possible because of the creation of an aesthetic community specific to acid disfigurement. It is this community that is responsible for the creation of a new aesthetic form – the Acid Aesthetic. The multiple individuals engaged in pursuing the acid aesthetic explore its common characteristics differently, thus generating what I categorize as *disfigurative*, *conflative*, and *refigurative* acid aesthetic. I consider *disfigurative* those representations of acid-attack survivors that, although seeking social justice and inclusion, tend to engage the audience through pity, emphasizing images conducive to suffering and despair. In addition, the *disfigurative* art often perpetuates gender stereotypes and patriarchal structures. The *conflative* acid aesthetic, on the other hand, gives more depth to the representation of survivors' emotions and inner conflicts. However, it does so by means of conflation of acid attacks with other gender-based forms of violence. This conflation is presented as female solidarity. However, in this depiction of solidarity among women, acid-attack survivors become either proxy for a generic discussion on gender-based violence or perform a secondary role. The third category - the *refigurative* – is exemplified by representations that seek to portray acid-attack survivors as empowered agents, but also as ordinary individuals. In these representations, survivors are not depicted stereotypically. Because

artists and survivors challenge stereotypes, viewers and readers are also required to challenge their own biases and assumptions regarding disfigured women.

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PROLOGUE

Roopa was two years old when she lost her mother. Her father remarried after six months of her mother's death. Her stepmother was told that her future husband had a son, not a daughter. She hated Roopa from the first day they met. Roopa's stepmother, whom she calls माँ (mother), did not used to feed or dress her properly. Throughout the years, she had to do the household chores and even take care of her newborn baby brother. Roopa's stepmother's hatred then took the form of choking and then poisoning her. Thankfully, Roopa survived both. Roopa told me she thought that by loving her stepmother she would change and would love her back, but this never happened. Roopa's stepmother waited for the day her father would be working at night and threw acid on her face. Feeling her face burning, Roopa ran outside where the family usually left a bucket of water, but realized that the bucket had been removed. Nobody helped her. The next day, in the morning her uncle, who lived in another village, was called. When he arrived, the acid had caused so much damage to Roopa's skin that she could see her bone through a hole on her shoulder. Her stepmother was jailed for only three months and her father sided with her stepmother. As I heard this I broke down in tears and she was the one who told me that everything was fine now. I chose this story to demonstrate that acid attack, a violent assault involving the throwing of a corrosive substance onto another person with the intention to disfigure, is motivated by complex reasons. Although most representations depict acid attacks in connection to jilted love, as Roopa's story demonstrates, the gender aspect of acid attacks is much more complex. I use the next few pages to explain my motivation for looking into aesthetic productions on acid-attack survivors in India, how it became a personal issue to me more than simply an object of study, and how I chose to conduct this research by intertwining art criticism with testimonies from actual survivors.

Acid attack is a crime against someone's appearance, and thus a subject for aesthetics. The main intention of this form of crime is to cause lifelong suffering through disfigurement. The attacker knows that the visible scars will possibly lead to social rejection and stigma; in other words, to a negative social experience. On the other hand, art has been considered to be a perceptual object intentionally produced to elicit a certain kind of aesthetic experience. For this, art has often been the exploration of the real world through the creative look of an artist. Herbert Marcuse's notion of aesthetic is that the cognitive function of the artwork is a "vehicle of recognition and indictment" (9-10). Recognition and indictment are means by which transformations of the context of human agency are fundamentally imaginable. Therefore, I subscribe to Marcuse's notion of aesthetics as having ethical-political consequences. Along the same lines as Marcuse, Alfred North Whitehead states that "[i]t is in literature that the concrete outlook of humanity receives its expression" (431). On the other hand, according to Paul Holmer, "[l]iterature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become" (28). This means that reality and fiction are constantly affecting each other. Writing about acid-attack survivors has then the potential to change society regarding this matter. Although I am not an acid-attack survivor myself I realized that there was a void in both literary and scholarly spheres on this type of crime that, unfortunately, is still very common in India, and should be addressed through legal, educational, activist, artistic, and academic works. When I say that there was very little literary material on the topic of acid attacks I mainly refer to the Indian literature in English, despite my continuous study of Hindi. Even feminist writers who discussed dowry crimes, rape, domestic violence, femicide, and *satī* (the burning of widows in the funeral

pyres of their deceased husbands) in their fictional and poetic work were silent regarding acid attacks. But the question still remained: Why were not Indian writers writing about it? This is actually a difficult question to answer.

While there were fictional representations of acid attacks beginning in the 80s, it was not until 2013 that the theme emerged frequently in English-language productions across artistic media.[1] I will argue that this trend arose from a seemingly unrelated public event: the gangrape of Jyoti Singh brought public attention to the various ways in which misogyny threatened the lives of Indian women. To explain this connection, I would like to pause here for a moment to describe the crime and its public reception. The increase in the production of artwork on acid attacks after 2013 is intrinsically connected to the aftermath of the gangrape and murder of Jyoti Singh, a 23-year-old student from Delhi. The gangrape and death of Jyoti Singh in December 2012 generated protests in India and around the world. What made this gangrape unique regarding the response of the public is still unclear. Sohaila Abdulali, a gangrape survivor herself, maps different rapes and gangrapes that got national headlines in India, but is also puzzled by Jyoti Singh's case:

[1] Since I became interested in representations of acid-attack survivors I have been creating an archive of artistic works that refer to this type of crime. My research indicates that *Atanka* (1986) by Tapan Sinha, a Bengali film, was one of the first artistic productions that depicted an acid attack on a female character, followed by the Hindi film *Tezaab* (1988) by N. Chandra. The next production on this theme was *Gangaajal* (2003) by Prakash Jha, followed by another Hindi film *Big Brother* (2007) by Guddu Dhanoa, the Hindi film *Force* (2011) by Nishikant Kamat, and the Tamil film *Vazhakku Enn 18/9* (2012) by Balaji Sakthivel, which led to several remakes in other Indian languages: *Black Butterfly* (2013) by Rajaputra Ranjith in Malayalam, *Case No. 18/9* (2013) by Mahesh Rao in Kannada, and Chirodini *Tumi Je Amar 2* (2014) by Soumik Chatterjee in Bengali. From 2014 onwards a new series of artistic works on acid-attack survivors started to surface, such as the short film *Newborns* (2014) by Megha Ramaswamy, the untitled series of photographs (2015) by Rahul Shaharan that composed the *Bello* calendar sold at Sheroes Hangout Café - Agra, and *Akira* (2016) by A.R. Murugadass (the latter being a remake of the Tamil film *Mouna Guru* (2011) by Santha Kumar), the graphic novel *Priya's Mirror* (2016) by Ram Devineni and Paromita Vohra, the series of photographs *Sacred Transformation* (2017) and *Shades of Love* (2017) by Niraj Gera, the collection of stories *Jalta Paani* (2018) by Meenna Danwar, the short film *Aunty ji* (2018) by Adeeb Rais, the novel *Love or Obsession* (2019) by Ashish Tanwar, the Tamil film *Bigil* (2019) by Atlee Kumar, the two biographies *Make Love Not Scars* (2019) by Ria Sharma, and *Being Reshma* (2019) by Reshma Qureshi and Tania Singh, the Malaylam film *Uyare* (2019) by Manu Ashokan, and most recently *Chhapaak* (2020) by Meghna Gulzar. My research, however, is focused on the post-Nirbhaya representations.

> I don't know why Jyoti Singh was different. One theory holds that she represented a new India, a country where a young rural woman can come to the city with a dream, pursue a degree, have friends and freedom, go out with a friend at night to see *Life of Pi*, and live to tell the tale. She represented something new and exciting and hopeful, and destroying that was the final indignity that brought long-simmering rage to the boil. (29)

Before (and after) Jyoti Singh's case, other rapes shocked the country, but, as Abdulali points out, the victims belonged to lower castes, were tribal girls, such as in the Mathura case,[2] or the criminals had religious or political motivations as in the Kathua case.[3] Jyoti Singh who, before dying had her identity protected under the alias Nirbhaya (fearless), possibly represented not just a new India, but a new Indian woman that suffered again the weight of patriarchy, sexism, and machismo. However, the pressure of the public and protests did bring some changes to Indian society.

Jyoti Singh's death was the force behind a new wave of debates on gender-based violence and of representations of violence against women in India. Raminder Kaur (2017) believes that the Nirbhaya case is the starting point to this new scenario and calls this "The Nirbhaya Effect." According to Kaur's theory, the Nirbhaya case, as it was popularly known, did not only propel discussion on rape, but called attention to the different forms of violence that women face in Indian society. Tamsin Bradley, however, while analyzing the reporting of rapes by *The Hindu*, one of the most influential Indian newspapers, presents a more nuanced perspective of the Nirbhaya case. Bradley noticed that the press was sensitive to the strong voices of activists anti-violence against women prior to 16 December 2012. There was a significant increase in the number of articles on

[2] A tribal girl was rape by two policemen who were later found not guilty. According to the judge, the circumstances did not justify a verdict of rape as she was "habituated to sexual intercourse" (Abdulali 29).
[3] An eight-year-old Muslim girl was held in a Hindu temple, gangraped and murder by Hindu men (Ibidem 30).

rape published in *The Hindu* in the year leading up to the gang-rape and murder of Jyoti Singh. "That number shot up again following the case of Nirbhaya, but a groundswell of protests already existed. The Nirbhaya case acted as a consolidating moment for a movement that has already self-organised and co-ordinated, and there is hope that the momentum generated may be sustained through the new networks that have been built" (84-85).

Being understood as the starting point or the culmination of existing grassroot activism, the reality is that the Nirbhaya case consolidated a most desired change in how violence against women and girls is discussed and represented in India. As a consequence of this groundswell, activists turned public attention to the varying forms of gender-based violence, and acid-attack survivors became part of this ongoing conversation. Before 2012 these women were systematically ignored, one might say as a part of the misogynist structure itself. Some acid-attack survivors voiced their concerns regarding not getting the same attention as rape survivors. Why this was (or still is) the case is also uncertain. For example, Laxmi Agarwal,[4] who was attacked in 2005 took her case to the Supreme court of India and presented a petition to ban over-the-counter sales of acid.[5] Yet it was only in 2016, after the Nirbhaya case had stirred the country, that a bill banning the indiscriminate sales of acid was finally passed. Unfortunately, without law enforcement the bill had little effect in preventing new cases of acid attacks. Also after 2012, a year before the Nirbhaya case, but at the tipping point of activist work, the Supreme Court of India recognized

[4] Laxmi adopted SAA, an acronym for Stop Acid Attacks, as her surname. Later, after her breakup with the Chhanv Foundation, the organization that initiated the Stop Acid Attack campaign, she started to use her family name once again.

[5] Although acid-attack survivors are understudied, they have managed to change Indian laws. In 1980 the so called Bhagalpur blindings made headlines in the major newspapers of the country, when for over a year policemen punished convicted and alleged criminals by piercing their eyes and pouring acid on them. With regard to this case, Nilabati Behera vs. State of Orissa (1993) led the state to finally formalize and enforce the survivors' right to compensation (Mody 140). As previously mentioned, in 2013, the Supreme Court of India created a new category of crime specific to acid attacks. Prior to this, the crime of acid attack was included in the wider category of crimes against women. In the same year, the Supreme Court prohibited the over-the-counter sales of acid. In 2015, The Supreme Court also ordered all states and Union Territories to include acid-attack survivors in the persons with disabilities list.

acid attack as a separate category of crime, which will enable future statistics to measure the increase or decrease of this type of crime in the future. This action stimulated the creation of NGOs focused on the betterment of the life of acid-attack survivors. In this same period, new representations of acid-attack survivors began to surface in films, photography, graphic fiction, and even commercials. Moreover, actual survivors also started to leave the shadows to claim their space in Indian society by exposing their own disfigured faces in physical and digital spaces. This eight year period, then, is a critical moment for the study of the literary and artistic responses to their conditions and survivors' aesthetic self-assessment. Since existing research tends to focus on the medical and sociological points of view of acid attacks, it is of high importance that attention be paid to aesthetics not only as an avenue for understanding the role of the intervention of arts in this socio-political problem, but also in understanding survivors as producers and subjects of representation of violence. I will return to the aesthetic as a category of inquiry at the close of the introduction.

Acid-attack survivors deserve closer attention from scholars even if it is only because of their effectiveness in changing laws in India. These cases and others also inspired the creativity of artists, such as Prakash Jha's movie *Gangaajal* (2003), which was based on the Bhagalpur blindings, and Meghna Gulzar's film *Chhapaak* (2020), which draws directly on Laxmi Agarwal's struggle. I claim that social justice entails not just the conviction of the criminals responsible for the disfigurement of hundreds of people every year in India, but as crucially our understanding of and support for those disfigured. Art, as I am arguing, has the potential to change social structures for the better and to create a more just society for those who were wronged. Therefore, the art related to acid-attack survivors' experiences, including that produced by survivors themselves, also deserves the attention of academics.

Since there is a shift in the representations of gender-based violence in India after 2012 my research focuses on the representations of acid-attack survivors in the era of the Nirbhaya case. Since 2015 I have been gathering artistic material on acid attacks, interviewing actual survivors, and observing their daily lives. In 2015, however, I did not as yet speak Hindi and needed the help of an interpreter. Seeing that the interpreter would not translate everything that survivors were telling me, I then decided to learn Hindi to later interview them without any intermediary. I do not want to simply analyze artwork; I want to understand how this art dialogues with survivors' lives, how representations of acid-attack survivors by non-disfigured artists affect survivors and how survivors influence these works with their self-representations. Moreover, I want their voices to speak throughout my work. I want to pass on what I learned from those who had first-hand experience of the attack and its aftermath. If there is so little scholarly research on acid attacks, why not use their accounts and first-hand experience as a "theoretical material" with which I address my analyses of the artwork? After all, survivors' knowledge on matters of acid attack is based on personal experience. In 2015, I travelled to Agra to interview acid-attack survivors at Sheroes Hangout Café. I already followed them on Facebook and thought that, since they posted mainly in English, I would not have any problem in interviewing them in this language. How surprised I was when I arrived there and found out that most of them did not speak English. I asked a volunteer at the time how that was possible if their posts were very often in English. He then told me that he was the one creating the posts for them. A man talking for the survivors through their Facebook profiles in a language they did not understand raised a huge red flag for me; one that is still unfolding to this date, since I have decided to learn Hindi in order to communicate with them without an interpreter. I tell this story, in part to indicate the evolving methodology of the

dissertation and in part to illustrate the problems of representation, both artistic and political, that the acid-attack aesthetic reveals.

To further illustrate the problem of representation, I will detail here another incident from my research experience. In December 2018 I was invited to a celebration of the 4th year anniversary of the Chhaunv Foundation in Noida, India. Around forty acid-attack survivors from different parts of the country would be there, and I would have the opportunity to meet those I had not met yet in person. The founders of the NGO organized a two-day event to which they invited several speakers. Surprisingly all of them were men and none of them were acid-attack survivors. Dividing my time between talking to the survivors who, over three years, have become my friends, meeting new survivors, and attending the talks, I saw a yoga guru teaching the survivors meditation, breathing techniques, and asanas to help them cope with the consequences of the disfigurement. I listened to the founders who also gave talks about the history of the NGO, Indian laws, medical treatments, and the current state of acid attacks in India. Finally I attended a motivational speech by a quadriplegic man. While I recognize the crucial role of solidarity in disability activism, his gendered experience of his particular disability elided the differences compared to that of the survivors. Moreover, as a motivational speaker, he became an inspiration to everyone in that room. But could not the survivors who have an experience-based knowledge of acid-attacks be the center of this event, as agents, and not as recipients? Unfortunately, if this was the intention, it was definitely not what came across. Survivors became only consumers of speeches given by men. Their presence was reduced to entertainment, given the fact that one survivor was asked to tell jokes and some were asked to dance to Bollywood songs. I understand that survivors deserve some time for fun and relaxation. However, they also need to know that their own experience is valuable knowledge.

The event underscored the extent to which survivors are infantilized and silenced within the activist discourse that advocates for them. The last activity of the second day was a game afternoon in a neighborhood public park. We all walked from the headquarters of the NGO to the park. There the founders told them what they should play. First they played kabaddi, a contact sport, then dodgeball. While some survivors were enjoying the games, I realized that Roshni, a survivor who had lost her eyes because of acid attack, was sitting nearby. The founders apparently had not thought about activities in which Roshni could also participate. As I sat on the sidelines next to her, she quickly understood she needed to speak slowly so that I could understand what she was saying in Hindi. She was a very curious, loving, and generous teenager. She asked me all sorts of questions about my country and me, laughed a lot at my answers to some of her questions, and was very kind to say that I was making only minor Hindi mistakes, and that with practice I would speak perfectly. Then, her best friend, another survivor who used to help her around, came and sat with us. I could not understand her because she would speak very fast. Immediately Roshni started interpreting for me what her friend was saying. She would repeat everything slowly to help me. Roshni, who was excluded from the games, wanted to include me in the conversation and she found a way to do that. Had the founders of the NGO allowed themselves to learn from the survivors, that afternoon would have been very different.

A few months after my encounter with Roshni, I received the news that she was found hanging from the ceiling in her home. The police treated it as a suicide, but given that she had talked to other survivors about her case just a few hours before being found, and that she was excited about the development of her treatment, her death was very suspicious. It is unlikely that we will ever find out what actually happened that night. Since recent representations of acid-attack survivors in India are inspired by the visibility of actual survivors, the main question is: Can the

arts offer these survivors the inclusion and the social justice that often fail them in real life? In this dissertation I seek to address this question.

Ethical questions engaged my methodology right from the beginning of my research. Although I never doubted the relevance of and need for this study, as I came to know everything the survivors were being subjected to, I became consciously critical of my work. Is my work not similar to that of the volunteer who was writing for the survivors? Will my work not impose selections and points of view like those of the interpreter that accompanied me in the first interviews, and who translated only forty percent of what survivors were telling me? Will I not benefit from this research like NGOs are profiting from survivors' images?[6] There will always be some sort of benefit to the researcher – a dissertation, a book, an article, a degree, a job position – and this I had to come to terms with. I understood that among all the possible research topics I could have chosen for my research I selected this one not because it could benefit me, otherwise I would have chosen to study Brazilian literature, which would have been much easier for me. I would have never had to learn another language or to have gone to another country to do my research. I chose this topic because it was time to do my part to bring the plight of acid-attack survivors to light. I could contribute to their cause by doing what I knew to do best - research. I

[6] In 2015, when I first visited the Chhanv Foundation, the headquarters of the NGO was in an old and small building in Laxminagar Bazar, Delhi. Alok Dixit, one of the founders of the Chhanv Foundation, explained to me how the profits of the Hangout Café and donations were distributed. First they paid the rent for the café, since they did not own the space. Then they paid the worker who worked in the kitchen, since survivors cannot work as cooks because of the high temperatures in the kitchen. The next step was to pay the rent for the rooms where survivors stayed. Finally, if there was any money left, it was distributed among the survivors. It was interesting that he did not mention where his salary and that of other founders fit into this distribution scheme since that was a full-time job. Three years later, when I visited the headquarters once again, I found out that it had moved to a brand-new building in a growing area of Noida, suburb of Delhi. It occupied three stories, and it was rented. Survivors who stated in 2015 that their salaries were often delayed were still complaining in 2018 that their salaries would be delayed by three, four, and even six months. While the space of the Hangout Café in Agra was rented, the one in Lucknow was rent-free because it was offered by the local government.

would then bear witness to them, channel their narrative through a feminist disability studies point of view, and amplify it to reach more people.

The role of a witness is not the same as that of an interpreter. Although I am also transferring passages of their oral narrative into another medium, bearing witness validates their experience of survival and recognizes their "strength to make what seemed impossible possible" (Oliver 2001). As Dana Amir affirms, it is important to "the rehabilitation of the psychic metabolic system [of the survivor] which conditions the digestion of traumatic materials" (5). The outsider witness has a way to address the issue of acid attack that differs from the interpreter. Through feminist solidarity (Mohanty, 2003; Ali, 2004) I amplify their narrative and dialogue it with my research so that others can hear them. By doing that, I am also showing how we all can learn from them. NGO personnel, artists, and researchers can all regard survivors as agents who can teach us about personal experiences that we did not have and, possibly will never have. In turn, this can productively and positively change how we run institutions, do art, and research.

1. INTRODUCTION

Disability Studies and Acid Aesthetic

In this dissertation I consider aesthetic productions that intervene in the political representation of acid-attack survivors. I consider this work particularly through the theoretical lens of disability. I define the acid aesthetic as the activist representation of acid-attack survivors. In particular I choose the word aesthetic to emphasize reception and response, the claim the art work makes on the viewer or reader. My focus within disability studies is on feminism and the aesthetics of disability. In other words, I am interested in how the female body, disfigurement, and experience can generate ethical and political responses through art. I point to disfigurement's pivotal role in complicating and enriching aesthetic notions because of the differences that survivors' experiences of this gendered form of disability bring to the processes of representation.

The most common criticism I encounter when discussing representation of acid-attack survivors through the lenses of disability studies is that I am conflating disability and disfigurement. Therefore, I will present a fourfold argument. First, I argue that acid attack disfigurement should be seriously analyzed from the disability studies standpoint because acid-attack survivors deal with physical, psychological, and discriminatory issues. Second, I contend that the visibility of acid-attack survivors inspires the creation of a new artistic subgenre called acid disfigurement art. Consequently, I propose a new disability model that embraces the three traditional models approach (medical, social, and cultural) that includes and focuses on the aesthetics of this artwork. Finally, with this new approach to acid disfigurement, I claim that in recent years there is an emerging aesthetic in cultural productions from India – the acid aesthetic.

Acid attack is certainly an act of violence primarily against the physical appearance of a person, however, psychological, physical and social consequences suggest of some commonalities between acid-attack survivors and disabled people. Disfigurement is a prominent change in someone's appearance either due to accident, violence, genetic anomaly, or disease. Acid disfigurement is the forced change in someone's appearance due to criminal attack. While acid creates multiple health challenges for survivors, exemplified by Roshni's blindness I mention in the prologue, acid's primary injury might be understood to be aesthetic, a wound to the physical appearance or beauty of the survivor.

It is not uncommon for acid-attack survivors with facial disfigurement to take months if not years to see their reflection in mirrors. Soniya, for example, a survivor from Ghaziabad who runs a beauty parlor, stated that for three years after the attack she avoided looking at her face in the mirror. Ritu, a survivor who works for Chhanv Foundation, said during the interview with me that she was wearing a red outfit when she was attacked by her cousin and his friends. It took her one year for her to wear red clothes again and only because all the founders and volunteers of the NGO dressed in red and went out with her. More obvious than these invisible, emotional marks, however, are very often the physical scars left by the contact of the skin with concentrated acid. All survivors I interviewed mentioned the lack of job offers due to people's prejudice against their looks. Geeta, a survivor who works at Sheroes Hangout Café in Agra, and Soniya also mentioned that neighbors and family members suggested that they ingest poison because they were, in their words "good for nothing now." Survivors who get financial compensation from the State are very often questioned why they still need to seek legal justice as if a few thousand rupees would suffice for a lifetime with disfigurement. And all survivors described people saying nasty things at them on the streets, being scared at their sight, and even pregnant women staying far from them as if a

look at their disfigured faces would disfigure their fetuses. Survivors often cover their disfigured face to avoid these social experiences. All these examples foreground my argument that disability studies should include acid disfigurement more actively in their discussions because as is the case often with disabilities, disfigurement requires major adaptations to life practices and is met with varied prejudices from the general population. In further support of this approach, I note that, the Supreme Court of India has already understood the relationship between disfigurement and disability, which led to these survivors be included in the persons with disabilities list in all states of India.

Western as well as non-Western disability scholars have pointed out that disabilities are culture and gender sensitive. In other words, persons with similar disabilities might have different experiences if in different cultural contexts or depending on their gender identity. As the reader might have concluded by reading the examples above, in the context of India, acid attacks are a gender-based form of violence embedded in unique cultural conditions. While there are cases of acid attacks on men, the overwhelming majority of these victims are women, and many of them are young adults. Acid attacks on men are generally the result of land disputes and political rivalries and have the chest and abdomen as the main target. On the other hand, the attacks on women are generally related to rejected proposals of marriage or sexual intercourse, dowry demands, divorce, and the absence of male babies in marriages. The main body part targeted in women is the face followed by their vagina. The cultural and gender characteristics of acid attacks in India would grant acid disfigurement as a form of disability a place of recognition among feminist disability studies, but this is not necessarily the current state of discourse within this area of study.

If disability studies embrace migraine, dyslexia, depression, anxiety, HIV, cancer, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder, among many so called invisible disabilities, why not embracing acid disfigurement? With the exception of trauma, there is a tendency among disability scholars to exclude impairments/disabilities resulted from crimes from their analyses. Even among decolonial Indian disability scholars, such as Anita Ghai, Renu Addlakha, and Nandini Ghosh, who emphasize the importance of local perspectives over Western models, there is very little emphasis on the relationship between crime and disability. Anita Ghai, in *Rethinking Disability in India*, refers to biological, cognitive, sensory or psychiatric impairments (80), impairments acquired by birth, accidents, and age, but mentions violence or crime just in passing while criticizing the understanding of disability as "God's will" instead of the result of "external factors, such as poverty, poor health facilities and violence/accidents, as responsible for causing disability" (29) or even more implicitly while discussing the impossibility of hierarchization of different disabilities based on the experiences, for example, if "the disabled person is a polio survivor or a landmine survivor" (223). The near exclusion of crime in the discussion of disability becomes evident when analyzing Renu Addlakha's scholarship. In 2001 together with the most renowned Indian sociologist, Veena Das, Addlakha published an article in which they analyzed the relationship between disability and formation of citizenship. One of their case studies was Mandira, a woman with a birthmark on her face. Addlakha and Das clearly treats the birthmark as an impairment: "The aspect of her [Mandira's] impairment that caused her parents the most anxiety was its impact on her marriage prospects" (513), drawing from Maira Weiss's concept *appearance-impairment*. Weiss creates this concept after studying children with birthmarks and defines it as referring "to children born with facial and other external, visible, deformities which mark the child as 'blemished' and/or 'ugly'" (149). It is surprising that

Addlakha had waited almost twenty years to look into acid disfigurement, even though the first official records of acid attacks in India date back to 1979.[7] In 2018, she led a research effort on acid-attack survivors in India with the intent to write a report on the issue. Her two Ph.D. students interviewed female survivors and asked them to tell the stories of the attacks, and what they considered violence and peace. The work is not yet published, and it is my belief that it is the criminal aspect of acid attacks that made acid disfigurement being for so long outside the realms of feminist disability studies.

By considering acid-attack survivors or acid disfigured women as disabled persons I should now clarify a few terms: impairment, disability, disfigured women/disabled women, acid-attack survivors/acid attack victims. I consider impairment as a type of physiological, mental, sensory or psychological limitation, whereas disability is the loss or limitation of opportunities to engage in the normal life of the community due to physical or social obstacles (Sherry, 2006; Tremain, 2002; Ghai, 2015). The rationale for such a distinction is to distinguish the biological differential experiences from the racism, bigotry, and other negative social effects that disabled people face. For example, a person with mobility impairment might perform like any other person if provided with ramps to access her workplace. However, I concur that the boundaries between these two concepts are not clear-cut (Goodly, 2010). Shakespeare reminds us that dyslexia might only become an impairment when society demands literacy (23). Therefore, impairment and disability can be both result of social and cultural practices. Following a political perspective of disability scholars, such as Shakespeare, Sherry, and Ghai, I use the word disabled person as the first categorical description of that person. From this point of view, as much as race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, disability is the central feature for an individual, and the issue of personhood

[7] The Bhagalpur blindings are the possibly the first cases of acid attacks officially reported in India.

becomes secondary. Likewise I opt for the term acid disfigured women as a type of disabled person instead of women with acid disfigurement. By adding the word "acid" I highlight that this is a specific form of disfigurement that is most likely related to an act of violence or a crime. Disability as identity becomes then a political act. As Ghai reminds us: "[S]ince society disables a person, a political process is required to undo the harm" (84). Similarly, instead of calling these women "acid attack victims" I use the term that they themselves prefer "acid-attack survivors" and sporadically "acid attack fighters" to emphasize their political attitude and agency.

It is important to note that after asking the female acid-attack survivors I interviewed if they considered themselves disabled, all of them answered negatively. If this is the case, why am I apparently disrespecting their self-perception, imposing a political identity they might not relate to? In my question I used the current politically correct word in Hindi for disabled "दिव्यांग" (divyaang) as well as the English word "disabled." During the interviews at Sheroes Hangout Café, where I did not have any interpreter, survivors did not understand the Hindi word. One survivor who understood the English word translated it as "विकलांग" (viklaang), which means "handicapped" to help other survivors understand my question. She went further, giving examples of people who did not have arms or legs. After this explanation, all survivors answered they did not consider themselves "handicap." I faced a similar situation when I interviewed the survivors at Make Love Not Scars, where an intern worked as interpreter. She did not translate the English word "disabled" into Hindi, but gave similar descriptions of people who did not have limbs. Likewise, these survivors said they were not "disabled." It seems that there is a disconnect between terminologies and living experiences. Survivors who had said that because of the loss of their sight they could not perform as before the attack, such as Farah who used to work embroidering dresses, or those who discussed their trauma and the difficulties imposed by society at large did not

recognize these issues as integral elements of the realm of disability. The words "disability," "दिव्यांग," and "विकलांग" in their understanding are still reduced to loss of limbs or mobility impairment, even though some of them have disability cards issued by the Indian government.

The acid-attack survivors I interviewed, however, are clearly acting politically within a collective defined by their disability. They expose their own disfigurement as a form of protest. Interestingly, even survivors whose disfigurement is not facial and who could easily navigate society without being identified as such, chose to join the NGOs and be seen next to those who are facially disfigured. In other words, they chose to be identified as acid-attack survivors. Moreover, these girls and women are fighting to end acid attacks in India, to end the sales of concentrated acid, and for the betterment of survivors' quality of life, such as free reconstructive surgeries and increased job opportunities. Therefore, given their embrace of disfigurement as a political identity and my view that disfigurement is a form of disability, I will be referring to survivors as disfigured women instead of women with disfigurement, the political equivalent of disabled women instead of women with disabilities (Shakespeare, 2014; Sherry, 2008; Ghai, 2017). If it is society which disables by isolating and excluding disabled persons from full participation in society, it is also society that disfigures these women and negatively reacts to their disfigurement. I understand that the reasoning behind the "person with disabilities" is that she is a person first, and the disability is incidental to that. It is a way to fight the objectification of terms such as "the disabled" or insults such as "the cripple," "the retarded" etc. The gap between the person and the disability lies in the desire to not be determined by the disability as a deficit to focus on the wholeness of the person. However, as Ghai has pointed out, this language usage did not bring too much change to the understanding of disability. Tanya Titchkosky (2001) remarks that in a subtle way the person-first approach conceives impairment as a problematic condition arbitrarily attached to certain

individuals, a condition (as opposed to sex, race or ethnicity) that is "only important as a remedial or managerial problem" (1). When conceived in this manner, the political advantage is lost. Therefore, I contend that terminology can replace a language of deficit for a language of pride that highlights the political dimension of disfigurement among acid-attack survivors.

Claiming one's own disability signifies identifying oneself with a disability community and treating the disability as an aesthetic quest, which is an act of decoding in which this aesthetic pursuit creates a cultural identity within which experiences takes on a more positive and altered meaning. Harlan Hahn states that disabled people need to reclaim/reconstruct an aesthetic tradition by deconstructing images of the body as a whole body image, in which separate and discreet parts of the body need to be emphasized (223). The engagement of acid-attack survivors whose disfigurement is not facial shows that they form a community through their shared experiences derived from acid attacks. This community, differently from the Benedict Andersen's idea, is not based on the erasure of differences and the homogenization of experiences. As much as survivors' scars will never be the same, this is a community where differences are embraced. Each disfigured woman has her own story of survival, yet all of them are trying to rethink themselves with and through their disfigurement. Even though differently disabled people can relate to each other regarding disablism and a disablist society, the way they experience the singularities of their disabilities is not necessarily the same. That is why, as I previously mentioned, when in 2018 I was invited for the two-day celebration of the fourth year anniversary of Chhanv Foundation I was surprised to see that only primarily able-bodied male motivational speakers were invited to talk to the female acid-attack survivors. Notwithstanding the founders' attempt to be inclusive, inviting a quadriplegic motivational speaker, his gender, his disability, and the manner through which he

acquired it (through an accident rather than criminal attack) imposed some limitations to the extent to which his experiences could be reflected on survivors'.

In consonance with Harlan Hahn's argument of disabled people having to recreate an aesthetic tradition and rethink body image, in recent years in India a new aesthetic related to acid attack disfigurement has been emerging. People who share similar impairments tend to create a culture of their own and consequently an artwork that expresses their experiences in the world through the lenses of their disabilities. This is not to say that there is a hierarchy of impairments in an exclusive manner. Petra Kuppers discusses disability culture as follows:

> Disability culture: there is a fine line here, between exclusionary essentialism on the one hand, and, on the other, the desire to mark the differences that disability-focused environments (which can include both non-disabled and disabled people) offer to mainstream ways of acknowledging bodies and their needs. I do not think that disability culture is something that comes 'naturally' to people identified or identifying as disabled. And I do not think that disability culture is closed to non-disabled allies, or allies who do not wish to identify as either disabled or not. To me, disability culture is not a thing, but a process. Boundaries, norms, belongings: disability cultural environments can suspend a whole slew of rules, try to undo the history of exclusions that many of its members have experienced when they have heard or felt 'you shouldn't be like this.' At the same time, disability cultural environments have to safeguard against perpetuating or erecting other exclusions (based on racial stereotypes, class, gender, economic access, internalized ableism, etc.). (4)

Driven by identity politics these survivors and artists form an aesthetic community; in other words, a community that shares forms and values. I recognize that this aesthetic community, as Zygmunt Bauman (2001) accurately identifies, does not have fixed and stable bonds between participants, and, as Jacques Rancière (2010) demonstrates, is structured by disconnection. I contend, however, that an aesthetic community is not a utopia, as Hermann Kappelhoff (2015) affirms, but it does in fact exist in more limited forms, imperfectly and impermanently, but is nonetheless real. The imperfectability of the acid aesthetic community can be identified by the different levels of ethical and political commitment embedded in the artworks, illustrated by the categories I create and that I will discuss in the following pages. Despite these disconnections, the relationship between poetics and politics is established through the bodily experiences of survivors and the shared emotions and solidarity with non-acid-attack survivors. This relationship forms the aesthetic bond between participants to a degree that even artists can be banned from this community in case they cross the underlined and acceptable ethical and political aspects of the representation of acid-attack survivors. An example of this rebuke is what Faizal Siddiqui faced after posting a TikTok video in May 2020 in which he threw water at the face of the makeup artist known as Faby. This performance represented an acid attack on a woman who left him for another man. Acid-attack survivors such as Laxmi Aggarwal posted several complaints on social media, and after the National Commission for Women presented a formal complaint to TikTok, Faizal had his video removed and later his account deleted. His creative representation of acid attack crossed the invisible boundaries of what is politically and ethically accepted by the acid aesthetic community.

Disability art then is also inclusive of non-disabled artists who are engaged through means of solidarity with disabled persons and disabled artists to decolonize art. In other words, to

challenge standards of art. Therefore disability art is an art inclusive of creative work produced by disabled persons, about disabled persons and their experiences, and that happens outside conventional genres and spaces. Within the realm of disability art, subgenres are created, which makes it possible for us to talk about deaf art (Humphries, 2008), migraine art (Honeyman, 2019), blind art (Bhowmick, 2013; Ledesma, 2019) and so forth. It is my contention that India has become the site of a new form of disability art inspired and produced by acid-attack survivors, which I call acid disfigurement art. This art is gendered, culturally-situated, and face-centered. I will return to this claim at the close of this chapter after reviewing the history of vitriolage and situating my own analysis in the larger context of beauty culture in India.

In order to approach this emerging art and the aesthetic that it produces I propose an aesthetic model of disability studies. This model focuses on the artistic expressions of disabled persons' experiences. Suzanna Biernoff (2017) has already criticized the separation of the three main disability models (medical, social, and cultural) because disabled persons are basically challenged by all these dimensions of disability and express them through art. For example, acid-attack survivors such as Farah, Ritu, and Anshu, take post-reconstructive surgery selfies and post on social media as discussed in a later chapter. Therefore, the aesthetic model is inclusive of medical, social, and certainly cultural perspectives on acid disfigurement. The aesthetic model differs from Petra Kuppers's rhizomatic model because the latter does not account for the artists' ethics in the production of the artwork. The model I am proposing, thus, has also a preoccupation to not only analyze the artwork, but also the ethics of artists.

In pursuit of a unique aesthetic, artists and acid-attack survivors create a cultural identity within which traumatic experiences take on an altered, positive meaning. Acid aesthetic, as I call it, is firmly rooted in a bodily experience of survival. Another element that is ubiquitous is the

mirror, which gives materiality and visibility to the scar for the survivor, helps her accept her new reality and identity, and establishes this art as face-centered. Das and Addlakha recognize the importance of the face in defining norms of masculinity and femininity, showing how "defects" may produce serious social disability (512-513), even in the cases of "appearance-impairment." The image of a female with a disfigured face inhabits the intersection of norms of femininity and normalcy (Campbell 2000). Suzannah Biernoff (2017) argues that the face is the main carrier of our identity. For her, the "loss" of face is the loss of humanity. In other words, the image of the survivor contemplating her reflection in the mirror grounds this aesthetic as a process and exemplifies their challenge to accept the repercussions of the initial violence. In that process, she sees how far she has come in her quest for redefining her identity based on her disfigurement. Often the mirror is central to survivors' self-representation. Sometimes the mirror is not present in this art as an object, but metaphorically as the gaze of the other or the lens of the cameras.

Despite the trauma of the attack and the presence of spiritual and mythological/religious elements in the artwork, which sometimes even predict retribution, this form focuses on recovery and repair. Adding to this positive aspect of acid aesthetic, the smile represents a particular, and culturally distinct, concept of happiness that is also related to an ideal of a specifically gendered form of heroism. Finally, this aesthetic is oriented to the future and it activates people's solidarity towards social justice and gender equality.

My research is aligned with more recent approaches to aesthetics developed by Sianne Ngai (2005, 2020), Ato Quayson (2007), Gerald Robert Vizenor (2009), Mao Douglas (2010), Marian Eide (2014, 2019), and Susan Best (2016). I call attention to a set of minor aesthetic terms and concepts derived from subaltern, bodily, and activist experiences. These are more nuanced than positive and negative concepts such as the *beautiful* and the *sublime* or clear cut emotions

such as the *rasas*. From the point of view of feminist disability studies, I call attention to the aesthetic analysis of these subaltern subjects adding to the works of Petra Kuppers (2014), Anita Ghai (2015), and Renu Addlakha (2016). Finally, I push the boundaries of interdisciplinarity in literary studies by incorporating the narratives present in films, social media, photography, and personal interviews.

The acid aesthetic is obviously conveyed by acid disfigurement art. In the chapters that follow, which are arranged thematically, I divide these artworks into three categories: *Disfiguration*, *conflation*, and *refiguration*. First, a *disfigurative* artwork tends to engage viewers through pity and/or to engulf the elements related to acid-attack survivors into a grand narrative that overshadows or "disfigures" the relevance of acid disfigurement. Elements of acid disfigurement are explicit, but not carefully explored, nuanced, and artistically developed in these artworks. Sometimes references to real elements surrounding acid-attack survivors and their disfigurement are used to give credibility to the work, but the intentions of the artwork or even of the artists seem dissonant. This chapter, in brief, is primarily critical and resistant. These artists attempt to engage with acid disfigurement, but the result is the perpetuation of stereotypes. Examples of *disfigurative* art are: Ashish Tanwar's novel *Love or Obsession*, the Bollywood film *Akira* (2016) directed by A. R. Murugadoss, and Niraj Gera's series of photographs called *Sacred Transformations* (2017). Second, *conflative* art is a stronger attempt to bring the physical and psychological dimensions of acid disfigurement into light. However, artists insist on conflating acid attacks with other forms of violence against women (primarily rape, as with the Nirbhaya effect) without carefully distinguishing the consequences of these different forms of violence to survivors within the cultural context. These works evidence attempts to grapple with and make visible conditions that are under-recognized globally, however, they specificities of disfigurement

are not explored. Examples include the graphic novel *Priya's Mirror* (2016) and the art film *Newborns* (2014). Finally, when the primary motif is the political aspect of acid-attack survivors' lives, in explicit relation to their disfigured body, I call it *refigurative* artwork. These artworks depict the complexity of acid-attack survivors' experiences, without promoting stereotypes. These representations are nuanced and fragmented. The audience/readers have a more complete immersion in the daily life of survivors. I consider examples of *refigurative* art the Malayalam film *Uyare* (2019) directed by Manu Ashokan, Rahul Saharan's series of photographs on acid-attack survivors with the support of Surabhi Jaiswal and Pascal Mannaerts (2014), survivors' own photographs, and Meghna Gulzar's film *Chhapaak* (2020).

Vitriol Attacks History: From Europe to India

Acid attacks are a particularly vicious and damaging form of violence that happens mainly in South Asian countries. Although some victims die, the purpose of the crime is not to kill, but to inflict lifelong suffering by disfiguring the victims. The disfigurement becomes also a mark of shame. When it is due to jilted love, it alters her status in heterosexual relations. It marks the survivor simultaneously as being a discarded possession of the attacker and someone who should not belong to anybody else. The origin of acid attack, however, can be traced back to early modern Europe. In the seventeenth century, the German-Dutch chemist Johann Glauber prepared sulfuric acid by burning sulfur together with saltpeter in the presence of steam. However, it was Joshua Ward, a London pharmacist, in 1736, who used this method to begin the first large-scale production of sulfuric acid, which lowered its cost. The use of acids, according to Edward Golding, was fundamental in the eighteenth-century industrial chemicals in a variety of ways, such as bleaching

and dyeing of cloth, as reagent for making other chemicals, etc. Golding affirms that by the 1760s other European countries were also involved in the mass production of sulfuric acid, which remains till today "one of industry's most important materials, with more than 150 million tons produced every year; it is used in batteries, mineral extraction from ores, fertilizer manufacture and chemical syntheses" (Golding 87)." Sulfuric acid has its place, among other scientific discoveries, in the industrialization of Europe, which led to the success of the British Empire. The first British chemists in Calcutta (1811), Bathgate and Co. used sulfuric acid to manufacture medicines and toiletries. Later, with the advent of photography, Bathgate branched out to sell films, develop negatives, and print photographs, an ironic presaging of the connection between attack and image creation in the acid aesthetic of recent years (79).

Although very important in the industries, sulfuric acid is a hazardous substance that, when combined with water, produces intense heat and can cause serious burns. This aspect of sulfuric acid's effects were not left unnoticed. Because in chemistry sulfates are called vitriol, acid throwing is formally known as vitriolage. Early in its history, sulfuric acid became a weapon in the hands of those who wanted to cause suffering to others. In Europe, the references to women throwing acid on men and other women were quite common. In France, for example, in 1879, 16 cases were reported, while from 1888 to 1890 there were 83 new cases. Jane Welsh points out that the term *La Vitrioleuse* (the acid thrower) was coined in this period, and "their violent acts were widely reported in the popular press as 'crimes of passion', perpetrated predominantly by women against other women" motivated mainly by betrayal and propelled especially by jealousy. These women ranged from working class and economically vulnerable to middle-class and bourgeois (22). Inspired by these women, Eugène Grasset produced in 1894, a photo-relief with water-color

stenciling named *La vitrioleuse* in *Art Nouveau* style. The work depicts a grumped-face woman holding a small bowl with vitriol.

There are several accounts of acid attacks in the United Kingdom. In 1840 Elizabeth Cleveland was indicted for "unlawfully, maliciously, and feloniously assaulting George Day, on the 13th of July, and casting a large quantity, to wit, one half-ounce, of a certain corrosive fluid called sulphuric acid, in and upon his face, with intent to burn him, and whereby he was burned" (Henry 601). George Day, who said he was invited to the woman's house and immediately asked for money, to which he refused, lost the sight in his right eye and could see very little from the left eye as a result of the attack. Elizabeth Cleveland pled guilty and was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

British suffragettes such as Emmeline Pankhurst used acid to burn slogans in public, among other tactics to force the government to allow women to vote. When Emmeline went to the United States in 1919 to give speeches on social service to the community, the importance of reconstruction after the war, and the critical role of democracy, Mary Kilbreth, the President of the American National Association to Oppose Woman Suffrage, questioned whether Emmeline Pankhurst, "who had lead a reign of terror that involved bombs, kerosene and vitriol throwing was an appropriate person to preach to American women about their patriotic duty" (Purvis, 318).

John Stevenson (2014) mentions yet another circumstance in which acid throwing was common – strikes. Great Britain's Parliamentary Papers 1780-1849 registered some of these attacks:

> Throwing vitriol is one of the means of assault in aid of combination used in Scotland, Rep. 8 --- Amongst the cotton-spinners in Lanarkshire there have been various cases of injury inflicted by the use of vitriol, Ev. 278 --- Instances of attacks on cotton-spinners in

> Renfrewshire with oil-of-vitriol, Ib. 323 --- Amongst the power-loom weavers in Lanarkshire, there have been four cases since 1822 where sulphuric cid or oil-of-vitriol has been thrown over persons who have been considered hostile to the interests of the combination, Ib. 327 --- Certificates by James Corkindale, M.D., showing the injury for life done to two men by having oil-of-vitriol thrown over them, Ib. 331, 332. (114).

Acid attacks became so common in Great Britain that they found their way into the plot of Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Mary Barton* (1848), helping the character John Barton to solidify his plan to attack the mill-owner's son, rather than those fellow-working-men who "mun choose between vitriol and starvation" (184). Likewise, Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock* is another example of how vitriol throwing influenced the literature of the time. The character Pinkie always carries a bottle of vitriol with him in case he needs to use. When asked what he was carrying, his answer is direct:

> "Vitriol,' the Boy said, 'It scares a polony more than a knife.' He turned impatiently away from the sea and complained again, 'That music,' It moaned in his head in the hot electric night, it was the nearest he knew to sorrow, just as a faint secret sensual pleasure he felt, touching the bottle of vitriol with his fingers, as Rose came hurrying by the concert-hall, was his nearest approach to passion (Greene 48).

During a fight with Dallow, Pinkie accidentally spills his bottle of sulfuric acid on his own face. Blinded and in agony he staggers over the cliff edge. These two cases of angry attack exemplify the entrance of vitriol as a synonym for bitterness and cruelty in the English language.

On the one hand, in Europe in the late eighteenth century, the price of sulfuric acid had dropped considerably due to mass production initiated in Britain, allowing people to have easy access to it. As a consequence to this, it was also transformed into a weapon and used by men and

women to injure others in different circumstances. This phenomenon influenced art and literature of Europe. On the other hand, the British Empire and its trade network made sulfuric acid available in other parts of the world. Later, the availability of this acid in India and its low cost contributed to the increasing number of acid attacks in this country.

While in India there are also cases of acid attacks on men, such as the Bhagalpur blindings, the overwhelming majority of these victims are still of young-women. The scarce literature on this subject confirms the gender division in this type of crime. The reason commonly cited for the attacks, as well as the part of the body that is targeted, also varies according by the gender of the victims. Acid attacks on men, as I mentioned above, tend to target the chest and abdomen of the victims and are mainly motivated by land disputes and political rivalries. On the other hand, attacks on women, to reiterate, target their face and are motivated by heterosexual relationship conflicts, such as rejection of matrimonial proposals, dowry demands, social pressure on a woman to bear sons instead of daughters, and other marital disputes. However, many women are manipulated into helping men attack other women. Although the few academic studies conducted on this subject point to the factors mentioned above, I argue that these crimes are multifaceted and are also intrinsically related to the increase in women's independence and agency. Many of the girls and women I interviewed were attacked because they stood up for themselves. They rejected marriage proposals, refused to accept male sexual advances, decided to get divorced, or simply spoke the truth.[8] Vitriolic men see women's agency as a threat to patriarchal structures.

The majority of the current studies on acid attacks on women are focused on Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Nehaluddin Ahmad, for example, affirms that Bangladesh has the

[8] Soniya bought a used cellphone from her neighbor, but later realized the cellphone was stolen and she told the police from whom she had bought it. Her neighbor sought revenge by attacking her with acid.

highest number of acid attacks in South Asia. Between 1999 and 2010, there were 2,500 reported cases of this crime. Among these figures, 80% of the cases involved women and 70% of these women were under 18 years of age (Ahmad 55-56). In Pakistan, the Aurat Foundation estimated that in 2011 alone, among 8,539 cases of violence against women 37.5% were acid attacks (Zia 1). These studies point to the increasing number of attacks and suggest that the reason behind them is the humiliation of rejected male suitors, honor-related crimes, and the non-obedience of Koranic principles (Anwary 306). While these reasons may also explain some of the acid attacks in India, it is important to notice that the countries listed above are Islamic or Islamized[9]. Although there is a significant Muslim population in India, this stratum of the society represents only 14.4% of the total population of the country in comparison to the 80.5% population of Hindus, and the acid attacks in India have proven not to be primarily religious related. Therefore, the reasons for these crimes have also to take into account specific social, historical, and cultural factors.

It was not until 2013 that the Indian Government created specific sections for acid attacks under the Criminal Law Act. This lag makes it difficult to know the precise number of acid attacks per year among the official numbers of the previous and vague category "crimes against women" published before 2013 by the National Crime Records Bureau in Delhi. However, since that time, 100 to 500 cases of acid attacks on women are reported every year in the country, according to the Acid Survivors Foundation India.

The existing studies on acid attacks on young-adult women in South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan as well as the few studies on this issue in India characterize this type of crime as being motivated by a feeling of revenge due to the humiliation

[9] In Islamized countries there is an imposition of Islamic practices on the public and political spheres of the society, while in Islamic countries, Islam is practiced in the private domain.

and rejection of male suitors (Ahmad 55; Welsh 16; Chowdhury 30). Studies on rape, gang rape, psychological torture, and beating, however, show a strong correlation between an increased modernization of women in India and the growth of violence against them. Some studies show that the reasons behind this correlation are the consequent increase in gender equality or even inversion of roles (Krishnan et al. 136; Das 52). Other studies show that the opportunities for inflicting violence on women increases, since these women circulate in different environments, such as schools and work places (Khan 219). Therefore, it is crucial to enlarge the current understanding of acid attacks, not simply as crimes related to the humiliation of rejected male suitors or of honor, but as a type of crime that has its real roots in the increasing independence and agency of girls and women that are trying to be kept under the weight of patriarchy. The acid attacks, which can still be interpreted as being caused by the humiliation of the male suitors, now becomes also a symbolic attack to the modernization of women and the attempt to keep patriarchal norms and structures in place, especially because many of these victims, due to the severity of their injuries, are not able to go back to school or to find jobs. The result of the acid attack is to impose a state of submission and dependence on women.

Ideal Beauty and the Place of Survivors of Acid Attacks in India

Acid-attack survivors are often judged by appearance. Ideals of modern Indian women have always been viewed through the lenses of physical beauty and attractiveness. Huma Ahmed-Ghosh in (2003) observes that in 2000 three beauty queens: Miss World, Miss Universe, and Miss Asia-Pacific, projected India to the global scene. According to Ahmed-Ghosh, these young women exemplify the crossroad of two discourses, the feminist and the Hindutva?. If internationally, they

represent India as a modern and progressive nation, nationally they represent traditional values of femininity and nation. The media has a central role in the continuation of the representation of woman as nation. However, the "new" Indian woman is simultaneously a "good woman" and "liberated" as shown by television serials and beauty pageants: "Indian women represent traditional sentiments in their responses when perched on the global stage of beauty pageants. At their moments of fame, they speak of their inner beauty, their will to compete, and being rooted in their 'Indian culture'" (Ahmed-Ghosh 217). Although Ahmed-Ghosh shows how Indian beauty queens are influenced by nationalist discourses, in her interviews with young Indian women who aspire to be beauty queens, she noticed that they do not think they are being manipulated. On the contrary, these beauty pageant participants see themselves as agents; in other words, as a "'modern' generation of women, who have the power to retain the 'traditional' and be global actors" (Ahmed-Ghosh 219). In some ways, the views of acid-attack survivors coincide with those of beauty queens.

Notwithstanding Ahmed-Ghosh's remarks on the historical, political, social, and cultural changes that Indian beauty pageant participants underwent, one thing that does not seem to change is the ideal of modern feminine beauty itself. While Ahmed-Ghosh compares Indian and U. S. ideals of femininity and its relation to notions of nation, she seems to overlook the ongoing change in the ideal of beauty among the American beauty pageants, changes that does not seem to find a parallel in the Indian context. While in the US, pageant standards are changing as evident in examples from Iowa which has selected both Nichole Kelly who is missing her left hand and Abbey Curran who has cerebral palsy, additionally Mikayla Holmgren, who has Down Syndrome, represented her district for Miss Minnesota. Although India has organized contests such as Miss Wheelchair, these participants do not compete side by side with non-disabled participants like their

American counterparts. Ahmed-Ghosh's beauty queens are still representative of an ideal, able-bodied and symmetric beauty. That same ideal drives to acid attacks since the latter aim to deprive women of their symmetric physical beauty, for which they are valued in Indian society. Their physical appearance is still a very important consideration in marriage proposals, for example. If the 2000 Miss World did not see public celebrations when she returned to her hometown because members of the fundamentalist Hindu organization Sangh Parivar warned and threatened her, we can imagine that the weight of patriarchal values further impacts ordinary women who do not have the cameras on their side, such is the case of the victims of acid attacks I describe throughout this dissertation.

The lifelong consequences of these attacks include, in the case of women, blindness and permanent disfiguring of the face, scalp, neck, shoulders and frequently breasts. Disfigured and disabled persons have been widely portrayed as evil, fearful, and unsightly in South Asian folk tales, fiction, mythology, movies, and media (Ghai, 2017). An invisible social barrier subtlety ostracizes disfigured people, subjecting them to discrimination in the community, at work, and in their daily social interactions. The survivor's physical appearance is changed forever, leading to the debilitation of her psyche; this generally results in a secluded life for most survivors who in most cases stop working, going to school, and forming marital bonds. Some of them are not only ashamed of their appearance, but frequently dependent on other people's help. In a society that conforms to prevailing ideas of what constitutes beauty, an attitude of ignorance and even discrimination is formed towards the physically 'different,' putatively less attractive and deformed persons. Besides the physical disability or disfigurement, the social implications of the injury and the ability to reintegrate are an added burden on the individual.

To return to Ahmed-Ghosh's article, her last sentence suggests the potential of Miss India to challenge the representations and institutions that create her (225). On the one hand, this might be already happening given the support that beauty queens have been giving to survivors of acid attacks in India. On the other hand, ideals of beauty and patriarchal structures might be questioned even more effectively by those women who may also represent a "new Indian woman" - the survivors of acid attacks. The media that promotes ideals of feminine beauty nationally and internationally is the very outlet that will be used by survivors of acid attack to question these same ideals. As Soniya, a victim of acid attack from Ghaziabad, explains: "As a beautician I understand now that beauty is on the inside. Clients ask for this or that look. But after they wipe off their makeup they will go back to [what they were] before. Whatever is inside will remain forever. I have learned beauty is inside not what's on your face ("Priya's Mirror: Soni[y]a "). The disfigured face that was supposed to be hidden from society becomes a signifier of subversion, agency, and empowerment. That is why the word "survivor" is very important to describe the disfigured woman by acid attack, because it simultaneously means victim and defiance (Vizenor 2009). These survivors question the place and role of women in Indian society and inspire artists to do the same.

Soniya's understanding of beauty exemplifies Shakti Maira's study (2016). Maira emphasizes the necessity of visual pleasure as well as the diminishing of ambient beauty as the consequence of governmental and individual choices. She affirms that beauty is subjective, but that does not reduce its importance in our daily life: "That is the fallacy of a world view that gives undue importance to the non-subjective, the measurable and the absolute. A world view that has been out of touch with the dynamic, changing, interlinked and relational reality of the world and one that is, I think, beginning to recede" (2). The efforts of acid-attack survivors to challenge standards of beauty and provide alternative definitions of beauty exemplify ways to "revive the

place of beauty in our lives beyond the limited confinement of beauty salons and cosmetic products" (Maira 2). More than reviving the place of beauty in our lives, survivors' understanding and communicating refigured ideals of beauty also revive local aesthetic traditions.

In stark contrast to modern India's beauty culture, the aesthetic pursued by survivors has a long tradition in India where the notion of beauty as a visible effect is not the center of aesthetic philosophy as it is in the West, but rather is secondary. In Sanskrit, the word *saundarya* comes from the adjective *sundar* ("soaked pleasantly" or "well-soaked"). Sundar "is that by which your mind is caught profusely into something with pleasure." *Saundarya*, on the other hand, means "beautyness," to use Shreenath Nair's term, because while *sundar* suggests a spontaneous emotional response *saundarya* points to an act of deliberate intellectual analysis. Shreenath Nair states that in Sanskrit no simple verb exists to describe sensual beauty, suggesting that the experience of beauty is a process. Therefore, "beauty has to be discovered rather than ornamented." He also emphasizes:

> Unlike in the West, aesthetics has never been regarded as a separate discipline in Indian tradition. The construction of beauty was also not the goal of art in Indian aesthetic tradition. Rather, literature and art are considered to be connected inseparably to the social and ethical well-being of individual life. Art is one means of gaining moksha, liberation from the notion of the individual self. Art is one means of gaining moksha, liberation from the notion of the individual self. The social, ethical, aesthetic, spiritual and moral lives of an individual are subsumed under the broader term of dharma. Dharma suggests a way of life leading towards moksha and therefore the objectives of art and literature go beyond the principles of pleasure experienced through beauty. (Nair 155)

In consonance with this traditional view of "beautyness," Sonyia says that the attackers did not steal survivors' beauty because "the true beauty lies within. And this beauty cannot be taken from us. They ruined our appearance but our inner beauty stayed with us" (RT Documentary). Roopa, a survivor who wants to be a fashion designer, states: "Deep down I know I'm beautiful! I've a kind heart and mind! Some think I'm not pretty, but I believe in my beauty, because my heart is pure!" Dolly, the youngest survivor, working at Sheroes Hangout Café-Agra, at the time of my research, affirms that she is now even more beautiful than she used to be. "The face cannot fully show it." Finally, Ritu emphasizes that "beauty is not about the face; it is about the heart. "I believe I am really beautiful" (RT Documentary). Their reconfigured notion of beauty, in concert with the Indian aesthetic tradition, fully embeds moral values. This attitude in turn coincides with the concept of *saundarya* not as a mere sensual pleasure, but as an intellectual process that cannot be detached from an ethical way of life.

While their representations accord with Indian aesthetics, survivors embody their own beauty ideal in digital space, social media, videos, and selfies. As survivors' own words demonstrate, their individual notions of beauty resonate in each other creating a collective meaning. Vanita Reddy describes this relationship between individual and collective representations as social vanity, "the process by which the advancement of group social and political visibility is already embedded within the generic conventions of digital fashion media in ways that exceed its largely self-promotional content… Social vanity cultivates individual taste to - at least in part - promote the visibility of group identity" (186). The survivors also see the group advancement and political visibility as integral to their self-promotion, however, vanity, as a moral judgement is radically absent from their discourse. Promoting *saundarya* is an ethical engagement. In the case of acid-attack survivors, their disfigurement is the main element of visibility and

promotion of their community. Survivors' notion of beauty will be discussed in chapter three, where I describe the *refigurative* aesthetic. But before that I will analyze the *disfigurative* and the *conflative* categories.

2. ACID AESTHETIC:

THE DISFIGURATIVE CATEGORY

Acid aesthetic, as I am arguing, refers to how female acid-attack survivors in post-Nirbhaya India are represented, how these representations affect the audience, and how these representations are produced. One of the three categories of acid aesthetic I am developing is the *disfigurative*. To be clear, I wish to avoid an ableist discourse around the idea of the figure and disfigurement. Disability scholars have often criticized the metaphoric use of language related to disability. For example in expressions such as "to turn a blind eye." In this sense, the nomenclature I am using to develop the acid aesthetic theory could be understood itself as ableist. However, in aesthetic practices, the word "figure" can also mean character or focal point.[10] Acid-attack survivors are figural participants in the aesthetic. What the *disfigurative* category does to these aesthetic figures is to present a reductive, simplistic, shallow, unidimensional, silenced, passive, and/or powerless version of acid-attack survivors. These artworks can reproduce and naturalize patriarchal ideas and place survivors as submissive to them. The *disfigurative* acid aesthetic very often benefits non-disfigured artists more than survivors themselves, even though actual survivors might willingly collaborate in these artworks (see *Sacred Transformation*). Survivors can have their own criticism on these artworks (and they generally do), but still collaborate with artists because, though not necessarily beneficial to the survivors, these artists are spreading the message against acid attacks; they are promoting a discussion on the disfigurement of girls and women with acid in India. Additionally the language of the *disfigurative* aesthetic can further distort the experience.[11] The

[10] See, for example, Eric Kadler's discussion in *Literary Figures in French Drama* (2012)

[11] Niraj Gera, for example, in an interview, refers to acid attacks, which is a form of crime, as "accident," minimizing the criminal's intentionality. Another dismissal of this crime happens in the Bollywood film *Akira* (2016) by A.R. Murugadoss, in which one of the actual survivors that stars in the film tells the actress that represents an acid-attack

ethics of production is as important to the acid aesthetic as the outcome itself. As much as possible I tried to find information about the ethics of the artists, which can be another determinant for their artwork to be categorized as *disfigurative*.

The *disfigurative* category like the two others that will be discussed in the next chapters is not homogeneous or clear cut. This chapter explores a range of possibilities within the limits of the *disfigurative*. Particularly, I focus on the emblematic presentation of mirrors and the affective demonstration associated with the smile across varying genres within this aesthetic. In the following pages the reader will learn in detail the *disfigurative* category of acid aesthetic through the analysis of the following three examples: Ashish Tanwar's novel *Love or Obsession*, A.R. Murugadoss's film *Akira*, and Niraj Gera's series of photographs *Sacred Transformations*.

When Love and Obsession Disfigure

I first came across Ashish Tanwar's novel *Love or Obsession* at Sheroes Hangout Café in Agra when I went there in 2019 to meet the survivors. The author had given copies of his book to the café and authorized them to keep the profit from the sales. His generosity caught my attention and so did many aspects of the novel. I chose to analyze this novel precisely because acid-attack survivors were selling a book that was supposedly inspired by their own experiences. I appreciate Tanwar's efforts to bring awareness about acid-attack survivors through a literary medium because artists tend to choose media that are more visual than literary to represent the issue of acid attacks

survivor: "कुछ नहीं हुआ" (nothing happened). In other words, the acid attack also loses its gravity by being referred as "nothing." Another way language can be *disfigurative* is by means of silence, not necessarily the silencing of a character. In *Akira*, the acid-attack survivor with major facial disfigurement is never named. Gera does a similar movement in the descriptions of his photographs that never mention the names of his sitters.

due to the visual aspect of disfigurement. In his novel, Tanwar shows solidarity with women, which is something that Jackson Katz (2006) calls for. However, Tanwar does this by placing female acid-attack survivors into a narrative of victimization, by romanticizing and normalizing harassment against women, and by disenfranchising the survivor.

In the preface of his book, Tanwar states the main problem behind acid attacks and his aims in writing this novel. He identifies social attitudes as the source of this form of crime. Consequently, women are stripped of their humanity and, therefore, of any rights. Thus, women have been enduring the physical, psychological, and social effects of this objectification. As an expression of his solidarity with female acid-attack survivors, he then sets out on a mission to teach young Indian men the difference between love and obsession.[12] Apparently, it is the lack of discernment between these two states of mind that lies beneath the objectification of women. Notwithstanding Tanwar's good instinct to help men better express their emotions towards women, he does not seem to successfully shed the patriarchal premises he lives in. Instead of a real solidarity with women, he is patronizing and condescending. This attitude does not benefit survivors, instead, it silences them.

It is generally said that we should not judge a book by its cover, but it was precisely the cover that arrested my attention because of the unique image the author chose. The aesthetic model I propose takes into account not only the text per se, but also the overall strategies and methods

[12] Tanwar uses a humanist approach to create his narrative. According to him: "Being humane is more important than being a man. She [woman] is not a commodity. She is a human being. Adore her. Love her but never think of harming her" (6). However, by addressing violence against women, he also evokes feminism. What I expected from this novel after reading the author's concerns and aims was to see a feminist approach to humanism that could recast humanism from its male and able-bodied dominances and biases. Pauline Johnson (2018) has demonstrated that feminism is not necessarily anti-humanism, despite recognizing the historical gendered flaws of this philosophical school (but still ignoring the ableist aspect of Humanism). In her analysis, feminism is actually a radical humanism. To modern humanism, the concept of person is composed of two dimensions: The identification with humankind as the only element of integration and a commitment to the singularities of human personality. Feminism, on the other hand, focuses on the particularities of specific communities of human beings with the objective of seeking equity among all human beings, including through traditional institutions created on humanist bases, such as human and civil rights.

used by the artist during the creation of his/her artwork. Although the plot is set in Delhi and Punjab and all the characters are Indian, the disfigured woman on the cover is Hasina Akter, a survivor from Bangladesh. I sent a photo of the cover of the book to Hasina and asked her if she knew the author or that her photograph was being used in this novel. She responded in the negative and wanted to be in touch with the author. Unfortunately neither the publisher nor Ashish Tanwar, who has the copyright to the novel, replied to her messages.

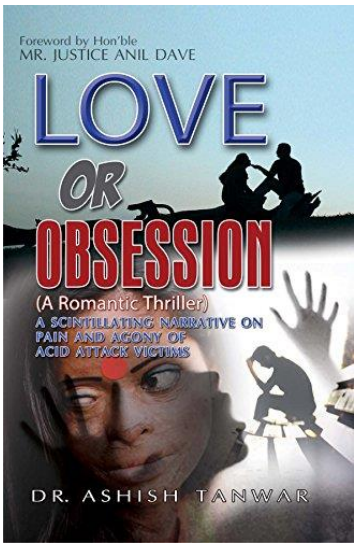

Fig. 1 *Love or Obsession*

Fig. 2 Hasina
(Reproduced with the permission of the photographer Abir Absullah)

Since the author is concerned with the human dimension of women, it is important to humanize this photograph to understand the implications of using it without the knowledge of the survivor herself because Hasina Akter is not a fictional character, but someone who has viscerally experienced an acid attack and is still enduring other forms of exploitation and hardship. Hasina

was attacked when she was seventeen years old due to an argument with one of her father's employees over a bucket of water. She currently lives one hour and a half from Dhaka, Bangladesh, in a small community of about one hundred people with only one community restroom. Their houses have earthen floors and they obtain water from a manual pump. She told me that, in the past, she got only ৳10.000 (about $118.22), a one-time compensation, from the Bangladeshi government for the attack. NGOs have also exploited her image, even taking her to countries such as Germany in order to have their work promoted and to get donations, from which she never benefitted. Hasina, at the time of my encounter with her, was working as a janitor in a government building near her village.

If Tanwar decided that Indian acid-attack survivors should receive the profits from his book, which is a commendable attitude, why not also help the survivor whose disfigured face grounds his readers' imagination? Another option would have been to use the photograph of one of the survivors at Sheroes Café. He knows them personally and could easily have asked for her permission. Conversely, he does not seem to know who Hasina is. Moreover, as surprising as it sounds, given that Ashish Tanwar has a degree in Law, neither Tanwar nor his editor obtained permission from the Bangladeshi photographer Abir Abdullah, who took the original photo of Hasina and who owns the copyright of the photograph, to reproduce it on the cover of the book. However, the question remains: Why did Tanwar choose the photo of a Bangladeshi survivor? Perhaps his intention was to suggest a universal similarity between the lives of acid-attack survivors, a weak hypothesis corroborated by the expression in plural – "acid attack victims" - in the subtitle of the book, despite the narrative focus on only one survivor. Moreover, although the survivors at Sheroes have consistently and across media expressed their rejection of the word

"victim" because it strips them of their agency just like their attackers once did, Ashish Tanwar insists, from the beginning, on placing his protagonist in a narrative of victimization.

The plot is centered on the relationship between two college students Rahul and Madhavi, which is challenged by the jealousy of their friends Dev and Geet. Dev's spurned love leads him to disfigure Madhavi with acid with the help of Geet. Although survivors frequently affirm that the attack is just the beginning of their hardship (physical pain, trauma, and discrimination), Tanwar chose rather to focus on the events that led to the attack. Therefore, the actual issue of acid attack is framed by a narrative about the difference between love and obsession. He states in the preface that there is a thin line between love and obsession: "Love is not love if it strives for physical possession. Love stands for sacrifice. Happiness of love ought to be the centre" (5). Given that Dev attacks Madhavi due to his jealousy, it would not be difficult to determine who is in love with Madhavi and who is obsessed with her. The fact that the female character Madhavi is disfigured by the male character Dev highlights the author's intention to shed light on gender-based violence and the difficulties that the attack brings to the female survivor. However, the emphasis of the narrative on Rahul silences Madhavi and erases her experience of survival.

In his attempt to demonstrate solidarity with women, Tanwar reinforces patriarchal structures that are then amplified by ableism. The author's intention to write about a female acid attack survivor falls short when he begins and ends his book focusing on attractiveness rather than disfigurement, and on the male character Rahul, rather than on the female survivor. Therefore, Madhavi's role in the narrative is merely a propelling element to draw the distinction between Rahul and Dev. For example, Dr. Dayal, the police inspector investigating the attack on Madhavi, while interrogating Rahul as a possible suspect, says that Rahul spoiled *his* own career. Dr Dayal does not focus on Madhavi's physical and psychological pain as emotional appeals to solve the

crime, but rather the impact of Rahul's supposed mistakes on his own professional future (10). Likewise, right after the attack had been carried out, the omniscient narrator concentrates on Rahul's state of mind, rather than on Madhavi's, who has been disfigured for life. Swain and French (2000) notes that history is owned and documented by those in power, consequently invisibility and silence are the foundation of oppression. Therefore, it is particularly important to listen to the stories of under-represented groups of disabled people (Goodley, 1996). Literature could be a place where survivors, as an under-represented group within the disabled persons community, could be heard. However, Tanwar omits his character's own understanding of her experience as an acid attack survivor.

The author appropriates the discussion on gender equality in a twisted form of solidarity with women that reinforces stereotypical gender roles, submissiveness, and oppressive behavior. This approach resembles the construction of negative heroes[13] in Indian films, a phenomenon widely studied by critics. Regarding stalking, for example, an attitude that Rahul practices until Madhavi accepts him, Alessandra Consolaro states that, in Bollywood films, "male protagonist is engrossed in an obsessive stalking of the female protagonist, with no need to introduce childhood traumas in order to justify his being 'evil'" (7). The lyrics of these films also encourage the naturalization and romanticization of stalking, as Sergio Silverio points out. One of the songs Silverio analyzes states: "Do not dare to stop me if I follow you… I have a right on you as you delight me, girl." (27). According to Silverio:

> This promotes the idea that men should persistently follow women until they give in and agree to talk to them. However, in real life women may not be impressed by such behavior

[13] I define negative heroes as male characters who pretend to be feminists, but who actually deprive women's voice and overwrites their own privileged position, which causes the negative impacts on women.

> and may at times retaliate. When this happens, some men who have been told by their favorite Bollywood songs that stalking is permissible get devastated and can sometimes end up causing physical harm to the woman. (27)

In two other studies on sexism, reinforcement of gender norms, and punishments, scholars reached the same conclusion:[14]

> [S]talking of women and the number of item numbers included in the films only adds to the fantasy element. The song sequences endorse that men are always superior reinforcing the beliefs in the patriarchal society that one hears from childhood, and therefore all consequences are attributed to the negative attitude of women. (Surendran and Venkataswamy 3)

Tanwar's novel follows the same script regarding stalking: "Her beautiful face, curvaceous body, long black hair, glittering eyes and above all an innocent smile has taken me away. Dev, [sic] and now whatsoever may happen she will be mine," says Rahul before beginning to stalk Madhavi (18).

Physical appearance is a common currency through which women are valued in India, like in many other countries. Despite several successful literary and cinematographic attempts to project different ideals and role models of female body, the exploitation of stereotypical attractiveness and physical beauty, in commercials, films, marriage advertisements, and TV series are still the trend (Das and Sharma, 2016; Ghaznavi, Grasso, and Taylor, 2017; Peter, 2017; Prusaczyk and Choma, 2018; Dhillon-Jamerson, 2019). While these media project ideals regarding

[14] See Khan, Subuhi and Laramie D. Taylor. "Gender Policing in Mainstream Hindi Cinema: A Decade of Central Female Characters in Top-Grossing Bollywood Movies *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018): 3641-3662; Surendran, Saumya and Sudha Venkataswamy. "'Machi Open the Bottle!' Glorification of Alcohol and Stalking in Tamil Film Songs" 4th International Conference on Literature, History, Humanities and Social Sciences (LHHSS-2017). Proceedings. Aug. 8-9, 2017, 47-50.

skin tone, clothes, weight, and attitudes, the audience that do not meet these standards face a decrease in self-esteem. In a study conducted by Metti Amirtham on the socio-cultural perceptions of women with regard to their bodies in the Indian context, it is clear that the majority of women still regard beauty as the main way to succeed in life.

> Irrespective of the group they hail from, their education, occupation, geographical location, economic position, religion and age groups, 67 percent of the respondents said that physical appearance is more important than intelligence for a woman. They seem to strongly believe that physical appearance helps women to prosper in life. (73)

Tanwar's exploration of female physical beauty underlines his alliances with standards of body conformity. The examples mentioned above as well as others illustrate the ways in which "certain forms of bodily display reinforce narrow sets of ideas about beauty, at once fetishizing and denigrating disability and difference" (Hall 44). If the display and performance of standard norms of beauty represented by skin tones and weight, for example, have a negative impact on viewers, the conformity of bodies reinforces resistance to those that do not fit the image of the "perfect body," such as the disfigured. Tobin Siebers, who argues for a disability aesthetic, challenges the standard definitions of beauty in terms of "harmony, bodily integrity and health as standards of beauty," (71) values that are, however, emphasized by Ashish Tanwar.

Representation matters because what we see affects our perception of ourselves and of others. Tina Campt (2012), for example, states that photography provides a means to challenge negative stereotypes and assumptions, creating counterimages. On the one hand disabled and disfigured people are constantly seeking to produce and consume representations that inspire others to not be ashamed of their non-normative bodies, intellect, and behavior. On the other hand disability scholars have often criticized the use of disability in narratives as a "literary spectacle

and ableist symbol" (Fraser 79) or as a narrative prosthesis; in other words as a metaphor empty of its real social and cultural implications (Mitchell and Snyder 6). When the emphasis on the normative and stereotypical female body overshadows the political relevance of the scars in the lives of survivors, this representation failed to drive its readers to dive into the deepest bodily, psychological, social, and cultural experiences that the disfigurement brings to survivors. In *Love and Obsession* there is a recurrent emphasis on the idea of physical beauty and attractiveness as well as on other currencies such as education and piousness that subscribe to the ideal of modern womanhood in India, without much questioning and without exploring the implications of disfigurement to this same modern Indian woman (Majumdar, 2009; Munshi, 2013, Niranjana, 2006).[15] The narrator reinforces Rahul's interest in Madhavi's physicality: "When one finds someone whose look makes the heart beat faster, body becomes light, soul loses control, sleep seldom comes and when it comes, one dreams of her/him" (17). Moreover, attractiveness is also used to hierarchize female characters: "Geet is not as beautiful as Madhavi yet she knows how to carry herself' (13). Beauty, education, and piety constitute the tripod on which Madhavi's character rests; her disfigurement is merely tragic contributing nothing to the author's scheme for character development. Tanwar does not explore the implications of her scars because his objective is not to dive into the representations of disfigurement, but to portray the difference between love and obsession. In order to fulfill this task, the attack is the essential element used to prove Dev's obsession whereas Rahul's marriage to Madhavi proves Rahul's love. Disfigurement becomes a consequential element not worth exploring. It is helpful that Tanwar seeks to redress gender violence at its source, with the attitudes of men, and that he takes practical steps to ally

[15] Emplotting piousness, Tanwar describes the couple's first romantic evening outside the university campus, Madhavi takes Rahul to the Bangla Sahib Gurudwāra, to his total surprise. Her explanation was that "without blessings of Babaji no relationship could ever blossom" (52).

with survivors by donating the proceeds of his sales to the NGO, however his narrative employs the same gender divisions that are at the root of toxic masculine presumptions of ownership over women's bodies. Without attending to the specificities of survival, the novel reinscribes victimization.

To further the idea of the irrelevance of disfigurement in Tanwar's novel, it is important to understand the systematic focus on beauty and attractiveness as a strategy to develop the characterization of Rahul. Although the author "decided to stand beside all those who bear endless pain, stigma and torments" as he writes in the preface (6), he emphasizes stereotypical notions of female body image, attractiveness, and beauty, ignoring the scars that transform women into acid-attack survivors. Considering that the author consistently focuses on the male character Rahul, Madhavi's body image becomes a foil to further Rahul's qualities. When Dev disfigures Madhavi, her father as well as Madhavi herself express concern regarding the continuity of Rahul's relationship with Madhavi. Marriage is the only aspect of the future life of Madhavi as a survivor that is actually discussed. There is no speculation about her future as a lawyer, for example, which would have been very interesting given the combination of her knowledge of laws and her personal experience as a survivor. Education does not serve a personal purpose in the scheme. Rather it becomes an asset on the marriage market, one made comparable with the physical advantages Madhavi is thought to have lost. The totality of Madhavi's individual and social existence is reduced to her relationship with Rahul. Thus, Rahul proposes to her as a sign of his true love and becomes Madhavi's "savior," since, as she says, "[i]n this condition no one will come forward to marry me" (108).

Although feminist approaches to women's agency tend to dismiss adherence to social conventions such as marriage, Nandini Ghosh (2016) reminds us that these conventions intersect

with disability in singular ways. The goals of disabled women might be exactly to marry and have children, given that these are often excluded from their future prospects. Disabled women are frequently seen as childish and incapable of managing responsibilities such as a family. Therefore, while non-disabled women promote the idea that women can choose between being single or marrying, having children or not bearing any child, disabled women might desire exactly the social conventions that are excluded from their lives. In this sense, the future marriage of Madhavi and Rahul symbolizes the wish of many disabled women and the questioning of standards of beauty as defining elements of women's worth. However, the fact that Rahul's desire to marry Madhavi after her disfigurement grants him qualifiers such as "savior" reinforces the idea that he is making a sacrifice by marrying a disfigured woman. Simultaneously, Madhavi is placed in a narrative of victimization, given that she believes no one else would marry her due to her disfigurement.[16]

Numerous aspects of Tanwar's narrative oppose what actual acid-attack survivors have been consistently teaching their audiences regarding the normalization of violence against women. For example, Madhavi thinks that Rahul's complaint about her going to her parents' house is his

[16] It is interesting to see how Rahul's reaction to premarital sex demonstrates the reminiscence of the Victorian moralism brought to India by colonizers. When they travel to Agra for a romantic getaway, the narrator emphasizes that "they know that the moments coming are morally wrong." When Rahul controls Madhavi, he affirms that they should get intimate only after marriage: "It may be orthodox for many but I can't do this before formal marriage is solemnized.' Rahul expresses himself" (87-88). The Indian Lady's Magazine, for example, was systematically used with the objective of spreading Victorian morals among its readership.

> But as Victorians themselves were aware (if reluctant to admit), the veneration of women in the name of social purity and sexual morality served less to protect females from the world's corrupting influences than to prevent their participation in the male-driven public realm economy. East and West, Angel-in-the-House ideology cast women as 'more than man's equal, in that she was elevated to be an object of veneration. This annulled the possibility of any serious consideration of the issue of parity' (Dalmia, Nationalization 2500). (Logan 153)

This twisted veneration of women finds echo in Tanwar's narrative. As Madhavi says: "For a girl getting reverence from her counterpart is the biggest thing in this life. You love me, respect me that is more than enough. You are in a situation when you could take my advantage but you are not even trying to touch me, I salute your humility towards womanhood" (87). This Victorian reverence is certainly incompatible with equality. Rahul, for example, first dismisses Madhavi's interest in running for president of the Delhi University Students' Union: "Are you mad? This is junk yar. You want to jump into it." (74). Tanwar's intention is to demonstrate the importance of women's equality: "She needs much desired and constitutionally granted equality. Equality in real sense and not on papers" (66). However, he fails to accomplish this in his novel.

way of caring for her and she respects him for determining how she should dress (26). Madhavi actually falls in love with Rahul when he admonishes her because of her "provocative" dress that makes her "look cheap" (35, 46), which is also an economic metaphor that points to the desire of having an expensive (unavailable) partner. This belittling attitude towards women goes against the discourse of many acid-attack survivors who understand the normalization of this possessive behavior as being problematic, exactly because the physical abuses that they suffered were the culmination of a series of actions such as stalking, possessiveness, controlling attitudes, and jealousy. On May 8th, 2020, Laxmi posted a video on her Facebook page in which she explains that the jealousy of her attacker was not related to how she dressed, but his "regressive mindset" (Agarwal "Chhote kapde nahi aapki nazar hai"). Tanwar's solidarity effort elides and silences the perspectives of survivors on multiple levels.

As a common element of acid aesthetic, spiritual motifs are used as a metaphor for the survivor's struggle. In *Love or Obsession*, however, Hindu mythology is appropriated to suggest that it is Madhavi's fault that Dev is obsessed with her: "Menaka has broken severe penance undertaken by Vishwamitra. This time Madhavi has incited the lust in Dev by her spotless beauty" (35). The story of Viśvāmitra and Menakā is told in the epic poem *Mahābhārata*. Viśvāmitra was a sage who was in deep meditation in the forest to achieve the status of *mahāṛṣi* ("a great seer"). The God Indra, feeling threatened by Viśvāmitra's growing powers, sent Menakā (a celestial nymph) to disrupt his concentration. Menakā seduced Viśāmitra with her dance and teasing with the help of Vāyu (the God of Wind), who blew away her clothes, revealing her attractive body. Consumed with desire, Viśvāmitra made love with Menakā, but later rejected her and the child she bore of him (Pattanaik 8). In the myth, the disruption of Viśvāmitra's meditation is not attributed to his lack of control, but to Menakā's powerful instigation. On the one hand, Menakā is Indra's

tool; on the other she is also discarded by Viśvāmitra after knowing of her pregnancy. Yet, Madhavi does not act to seduce Dev, just being beautiful makes her as culpable as the god's plaything. She seems to be Tanwar's tool and will also face the bad consequences of Dev's lack of control. It is possible that Rahul's controlling attitudes towards Madhavi is an attempt to prove that, unlike Dev, he is in control of the situation. However, he does not control his own attitudes; he only controls hers. This example illustrates how the spiritual tradition can interpellate men into patriarchal notions.

This normalization of patriarchal romance symbolized by the Taj Mahal, where Rahul and Madhavi spend their romantic getaway. The Taj Mahal has already been explored in other representations of acid-attack survivors, such as in the series of photographs by Niraj Gera, which will be discussed in this chapter. Although this marvelous example of Persian architecture is generally seen as an expression of love because Shah Jahan ordered its construction to entomb the remains of his favorite wife – Mumtaz Mahal, the Taj is actually a mausoleum; in other words a symbol of death. The Taj Mahal was strategically build in front of the Agra Fort so that Shah Jahan could look at her mausoleum every day. Some legends, however, say that after the completion of the Taj Mahal, Shah Jahan cut off the hand of the architect and plucked his eyes out, so that he would not be able to design something more beautiful than the Taj (Boda 4). Other legends state that he had the hands of all craftsmen cut off (Wolff 58). The symbolism of love embedded in the Taj Mahal has been frequently questioned by scholars who understand it as a reminder of maternal mortality, since Mumtaz Mahal died during the delivery of her fourteenth child as the result of the need to constantly bear children in an environment with poor medical infrastructure (Elit, 2007; Vandermoortele, 2012; Obregon and Waisbord, 2012). Despite the horrors described by the legends and the historical difficulties faced by Mumtaz Mahal, what is remarkable is that the Taj

is used as a symbol of love in Tanwar's novel. Reading against his intentions one may argue that the monument evokes the oppressive structures that took Mumtaz Mahal's life and threaten Madhavi's well-being. On this reading, it is not only Dev's obsession that threatens this young woman, Rahul's may be just as lethal though in a less obvious way.

Tanwar's novel is such a disfigurative representation of acid-attack survivors that readers are not given access to Madhavi's thoughts about her new face after the attack. Rahul, praised for his sacrifice, is at focus of this acid aesthetic: "Rahul and Madhavi have been married. The facial disfigurement, sight in one eye, speech impairment meant nothing for him. He listened to his true heart and *has done stupendous thing in marrying Madhavi*" (110, emphasis added). The narrator serves as a distorted mirror through which we, readers, learn about Madhavi's disfigurement. The narrator does not mirror her scarred face, but gives a patriarchal frame for the readers to understand her disfigurement.

The situational irony of this book is that it is sold by acid-attack survivors who will probably never know what is written in it, since the novel is written in English, a language that very few survivors can read. They will never know the shape given to their experiences of patriarchy and disfigurement in this book; a book that perpetuates, supports, and calcifies many of the social and cultural norms they fight against.

Kicking Acid Disfigurement out of Scene

The Bollywood film *Akira*[17] directed by Arunasalam Murugadoss uses acid disfigurement only to spur its plot, but the issue is, nonetheless, quickly buried in a narrative that revolves around

[17] See appendix A for a detailed summary of the plot.

a questionable representation of women's empowerment. *Akira* is a Hindi remake of the Tamil film *Mouna Guru* (2011). The original film does not have any reference to acid attacks. Therefore, the presence of acid disfigurement in the 2016-Hindi version follows, as I pointed out in the introduction, the influence of the Nirbhaya case in representations of gender-based violence in India. Despite Murugadoss's efforts in bringing to light this form of crime and disfigurement, actual survivors of acid attack, I argue, are disenfranchised in the film, their struggles as survivors, exemplified here by the smile, are trivialized, and it portrays a failed attempt at empowerment because the director prioritizes the melodramatic elements in detriment to the social issue. In accord with Ahn's work, I define empowerment as a collective effort to gain autonomy and community. Empowerment is shared rather than earned through individual action. It is distinct from agency in that an individual may enact agency without sharing in structural power.

Akira fits a long series of films focused on social issues that include gender-based violence and disabilities, which are produced for the betterment of Indian society. Since the times of Jawaharlal Nehru, cinema has been used to promote social issues among the Indian population, especially due to the high rates of illiteracy in the country. The states had also become interested in adult education and saw it as an opportunity to use cinema alongside with suitable books and even magic shows to discuss social issues (Sharma and Sharma 85). Some of the topics covered were a more equal status for women, family harmony, and smaller family size (Singhal and Rogers 331). This project began since the 1930's and in the 1980's the Doordarshan's government television system in India began some TV series with the same intent, which continues till today with films, such as *Akira*.[18]

[18] The link between education and entertainment has roots in socialist theory. See: Mally, Lynn "Exporting Soviet Culture: The Case of Agitprop Theatre" *Slavic Review* 62.2 (Summer 2003): 324-42.

> As a result of the high rates of illiteracy and the unparalleled popularity of films and film stars in India, the state has viewed film as a pedagogical tool in its modernization agenda. Illiteracy or the lack of a formal education signals to government functionaries that vast portions of the populace, who are referred to as the "masses," are easily influenced – or incited by – onscreen image. Since the masses are perceived as very malleable – and in need of proper molding – elected officials and bureaucrats throughout the decades have been exhorting filmmakers to make "socially relevant" films to "uplift" the masses. (Ganti 48)

Discussion of violence against women has been a constant theme in Indian cinema in all Indian languages and the film *Akira* builds up on spreading knowledge about the evils of violence against women and the need for women's empowerment. This film tells the story of Akira Sharma who, as a child, witnessed an acid attack. The attacker's friends retaliate and try to throw acid on her, but she defends herself using a karate move. The acid falls on the attacker's own face. Since his family had political connections, Akira is sent to jail for three years. This incident turns her into an introverted and traumatized young woman. She moves to Mumbai and becomes entangled in the crimes of Govind Rane, a corrupt police officer. By taking matters into her own hands, she not only saves herself, but also saves Mumbai from riots.

While the film also highlights the problem of acid attack, its paratext is used to disfigure survivors. In other words, both opening and closing credits as well as such as the "all persons fictitious" serve to silence or make survivors invisible. The disclaimer states the following: "All characters in this film are fictitious and bear no resemblance to any person living or dead. Any similarity is purely coincidental." This statement would be legitimate if it were not for the presence of actual acid-attack survivors appearing in the film as survivors. The function of this disclaimer

is to reduce the possibility of legal action for libel. In *Akira*, however, this disclaimer suggests that the presence of the survivors Soniya, Ritu, Roopa, Geeta, Neetu, and Dolly in the film is something unintentional, as if there were no difference between having actual survivors in the film or only actresses with makeup representing disfigurement.[19]

Both opening and closing credits are also disfiguring of survivors. The opening credits offer a "Special Thanks to Chhanv Foundation," the organization responsible for the creation of Sheroes Hangout Café. However, thanking the NGO is not the same as acknowledging the individuals that helped the creation of the film. Surprisingly, in the closing credits, the survivors' names are nowhere to be seen also, even though they have speaking lines in the film. On one hand, the thanks to the NGO instead of to the individual survivors suggest that the NGO, which is run by men, owns these survivors. On the other hand, the fact that their names do not appear among those of the other actors or the crew while the closing credits roll implies that they are not just fictional characters as the "all persons fictitious disclaimer" suggested, but fictional characters portrayed by "invisible" actresses. Disability scholars and activists have frequently pointed out the social invisibility of the disabled persons (Garland-Thomson, 1997, Marx, 2003; Lawson and Gooding, 2005; Dossa, 2009; Fraser, 2018). For this same reason, disability artists have been

[19] It is well known that this disclaimer has been used many times over ironically as well as a political statement. For example, the disclaimer in the animated sitcom *South Park*, created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone, was humorous and ironic as was the entire series: "All characters and events in this show – even those based on real people – are entirely fictional. All celebrity voices are impersonated – poorly" (LoBrutto 111). Another interesting example is the disclaimer in the film *The Constant Gardener* (2005) by Fernando Meirelles. Despite using the trope of good white people helping black people, the political disclaimer signed by the author of the original book suggests that the impact of the pharmaceutical companies in the real world is far worse than what is portrayed in the movie: "Nobody in this story, and no outfit or corporation, thank God, is based upon an actual person or outfit in the real world. But I can tell you this; as my journey through the pharmaceutical jungle progressed, I came to realize that, by comparison with the reality, my story was as tame as a holiday postcard" (Boym 454). In the case of the film *Akira*, there is no evidence that the disclaimer is ironical. With the exception of Soniya, who has her own beauty parlor in Ghaziabad, all other survivors worked at the time of the release of the film at Sheroes Hangout Café in Agra. The statement that the characters that they portray do not bear any "resemblance to any person living or dead" is simply a mechanism to erase their identities.

constantly trying to make disability visible in their cultural productions to counteract social invisibility (Sandahl and Auslander, 2009; Sandell et al, 2013). After all, "[v]isibility challenges thoughtless and passive acceptance of damaging norms" (Honeyman 133). This visibility is precisely what Murugadoss sought in his film regarding acid disfigurement. However, I would argue, the visibility of disfigurement for the sake of following a trend is not necessarily a meaningful, ethical, or political way to explore the visibility of survivors' scars. Kevin Stagg reminds us that: "Unlike other marginalized identities (gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity), disability is omnipresent throughout literature creating a conundrum whereby disability's social invisibility is accompanied by its cultural profusion." This statement implies not just a paradox between reality and representation, but it might also point to a paradox within the artwork itself, where disability is used as a strategy to focus on other issues. Murugadoss's attempt to render acid disfigurement visible seems to fall into this internal paradox, in which the visibility turns to invisibility when survivors are not credited with their active contributions to the film.

The participation of actual acid-attack survivors in *Akira,* while displaying their agency, elides their political activism because they are made to trivialize a fictional survivor's recovery. Let me explain this claim with reference to the film's emplotment of attack and survival. In contrast to Akira who defends her body from attack, an unnamed girl is disfigured in an acid attack, yet this survivor in the film is never named, therefore, I will call her "unnamed survivor." This unnamed survivor is played by an actress with extensive prosthetic makeup rather than an actual survivor with her own disfigured face. The unnamed survivor is seen surrounded by the actual acid-attack survivors I previously mentioned. Even though the support of their peers is something that all survivors mentioned to me during my interviews as an fundamental element in their recovery, their scripted lines and supposedly motivational sentences as well as and the pressure

they exert to make the unnamed survivor smile in face of her hardship overshadow the complexity of the recovery process. Dolly, Geeta, Neetu, Soniya, Roopa, and Ritu say the following sentences: "Why are you crying? Don't cry." "It's ok! We're here with you." "Smile. It's okay." "Don't be disheartened. We'll always be with you." "Your face's scarred, but that doesn't mean your life's scarred too." "Smile, that's it."[20] What surprises me more than they asking the unnamed survivor why she was crying, as if there was no reason for her to cry or as if she did not have the right to feel sad after the attack, is a sentence that is translated as "it's okay," but a more accurate translation would be: "nothing happened" (कुछ नहीं हुआ). The film banalizes acid attack and classifies it as "nothing." Moreover, to use actual survivors to normalize acid attack is not only disempowering, but also disregards their own experiential knowledge of disfigurement. Furthermore, due to the pressure to smile, the unnamed survivor gives an uncomfortable and embarrassing smile to which all survivors and neighbors laugh and clap. Murugadoss subverts the practice of survivors who consider their smiles as an expression of their inner beauty. For them the smile is the result of a long process of recovery and the creation of a new identity, which is political and activist (see chapter three). Murugadoss's portrayal of the smile, however, follows another rule: "fake until you make it." This display of smile is external and artificial suggesting that by forcing a smile the survivor would feel better about her new body. The director co-opts survivors' practices and simplifies their philosophy of affect. Ritu and the other survivors might see participation in a film that sheds light on the issue of acid attack as yet another platform for them to promote their cause. However, by having to trivialize disfigurement and their own practice of recovery their agency is coopted (Ahn 2020).

[20] These are the subtitles provided for English-speaking audiences. Grammatical errors are present in the original.

Fig. 3 - Unnamed girl being attacked with acid

Fig. 4 - Unnamed survivor with facial disfigurement

Fig. 5 - Unnamed survivor looking at her disfigured face

Fig. 6 - Unnamed survivor smiling surrounded by Roopa, Soniya, Dolly, Ritu, Neetu, and Geeta (from left to right).

The artificiality of the unnamed survivor's smile is set up as a foil to emphasize Akira's psychological trauma. Although it would be a mistake to try to hierarchize traumas, it is evident that Murugadoss prioritizes Akira's psychological trauma over that of the unnamed survivor. The fact that the one with major facial disfigurement can easily smile while Akira, who has a tiny facial scar from the knife cut rarely smiles demonstrates that her trauma is certainly more ingrained. One might think that Akira's trauma originates from being sent to jail for a crime she did not commit, but the unnamed survivor was punished with disfigurement for no crime. Akira's unjust incarceration as a child is revived in the form of the two forced and illegal stays in the mental hospital (governmental asylum) later in the film. The unfairness of this system and the death of her father may have caused the real trauma, more than the acid attack itself. Akira's life in jail is dramatized by her serious and sad facial expression, and by black and white images, which is worth noting, were never used to depict the emotional state of the unnamed acid attack survivor. In this case, the acid attack is once again minimized and the unnamed survivor's easy smile becomes even

more grotesque. The unnamed survivor's disfigurement is a visible account of her physical trauma while the psychological trauma experienced by Akira who is not physically disfigured has to become visible through the lack of her smile. Disability scholars have emphasized the difficulties and sometimes prejudices in having invisible disabilities represented (Murray, 2008; Osteen, 2010; Schatz and George, 2018). The difficulties in representing the psychological trauma of Akira might be the reason why she hardly smiles. However, acid disfigurement, despite its visual nature, does not cause only physical trauma, but also psychological trauma. Therefore, the quick, embarrassing, and uncomfortable smile forcefully wipes out these complexities of acid disfigurement.

Fig. 7 - Akira fights her attacker

Fig. 8 - Acid drops on the face of the attacker

Fig. 9 - Akira incarcerated in a child correction facility

Fig. 10 - Akira incarcerated in a child correction facility

Although the film *Akira* begins with a reference to another Indian film on acid attacks, the song "So Gaya Yeh Jahan" from the film *Tezaab* (1988) by Chandrashekhar Narvekar, acid disfigurement is left aside for melodramatic explorations. The film presents a melodramatic representation of a number of social issues in addition to acid attack: the broken justice system,

the misuse of government mental health facilities, the plight of transgender citizens, the political corruption of policing, and disability struggles. The main melodramatic feature of the film is Akira's kick. The DVD even provides additional scenes of Sonakshi Sinha, the actress who performs Akira, learning and performing the kicks. However, Akira's display of agency, especially through karate moves, becomes ineffective because she is operating within a framework determined by male police officers (Ahn 2020).

Fig. 11 - Akira fighting Nikki's gang at college

Fig. 12 - Akira fighting Nikki's gang at college

Fig. 13 - Akira being taken back to the mental hospital

Fig. 14 - After escaping a second time, Akira found Dr. Tiwari to force him to prove that she is not delusional

Fig. 15 - Akira fighting officer Govind Rane

Fig. 16 - Akira fighting officer Govind Rane

The metaphorical "gouged out eyes" of the acid attack survivor that Akira mentions do not only reinforce my argument that disfigurement should be analyzed through the lenses of disability studies. They also demonstrate how disability can lose its materiality in representations, disrupting the political aspect of disability itself. This metaphor illustrates the extent to which the film conflates women's empowerment with physical domination and violence rather than structural and political representation or collective support, such as the acid survivors' practice. During the World Disability Day ceremony, for example, Akira is supposed to give a speech at her college, but Nikki and her gang disrupts the sound system and her microphone stops working, making it impossible for people in the audience to hear her. Instead of giving up, Akira speaks in sign language to communicate with the students from the school for speech and hearing impaired children that functions in the premises of her college. The children's interpreter then does a reverse translation from sign language to Hindi. As her father used to say: "A disabled person isn't someone who doesn't have a limb, it's someone who doesn't use the limbs. Hands that don't come forth to help others are 'disabled'. The eyes that ignore atrocities are 'disabled' Feet that turn away and desert their parents are 'disabled.'" The teaching of her father, which Akira subscribes to, goes beyond the concept of "temporarily able-bodied" (TAB) developed by disability activists in the 80's, which refers to those who do not identify as disabled, in order "to challenge the security of the 'able-bodied' position" (Marks 18). In Akira's point of view everyone who does not use their body to act towards rightness and justice is disabled. On the one hand, this form of describing disability calls for everyone to come forward whenever someone is in need. On the other hand it ignores the disabled subjectivity, their unique and concrete experiences, and representational lives, relegating disability to the realm of the metaphoric (Mitchell and Snyder 1-6). Despite the beauty in Akira's words, they actually disenfranchise disabled people from their particular experiences.

Fig. 17 - Akira giving a speech in Indian sign language during the World Disability Day

Another common aspect of acid aesthetic is the presence of religious or spiritual elements. In *Akira*, three different religious systems coexist. The first religious reference in the film is described as a Sufi saying: "Life always tests you with your special virtue that exists in you."[21] This saying serves as a frame to introduce Akira, whose name means "strength with grace." It is her "graceful strength" that is emphasized in the film. Although Akira is actually Hindu,[22] her resilience and ability in karate lead her to compare herself with Jesus Christ. When Akira is told by officer Rabiya that she would have to go to the mental hospital in order to avoid riots in Mumbai instead of proving to everyone that she was not delusional, the camera focuses on the image of Jesus Christ in the old Holly Cross Church. Akira, like Jesus Christ, becomes a sheep to be immolated in order to save others. While being taken by the police, the speech and hearing impaired children see blood in Akira's hand, from the killing of Govind Rane and his team of corrupt officers, and ask her whose blood that was. Akira replies in sign language that she nailed herself to the cross. Although her account emphasizes her intent, she did not have any choice given that the police Commissioner and Secretariat had already decided her fate, which was carried out

[21] 'जिंदगी तुम्हारे उसी गुण का इम्तिहान लेती है, जो तुम्हारे भीतर मौजूद है.' - पुरानी सूफी कहावत.
[22] Her surname "Sharma" suggests she belongs to the Brahmin caste of the Hindu religion.

by officer Rabiya. The non-disfigured acid attack survivor is portrayed as a savior, while the disfigured one was never again mentioned in the film. Moreover, Akira's psychological trauma does not play any role in her becoming a savior; instead it is a fake disability - recurrent persistent delusion – that becomes the excuse for her killing of the police officers and for her to be taken once again to the governmental asylum. This is the official narrative that people were told. Her life teaching kids with special needs in Jodhpur after the charges were dismissed seems more like a person living in hiding than actual liberation, since she could not be reintegrated to the society in Mumbai.

Fig. 18 - Akira's sacrifice

Fig. 19 - Speech and hearing impaired child asking Akira whose blood is on her hands

Fig. 20 - Akira tells the children she nailed herself to the cross

Despite adding acid disfigurement to a mainstream Bollywood film, establishing inter-disability solidarity[23] and religious intertextuality, Murugadoss performs *disfigurative* acid aesthetic by not giving due credit to actual acid survivors that appear in his movie. This erasure of actual survivors is reinforced by paratextual elements such as the "all fictitious persons disclaimer." By giving credits to the NGO instead of the individual survivors, the women were treated as possessions of the institution. The artificiality of the smile given by the unnamed acid attack survivor also deforms the experiences and teachings of actual survivors regarding the practice of smiling, which represents their recovery and reflects their perception of themselves; not a forced and exterior appearance of happiness that would act inwards. Moreover, disability is used metaphorically, relegating the bodily experiences of disabled people to the margins of melodramatic scenes in which kicks, punches, and convoluted corrupt activities by the police become the center of the plot. In sum, Akira's agency itself is emptied of power when she is impeded to prove the truth about the corrupt police officers and is then taken back to the governmental asylum.

Disfiguring the Subject's Agency in the Name of Authorship

The third example of *disfigurative* acid aesthetic is Niraj Gera's series of photographs on acid-attack survivors called "Sacred Transformations" (2016).[24] Although I consider Gera's work

[23] For inter-disability solidarity I mean a sensibility that reflects in the efforts to challenge identity centered epistemologies and that develops solidarity among persons with different disabilities.

[24] Susan Sontag, analyzing photos of war, states that, "the memory of war, however, like all memory, is mostly local… But for a war to break out of its immediate constituency and become a subject of international attention, it must be regarded as something of an exception, as wars go, and represent more than the clashing interests of the belligerents themselves" (34).This explains why the visibility of acid-attack survivors begins after the international uproar resulted from the gang-rape and murder of Jyoti Singh. Niraj Gera's series of photograph itself was created after the foundation of NGOs focused on helping acid-attack survivors, which promote their work internationally mainly through social

illustrative of the *disfigurative* category of acid aesthetic, his photographs also point to the *conflative* and the *refigurative* categories of acid aesthetic, which I am going to introduce in the next chapters. For example, his series of photographs encapsulates survivors' past in a narrative of child abuse, including rape, which is a characteristic representative of the *conflative* category. The last part of his series portrays survivors after they have regained their confidence, self-acceptance, and agency, which suggests the *refigurative* category. However, since there is a strong emphasis on the victimization of the survivor and on the engagement of the viewer through pity, the covert imposition of the photographer's own spiritual values on the survivors, and his questionable ethical approach, I consider Gera's series of photographs another example of *disfigurative* acid aesthetic. Moreover, the fact that Gera never names the survivors in the description of his photographs, despite his personal acquaintance with them, is itself another element that contributes to photography as a medium that disfigures survivors. Gera uses multiple modes of exhibition of the disfigured subject, including the sentimental and the exotic. It is worth noting that in comparison with the two previous examples (*Love or Obsession* and *Akira*), Gera's photographs give more depth to the issue of acid attacks by emphasizing the importance of community to the process of recovery of the survivors, by acknowledging that survivors can contribute to society, and by stating that survivors' smiles are the result of an inner process of recovery and acceptance. Moreover, there is a merit in focusing on disfigured women in this series of photographs given the fact that disfigured/disabled people, as David Hevey affirms, are "almost entirely absent from photographic genres or discussion because they are read as socially dead and not having a role to play" (Hevey 432).

media. There is a slight contradiction here. These subjects have to be acid-attack survivors to receive NGO support, but have to have facial disfigurement to be photographed by Gera as a way to receive viewer's sympathy.

Regarding how representation of disfigurement in these photographs, they fluctuate between the sentimental, the wondrous, and the exotic modes. Garland-Thomson (2001), while analyzing photographic images of disability as visual rhetoric, describes four primary photographic modes of representing disability: the wondrous, the sentimental, the exotic, and the realistic modes:

> The wondrous mode directs the viewer to look up in awe of difference; the sentimental mode instructs the spectator to look down with benevolence; the exotic mode coaches the observer to look across a wide expanse toward an alien object; and the realistic mode suggests that the onlooker align with the object of scrutiny. A visible signifier of disability – that is, the physical impairment – is always apparent in photographic images. In representing disability, the visualization of impairment, never the functional experience of it, defines the category of disability. In this sense, disability exists for the viewer to recognize and contemplate, not to express the effect it has on the person with a disability. (346)

Gera gives preference to survivors with major facial disfigurement to instigate viewers' stares, as I have briefly mentioned before. As Katie Ellis (2015) remarks, "Like female characters, people with disability also connote 'to-be-looked-at-ness.'" In the case of female acid-attack survivors this statement becomes a double affirmation. Borrowing from Garland-Thompson, Ellis explains that disability is to staring as women is to the male gaze. Garland-Thompson states that the act of staring disregards the entirety of the person to focus on the disability by registering "the perception of difference and gives meaning to impairment by marking it as aberrant" (Garland-Thomson, 2002). Despite Gera's intent to depict survivors' agency and empowerment, by choosing

only sitters with major facial disfigurements, he encourages the viewers' stare and, consequently, reinforces survivors' objectification by means of the viewers' stare.

To begin with some context, Niraj Gera is an Indian photographer based in Delhi. He received the Center of the Picture Industry (CEPIC) Award and Ozone Zone International Photo Award for his work on acid-attack survivors. In an interview to the on-line magazine *Metro*, Gera explains the reasoning behind the "Sacred Transformations"[25] series and his objective in depicting the survivors as follows:

> The series is an attempt to reflect on this transformation of the survivors, and at the same time to sensitise the society towards them. They deserve much more than stigmatization and shunning. They deserve love, acceptance and embracement[sic] just as we all do. The series is a journey from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge, from negativity to positivity and from misery to empowerment.
>
> It tries to convey that life is not a bed of roses, if there are bad times, there are good times too. Every photograph carries a story in them… It is important that in times of crisis, big or small, one should remember and believe that there is always a ray of hope. When you have a positive approach and the willingness to strengthen your inner self, when there is love and acceptance from your surroundings. And when you refuse to give up on life, that is where 'Scared Transformation' happens. (White)

Gera's statement points to a project of narrativization of survivors' disfigurement with the objective of sentimentalizing it for the viewer's gaze (most likely stare). He seems to target an audience who is unaware of the struggles of acid-attack survivors. His comments, almost paternalistic, frame the viewers' understanding of his photographs. Similar ideas are included in

[25] See appendix B for the complete series of photographs.

the description of the album on Niraj Gera's Facebook page, however, emphasizing that the photos depict the emotional changes of the survivors due to their experience of gender discrimination.[26] Lennard Davis offers a useful frame for understanding Gera's work. According to Davis: "Disability is a specular moment" and the encounter between the viewer and the disabled body enacts, "the power of the gaze to control, limit, and patrol" the disabled subject (12). Davis adds that disability is always viewed as a narrative. In other words: "A person became deaf, became blind, was born blind, became quadriplegic" (3). According to this manner of presenting disability, it is reduced to a time-sequenced narrative, which also controls the meaning of disability. As Davis contends, "by narrativizing an impairment one tends to sentimentalize it and link it to the bourgeois sensibility of individualism and the drama of an individual story" (3). With regard to acid disfigurement, however, there is no diversity in the basis of this narrative because all survivors *became* disfigured. The narrative would then focus on the *how*, *who* did it, and *why*. This visual narrativization of the acid disfigurement with the objective of sentimentalizing it is precisely what Gera does, although he does not target the individual story. On the contrary, Gera reduces the diversity of the individual stories of survival into only one grand narrative of overcoming a life that begins with child abuse, the attack that is carried out by a male individual as the expression of his possessiveness, and with some elements of support, the victory over the pain and suffering.

As a guideline for the viewer, Gera suggests that the emotional and social dimensions of the photos are the determinant elements of these photographs. Niraj Gera's portrayal of acid-attack survivors' emotional journey intends to awake in the spectator emotions that are suggested by his choices of lighting, color, composition, emphasis on facial expressions, etc. These particular

[26] This leads me to a question: why does he consider an emotional journey as a sacred transformation, instead of an emotional transformation? In my analysis, Gera is connecting emotion with spirituality for the same reason that in the *rasa* theory emotions become a method to reach liberation.

elements, with the support of the caption and description of the photographs depict feelings and emotions such as, hope, nostalgia, despair, shame, and loneliness. These emotions, however, seem to be Gera's imposition on the experience of survival. Although photographers in India still tend to exclude disabled/disfigured people as their sitters, which highlights the importance of Gera's work, his visual narrative prioritizes the victimization of survivors, engaging the viewer through the feeling of pity. The ethics of his production are also questionable as I will discuss below. Finally, Gera's acid aesthetic seems to project more his own values than survivors' ideals of survival.

As an overview of the "Sacred Transformations," there is a clear emphasis in Gera's work on the dark and painful moments lived by survivors and on depicting a visual narrative arc from objectification and oppression through the attack to a spiritual reclamation and empowerment. After establishing the scenario with photos in which all survivors are presumed to have experienced childhood oppression, Gera explores the attack and its aftermath. In this second section of his series as well as the previous one he emphasizes these obscure feelings and experiences mainly through the use of black and white and sepia photographs. Other techniques include: the widespread use of black clothing that blends with the black background, and photomontage of tears. The techniques and strategies are quite similar throughout the third section, which instills in the viewers' mind an association between these techniques and the negative aspects of the early life of an acid attack survivor. This repetition affects the way viewers interpret the closing photographs, which represent the supportive structures and the turning point in survivors' lives towards their self-acceptance.

Gera's didactic mode of telling this narrative of overcoming targets an audience that is not familiar with the issue of acid attacks. Only the last two sections of his photographs include survivors as a potential audience.[27] In this third section, Gera highlights the supporting elements that help survivors to overcome the emotional challenges imposed by the attacks: meditation, yoga, faith, friends, family, community of peers; elements that help survivors to regain self-acceptance. Those elements that point to the spiritual domain (meditation, yoga, and faith) are largely inspired by Gera's involvement with the Art of Living, created by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.

Despite the influence of Gera's own experience with spirituality in his series, the emotional journey seems to represent the journey of a heroine, who has to overcome challenges, difficulties, and loss. Particularly, Gera thematizes mirrors as simultaneously a representation of these challenges and of the regaining of inner strength, confidence, and agency as the survivor contemplates her own reflection. Traditional representations of heroes depict them as performing great deeds or selfless acts for the common good or for fame (considered from the Greeks to represent, for example, as a form of immortality). In contrast, in Gera's representation, the main goal is self-acceptance by the survivor. Having accepted themselves, survivors can also affect society at large as depicted in "My Confidence speaks for me." Overall, however, his photographs present a descriptive form of survival and appeal to consciousness-raising, operating as normative and potentially reductive, instilling a victim narrative.

[27] Several of these later photographs emphasize darkness, although depicting supportive elements such as maternal love in "Untainted love," meditation in "Stepping inward," the support of friends in "Because I have a friend I'll always have a brother," and the support of the community of survivors in "Together we smile, together we rise." The constant repetition of these techniques to convey suffering in the second set of photographs creates a mental imprint on the viewers that might impede an experience of love and happiness evoked in the last part of the series, especially for viewers who do not have a first-hand experience with acid attack.

The Past

The opening sequence of photographs objectifies survivors who are represented metaphorically through generic images of suffering. The narratives are emphasized by Gera's descriptive captions.

Fig. 21 - "Gudiya"
Description: The photograph is symbolic of the damage caused to girls and women in our society because of crimes like, female [sic] foeticide, dowry death, human trafficking, sexual offences etc. It shows the existence of the deplorable reality of a life as good as that of this breathless Gudiya.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

Fig. 22 - "Missing the Springtime of Life"
Description: This picture represents the sad reality of our children, specially girls, who are devoid of their childhood. They spend their days, not in school, but in their and others' homes doing the daily household chores. They are devoid of the love and care which is required to nurture them. The gendered conditioning starts at an age too young to believe.

Fig. 23 - "A Confined Life"
Description: The picture shows how the restrictions, questions, threats, violence, demoralization, harassment, societal pressure etc. is imposed upon a female in order to keep her 'in control'. Her freedom is left at the mercy of the patriarchal society and her life is confined to their command/wishes.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

It is worth noting that the description of the photographs, written and displayed by Gera, rather than, following photographic display conventions, providing information about the techniques, model of camera, filter, lenses, and most importantly the sitters, instead develops the basic idea of caption to inform viewer's interpretation.[28]

Rather Gera circumscribes the viewers' interpretation. As Garland-Thomson (2001) states: "photographs instruct their viewers to see the object of perception from a certain position in relation to what is viewed" (340). The first photograph of the series, "Gudiya," initiates the creation of an imaginative past of survivors; a past of child abuse. "Gudiya" is the Hindi word for "doll," but it is also used as a synonym for "girl." Used in the place of an actual girl, the doll objectifies the survivors. Gera seems to suggest that the doll in the image is a visual representation of the fate of girls in India. The most remarkable aspect of this photo, or borrowing Barthes terminology, the *punctum*, is the torn cloth located between the legs of the doll, which suggests rape as a form of child abuse.[29] The association between an inanimate object and living girls contributes to the idea of objectification of women in India, an event that erases women' desires, agency, and emotions.[30]

[28] In her study on disability and the photographic representation of black subjects in the arts, Cassandra Jackson states that the homogenization of black subjects wounded by slavery in a single narrative is due to the representation of the black body as the collective other. As Jackson asserts: "The story then not only compresses the individual into a chronological narrative explanation, but it compresses the history of slavery into a single defining narrative" (33). I contend that Gera is doing a similar move. He is compressing the individual narratives of survivors of acid attacks into a chronological narrative explanation. By doing that, he is also compressing all the elements (cultural, historical, gender etc.) related to acid attacks as I will show. One might argue that all representations of acid attacks somehow homogenize all individual stories into one. In other words, artists create a fictional narrative to address the issue of acid attacks. However, when the artists use actual survivors of acid attack, they have, I argue, an ethical commitment to each of those subjects. Their stories of survival are different as I pointed out with the example of Roopa at the beginning of this chapter. This diversity is not found in Gera's visual narrative.

[29] Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Hill and Wang, 1981.

[30] As I am going to demonstrate in chapter three, survivors, however, do not use this convention as self-representation. In other words, no object is used as a complete metaphor of their experiences

Despite the second photograph being a humanized form of the doll, the theme of objectification persists. Figure 22, depicting a young girl who, instead of doing things expected of girls of her age, such as playing or studying, is making *chapātīs* (a type of non-fermented bread) on a wooden stove. The absence of color also creates a somber atmosphere that highlights the hopelessness in the girl's face. One of the most interesting elements in this photo is the book that lies next to this working girl whose title is *हमारा भारत* (Our India).[31] The textbook is lying closed, signifying her limited access to education and reminding viewers through the title of the book that the India of girls is an India of oppression, especially in the case of economically disadvantaged and low-caste girls.[32] Gera continues to explore the theme of the objectification of girls in "A Confined Life" (figure 23), the most staged of the first part of this series. Each male hand poses a gesture that suggests belittling, harassment, accusation, control, and abuse. These three photographs emphasize feelings such as loneliness and helplessness. One might question Gera's use of the girls to convey the theme of objectification as objectifying the sitter herself in order to make his statement. The staging of the photograph and its digital manipulation by the use of software emphasizes the photograph as an object of the *operator's* control rather than that of the girl depicted in it. Homogenizing the story of acid-attack survivors, Gera suggests that this kind of oppressive childhood is the representation of all acid-attack survivors' childhoods.

[31] *हमारा भारत* by J. Bharatadasa is a text book with general information about India's history, natural and cultural diversity, in which neither gender nor disability is discussed.

[32] There is a progression of humanization of the sitter in these photographs and, in the next sections of the series there will also be a movement from the individual to the community.

The Attack and Its Aftermath

Gera contributes to the continuity of stereotypes of suffering and pity with at least the first half of his series by using the sentimental mode, as envisioned by Garland-Thomson, to represent acid disfigurement. Since the 1990s disability scholars have been pointing out that the visual representations of disabled people in popular culture often perpetuate stereotypes of otherness, through performances of helplessness, pity, and tragedy (Longmore, 1997; Garland-Thomson, 2001, 2002; Hevey, 2013). The sentimental mode establishes a relationship between disfigured women and the viewer, in which acid-attack survivors are placed in the position of victim, sufferer, and someone who needs help. This depiction evokes pity and functions through paternalism. In the sentimental mode, according to Garland-Thomson (2001): "[D]isability operates as the manifestation of suffering, a seemingly undeniable sign that makes what is internal and unnarratable into something external and narratable. In this way, the visibly disabled body operates as the spectacle of suffering rather than the reality of suffering, which is less representable" (341).

Gera undermines the particular suffering of survivors by conflating it with the general suffering produced by gender inequity. In order to awake pity in the viewer, Gera exploits the suffering of girls; his compositions highlight elements that indicate oppression and abuse, in part through the absence of colors. The awakening of pity through the exploitation of negative feelings such as sadness and hopelessness continue to be emphasized in the next part of his series, which presents the attack and its aftermath.

Fig. 24- "The Bandage of Misery"
Description: The photograph depicts that the very first operation is only a start to the several other operations which they have to undergo, and that the bandage is a constant reminder of the fear of entering into a skin which wouldn't look any where near to familiar the one she is accustomed to. It is no less a fear than that of a serious identity crisis. There are many acid attack survivors who undergo more than 20-30 operations for the reconstruction of skin.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"The Bandage of Misery" evokes pity by depicting suffering. With the dramatic view of Roopa's face covered by a bandage, the emptiness of her eyes acknowledges the viewer's presence. Her stare could have challenged the viewer's pity. However, the way the bandage covers her mouth and nostrils turns her more into a mummy than a person undergoing treatment to heal her scars. This corpse-like look projects pain and suffering and evokes pity. This photographic convention fits Hevey's description of photography as often positioning people with disabilities as the 'voyeuristic property of the non-disabled stare. The black clothes and background emphasize the bandage as the main element in this composition. The theme and techniques used in "The Bandage of Misery" are replicated in the next six photos and are used to reinforce the victimization of survivors by emphasizing dark colors, black backgrounds, and facial expressions that depict suffering, loneliness, and despair.[33]

[33] The six photos are: 9- "Haunted by Myself," 10- "Trapped in Agony," 11- "Unendurable Reality," 12- "A Struggle to Break Free," 13- "Lost Hopes," and 14- "Bars of Stigmatization."

Gera accentuates the loneliness of the survivor in "Lost Hopes." The close up of Rupali's eye, using the "rule of thirds,"[34] occupies the right side of the photography. The main difference between this photograph and "Trapped in Agony" is that Rupali's image disappears from inside her right eye, leaving the damage caused by the acid attack as a visible cloudy spot. The solitude of the survivor is accentuated. This negative feeling is representative of the hidden figures that survivors tend to be in society. As Susan Sontag suggests, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, photography can have a reductive and stereotypical function, reiterating, simplifying, agitating, and creating the illusion of consensus (5). In this part of his series, Gera is developing the stereotype of a pitiful, hopeless, and lonely survivor. In "Bars of Stigmatization," for example, the social prejudice faced by the survivors is given the form of a cage that limits the mobility as well as expression of the survivor. This is not to say that actual survivors did not face prejudice, physical pain, or despair at some point in their recovery. The problem is to naturalize and emphasize these aspects of their lives to the detriment of a more nuanced narrative.

Exploring the absence of colors, the black background and clothing, and obscure moods, Gera introduces the visual characterization of shame through the covering of the face "The Wounds Heal, but the Scars Remain" presents Roopa trying to cover her face with her left hand. Her hand is neither fuzzy as in "Unconcealable Scathe" nor is her face wrapped in a black shawl as in "Veil of Reluctance," in which only a tiny portion of her face is exposed. Emphasizing loneliness, illustrated in "Befriending Isolation," Rupali's naked right shoulder displays the trajectory of destruction that the acid caused to her body, starting from her face, passing by her neck, and

[34] In photography, "rules of thirds" is the imaginary and equal division of a scene in thirds by two horizontal lines and two vertical lines. The subject of the photograph is either placed between lines or along the lines for proportion and balance purposes.

continuing onto her shoulder and chest. Gera increases the dramatization of this photograph by adding a fake tear rolling down her right cheek from the eye that was most affected by the acid.

Comparing survivors' body image before and after the attack to represent nostalgia associates the disfigured parts of the survivor's face with sadness and the non-disfigured parts with happiness.

Fig. 25 - "Tears of Nostalgia"
Description: The photograph depicts a moment where the acid attack survivor nostalgically looks at an old picture of her and wishes to rewind time. There are also survivors who don't even have a picture to share how they used to look prior to the attack.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

The viewer is caught in what Trachtenberg calls "the dialectic of strange and familiar, of astonishment mingling with recognition" (4). In other words, Gera's photographs present survivors as the other of non-disfigured people, reinforcing familiar stereotypical ideas about disfigurement and disfigured people. Gera deliberately uses the word nostalgia (from Greek νόστος, meaning "homecoming", and ἄλγος, meaning "pain") to suggest that survivors long for the past. Nostalgia, as a feeling, is intimately connected to trauma because it implies a longing for a period of time that frequently represents happiness. In the case of an acid attack survivor, whose life was transformed by an act of crime, the person has to negotiate between the past and an undesirable present

situation. It is precisely this nostalgia originating from a traumatic experience that, from Gera's point of view, haunts survivors. Therefore, he proposes his own idea of nostalgia in these two photographs. The viewer sees Ritu, a survivor to whom many others look up, looking directly at a photo of herself, which was taken before the attack. The mood is established by the contrast between Ritu's scarred, sad face, which is once again dramatized by the addition of a tear that rolls down her face, and her non-disfigured smiley face in the photograph she holds. The bright colors in the photograph she holds also contrast with the absence of color in Gera's framing photograph. The two aspects of her life, before and after the attack, connect at the moment of seeing the photo. Gera reinforces the idea of a present that is immersed in suffering and sadness. The irony in these "past and present" photographs is that he depicts their previous lives, in the first section of his series, as relentlessly abusive and demeaning, yet they are nostalgic not necessarily only of their non-disfigured body, but of all the happy memories they had.

Gera, using some artifices, induces the feeling of sadness to viewers while they are seeing the disfigured profile of survivors, despite the description of the photo which says that "the better half will be based on their [viewers] perception of beauty." Similarly to "Tears of Nostalgia," the composition in "The Better Half" balances the non-disfigured side of Rukaiyaa's face on the left side of the photograph, while on the right side of the photograph, we see the disfigured side of the same survivor's face. This is the third time he adds a tear rolling down the survivor's disfigured profile. The sadness expressed by the disfigured profile might encourage the viewers to feel pity and to consider that half as the one that lacks beauty. The artificial difference between the two profiles does not lie only in the addition of a tear to the disfigured one. In the non-disfigured profile the survivor has a light pinkish lipstick, a very defined black mascara and eyeshadow, and the curls of her hair framing her face, whereas in the disfigured profile there is a smear of red lipstick on

her lower lip, light mascara and eyeshadow if any, and her hair is pulled behind her neck to better expose her disfigurement. Gera uses similar techniques in "Unfair & Dreadly,"[35] in which the side of Rukaiyaa's face that is disfigured is depicted with a sad expression whereas the side of her face that is not disfigured is depicted with a happy expression These elements alter the profiles, eliciting the viewers' emotions and inducing a particular point of view on beauty, since makeup and hair style are intimately associated with beautification. It is not enough to display the non-disfigured profile. It has to be improved by means of makeup, thus enforcing a gender practice in the representations of female acid-attack survivors.

The sequence seems to update a charity mode of representation of acid-attack survivors. As Robert Bogdan explains, one of the most common strategies of the charity mode of photographic rhetoric is the "before-and-after" visual trope, which "was used in advertising campaigns for prosthetic devices and other disability products. As in the charity campaigns, there were typically two photographs the first showing the person before the intervention or treatment and the second showing the same person after it" (106). In the case of acid-attack survivors, although Gera's sitters have undergone reconstructive surgeries, the "before-and-after," however,

[35] The textual and visual information given on the right side of the photograph parody the line of skin-lightening cosmetics called "Fair & Lovely," which began to be produced in India in 1975 and is very popular throughout Asia and among the Asian diaspora. The photograph works simultaneously as an anti-advertisement of "Fair & Lovely," criticizing its promotion of colorism, and, at the same time, of acid sales. The word "UnFair," associated with the right side of Rukaiyaa's face marks its protest against a society that promotes fair skin, but it also points to the left side of her face and the unfairness present in acid attacks.

In all "Fair & Lovely" advertisements a photo of the product is offered to the consumers next to the face of a model, which is divided in half, a darker side and a fairer one, showing the results of using the product. In the photograph, a bottle of acid is shown as the product used to disfigure Rukaiyaa's face next to her and the forced "consumer" of it. Frequently, advertisements and commercials of cosmetic products indicate where they can be found. Likewise, "Unfair & Dreadly" indicates that the acid used in the attacks can be found everywhere. The image of the globe could indicate that acid attacks happen everywhere in the world. However, it emphasizes the South Asian continent that can be seen right next to the bottle. The pink background of the photograph is also a feature borrowed from the original advertisements that refers to the products produced for women's use, while the "Men's Fair & Lovely" is mainly black and sometimes has the addition of blue. Instead of changing the lives of women through the lightening of their skin color, Gera tries to simultaneously call viewers' attention to two problems present in Indian society: Colorism, and acid attacks.

refers to the body (or rather face) before and after the attack, which I call "half-disfigured-half-non-disfigured face" trope, given the ubiquitous presence in acid the representations of acid-attack survivors. Notwithstanding this difference, the intention is the same as in the advertising campaigns discussed by Bogdan; to move the viewers through pity and appeal to their compassion and sympathy. This emotional appeal is the reason why in these three photographs the disfigured half of survivors' faces is depicted as sad while the non-disfigured half is depicted as happy. Sometimes the sadness of the disfigured half is exaggerated by the use of fake tears while the non-disfigured half is embellished through the use of makeup.

Structures of Support

The third phase of the emotional journey portrayed in Gera's series explores some crucial structures of support that can help survivors' healing process. These are: meditation, faith (or spirituality), yoga, family support, the support of friends, and the formation of a community of acid-attack survivors. In "Together We Smile, Together We Rise," the photographer portrays the role of the community of acid-attack survivors in the recovery of new survivors in a more positive and less problematic way than in the film *Akira*.

Fig. 26 - "Untainted Love"
Description: No matter what the world throws at you, from a mother you can always expect unconditional Love. The photograph captures an intimate moment between a mother and her daughter, both of whom were attacked by her own husband. It also tries to send across the message that, love moves the world. We can be more generous by being more loving. A loving environment helps the survivors overcome and cope with the trauma soon.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

Although in "Untainted love" Gera adopts the palette he was previously used to convey feelings such as suffering, sadness, and despair, here the mood is lightened by the smiles and expressions of love and care of the mother and daughter – Geeta and Neetu. Geeta was attacked by her own husband who also happened to throw acid on his daughters, killing the youngest and leaving Neetu almost blind. This photograph depicts the mutual support between disfigured mother and daughter. However, the absence of color, a technique used in thirty one out of forty one photographs, among those many used to focus on negative moods, instills negative feelings in the viewers, which might influence the way they appreciate this photograph. In other words, positive emotions such as love, and happiness, depicted in this third section of Gera's series, might be clouded by the viewers' memory of the previous photographs that depict negative feelings using the same techniques. Although Gera is aware of their community ethos, his photographs disfigure survivor's principles with his own assumptions about trauma and recovery.

Self-Acceptance

The last section of "Sacred Transformations" represents survivors' self-acceptance, still imbued with the same technique used to awake pity in viewers – the exploitation of darkness and absence of colors. In the description of "My Smile is my Strength," Gera develops a theory of smile that, differently from that portrayed in *Akira*, approximates survivors' own experience of smiling. In other words, the smile is not an artificial practice performed for photographic convention or adopted to affect survivors' mindset, but a result of an inner transformation.

Fig. 27 - "My Smile is my Strength"
Description: I no longer use a smile just to hide my pain. My smile comes from within, and I cannot afford to lose it! It has taken me time and courage to understand the value of smile. Truly, it's priceless. The joy which comes from within is priceless. A simple smile can brighten your day and also somebody else's too. So remind yourself often to smile.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

Another aspect of the portrayal of acid-attack survivors amidst darkness is that they become the focus of the viewers' staring, which is described by Garland-Thomson (2001) as "the social relationship that constitutes disability identity and gives meaning to impairment by marking it as aberrant" (347). Possibly the idea of staring is behind Gera's choice of acid-attack survivors with major facial disfigurement. Their disfigurement is highlighted by his strategies of representation,

which invite the viewers' stares. The centrality of the disfigured face complies with what Garland-Thomson agues about the stares, that they "gawk with abandon at the prosthetic hook, the empty sleeve, the scarred flesh, the unfocused eye, the twitching limb, but seldom do they broaden looking to envelop the whole body of the person with a disability" (347). But, in acid aesthetic, staring is complicated by the widespread presence of the mirror.

If in *Love or Obsession*, the narrator becomes Madhavi's mirror succinctly describing her disfigurement, and in *Akira*, the mirror is used to reinforce and validate notions of disfigurement as abnormal, unhealthy, unfit, and ugly, in "Sacred Transformations", the mirror does not have this negative connotation. In fact, it reaffirms the beauty of life rediscovered by the survivor.

28 - "Falling in love with myself"
Description: The world appears beautiful when one is happy from within. The photograph shows one such moment, where the survivor adores herself. She is no more stuck with the nostalgia and has been able to break through the shackles of societal norms of beauty. She is now in love with herself!
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

The aesthetic strategies of this photograph, which highlights beauty, pride, and also disfigurement, are in consonance with Siebers's notion of "disability aesthetic" as that which "refuses to recognize the representation of the healthy body – and its definition of harmony, integrity, and beauty – as the sole determination of the aesthetic" (64). The focus of Rupali's gaze

is not on the scars and how they make her former face unrecognizable, but on the adornment of her scarred face. This, in turn, does not happen by trying to "erase" the scars by means of makeup, for example, but by accepting her new face as beautiful. The adornment here is an aesthetic that embraces the acid-altered fac as part of their survival aesthetic rather than compensation for what is seen as a lack. The acceptance of this new body and self, or what Gera calls love, is exteriorized through her smile and the way she looks at her reflection. In photograph "I am Beautiful" Ritu is richly adorned with heavy makeup and ornaments. However, there is no attempt to hide her scars. The collar of her *cholī* exposes the scars on her chest and her prosthetic eye stands out in comparison with her other eye, but to portray her pride as she smiles at her reflection in the mirror. The photo suggests that beauty is less in the ornaments and more in the inner beauty she rediscovered. In both photos, Gera chose to focus the mirrored face rather than the actual body, which is out of focus, emphasizing both the metanarrative of his representational discourse of his series of photographs as well as the point of view of survivors during their contemplation of their own visage.

The wondrous and exotic dominate the photographic rhetoric in the last part of "Sacred Transformations." For Garland-Thomson (2001) the contemporary version of the wondrous mode, rather than amazement, emphasizes admiration. This new version of the wondrous mode has produced "the convention of the courageous 'overcome' (352). Moreover, she adds that the caption and description of photographs instructs the viewer how to respond to the picture by emphasizing inflated words. Gera's "Rising from Darkness" and "Victorious Beauty: The Unrobable Joy" embody the wondrous mode of representing acid disfigurement. Viewers are invited to admire survivors for overcoming their trauma, for showing confidence, for feeling beautiful, and for smiling. The variation of the exotic mode, which guides the viewer to look

toward a strange subject, can be seen in “Make a Wish,” where Ritu is depicted as a fairy-like being. I call this the fantastic mode because the visual representation of the subject alludes to the fantasy realm of fairy-tales and myths.

However, the exotic mode raises ethical questions about the subject’s participation. In one of my meetings with Ritu, I was showing her Gera’s photographs and she asked me to send her the photograph “I am Beautiful,” in which she is a sitter. This request surprised me because it implied that the photographer had not sent a copy of these images to her. When I asked Ritu if she also wanted me to send “Make a Wish” to her she immediately said she did not want it because she did not like it. Even though survivors can collaborate with artists, it does not mean they agree to how they are represented. Survivors have their own idea of aesthetic. One might ask why they collaborate with artists if sometimes they do not like the way they are represented. In a way they know artists are amplifying their cause, which will project their own work and activism.

Fig. 29 - “Evolution”
Description: The photograph portrays the courageous emotional journey of a transfiguration after the attack. Her evolution from a broken and hesitant woman to a woman full of confidence and resilience.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

Two photographs summarize the entire series: “Rising from Darkness” and “Evolution.” “Evolution” is the representation of acceptance of survivor’s new body and identity, and the

freedom that comes from it. As a whole, all the images of Roopa look toward the right end of the photograph. In other words, all of them seek the freedom from shame and despair. Gera's photograph, however, also reminds us of the image of the evolution of humans, from apes to modern man. The profile of the subjects, five stages of the evolutionary process, where the subjects are directed, the color palette, and the height of the subjects are all similar stylistic techniques shared between Gera's photograph and the traditional image of the evolution of humans. Despite the positive interpretation of the evolution of emotions, Roopa engulfed in her sadness presents an odd echo of the Australopithecus. Reminding ourselves that this series represents the emotional journey of survivors, feelings, not only the positive ones, but also loneliness, sadness, and shame are part of what makes us human. Therefore, in contrast with this visual rhetoric, I would argue that the Roopa from the extreme left in the photograph and the Roopa from the extreme right are equal in their humanity.

As a producer of art, Gera, rather than amplifying his subjects' views, promotes his own beliefs among the survivors and through his photos to the viewers. His work promotes his activism, but not survivors' agency. It is also important to highlight Gera's commitment to improve survivors' lives through meditation and spiritual growth. His photographs are not only a record, but like those of colonial photographers, though perhaps more benignly, an intervention. Some of his photographs in this series speak about the beliefs of Niraj Gera himself. For example, after being asked in an interview if he had taught meditation to the survivors he stated:

> Yes, I did introduce them to meditation because I felt that they needed to attend to their spiritual and mental healing just as much as they did to their physical healing and being an Art of Living faculty, the least I could do was to introduce them to this spiritual knowledge inspired by my Guru Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. This course helped them enormously in

> connecting with their inner self and the feedback was very promising. It helped them overcome their fears and inhibitions, and this course was special because they had had deep-seated trauma from the accident that only spiritual practices could help get rid of. (Roy, "Meet The Man Behind These Powerful Images Of Acid Attack Survivors, Winning Hearts On The Internet")

By teaching the Art of Living, Gera seeks to uplift survivors' spiritual and emotional conditions, and motivate them to advocate for others in need. However, it is important to pay close attention to his choice of words. His generalization suggests that several survivors had been benefited from his spiritual guidance, which may be misleading. It is important to note that during my second interview with survivors I asked them if religion had any role in their recovery and all of them responded that religion was not a factor that helped them in regaining confidence, agency, and self-acceptance. Additionally, he categorizes acid attacks as "accident." Even though there are survivors who had accidents with acid, the majority of these girls and women survived an acid attack. The word "attack" itself denotes the crime involved in this act that Gera minimizes. Lastly, his emphasis on his own agency suggests that survivors are more passive receivers than agents themselves.

Gera's acid aesthetic projects his own values and disfigures his subjects' ideals. He not only portrays survivors performing his own spiritual practices, but he includes his own image in his series of photographs. Thus he appropriates "the disabled body for the purposes of constructing, instructing, or assuring some aspect of an ostensibly nondisabled viewer," to adopt Garland-Thomson's view (340). It is clear that paternalism remains a constant presence in the representation of acid-attack survivors in the third part of Gera's series.

Fig. 30 - “Because I have a brother, I'll always have a friend”
Description: It is always assuring to know that someone’s got your back. To know that you have a friend, a family whom you can trust and look forward to in times, good or bad. This is a photograph of one such assuring relationship.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

Why would Gera choose to be featured in his own photograph? For hundred years painters and later photographers have been reproducing their own image in works of art with the intention of making a visual statement about themselves. Gera’s presence in this photograph seems to be pleonastic because his own series of photograph already represents his support and commitment to the cause of acid-attack survivors. Moreover, his physical position in the photograph suggests his relation in regards to Roopa. He looks slightly down to Roopa. This photograph, far from depicting a relationship of equality, reinforces paternalism.

“Weapon of Massive Destruction” exemplifies Gera’s photographic appropriation as an act of aesthetic disfigurement. Although the photo seems to be a studio photograph, in conversation with the photographer, I learned that this was an actual seller or most likely a distributer of acid who was passing by the photographer. Gera then asked him to stop for a photo and in return he would, not exactly pay him, but buy one of his bottles. This ordinary man who protects his face from the cold and warms his hands with his body heat becomes the prototype of an attacker, not only because it is a common knowledge that criminals tend to cover their faces in order to not be identified, but also because the majority of the attackers are indeed men. On the one hand this

photograph is a social criticism about the easy availability of acid as well as the intentionality of the attacker. On the other hand it is also an exploitation of a subject who is unaware of the use of his image, which in turn makes us question once again the objectification of the subject.

Fig. 31- "Weapon of Massive Destruction"[36]
Description: The picture captures the harsh reality of open and unregulated sale of acids which can be conveniently acquired by the perpetrators and be used as a tool for disfiguring and destroying lives.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

Like this male subject the survivors were not paid for being sitters for the photographs.

In summary, Gera imposes a collective narrative arc on survivors' individual stories, from trauma to recovery, that focuses on his own contributions to both their particular healing and on raising awareness of acid attacks. He explores negative feelings, emotions, and a series of styles and techniques that tend to engulf the photographs that are supposed to depict positive messages of courage and strength. The viewer is also a constant preoccupation of Gera, who targets primarily non-acid-attack survivors. This strategy is clear in the creation of a fictional past for the survivors

through photographs that objectify and disfigure his subjects. Gera's series presents a *disfigurative* narrative of empowerment through victimization.

Conclusion

Artists, such as Ashish Tanwar, A.R. Murugadoss, and Niraj Gera engage with acid-attack survivors through acid disfigurement art to create an aesthetic community, which seeks to sensitize viewers on the issue of acid attacks in India and the life of survivors through art. Acid-attack survivors willingly collaborate with these artists with the intention to promote their collective plight for a gender equitable society. However, a close look at these artworks brings to the surface some artists' choices regarding the representation of acid-attack survivors: at times, these artists end up reproducing the same patriarchal beliefs that actual acid-attack survivors condemn. Moreover, these representations depict survivors as victims, stripping the agency that is very often the reason for the attacks. In other words, actual survivors refuse sexual advances, file for divorce, reject marriage proposals, among other manifestations of their agency, and are attacked in order to be forcefully subjugated to a patriarchal structure. After the attack, many of them become activists or "acid attack fighters." When artists depict survivors as victims and guide viewers/readers to feel, above all, pity, these artists are projecting a stereotypical idea of a disfigured person; one that likely goes against the reality of the lives of those who inspired them. These representations fall short of their beneficial agenda to survivors. On the contrary, they tend to benefit primarily the artists themselves.

3. ACID AESTHETIC:

THE CONFLATIVE CATEGORY

In the acid aesthetic artists may conflate the harm done by acid attacks with the harms of other gender-based violence, producing a *conflative* acid art. Especially in visual media, the material of this chapter dialogues the visibility of the acid disfigurement with invisible scars inflicted on women. However, not all artists conflate these forms of violence in the same ways or to the same extent. The *conflative* aesthetic, thus is not homogeneous. Some artists make an effort to differentiate acid attacks from the other forms of violence against women in their artwork. In this case, however, the differences are not elaborated, in order to serve a broader purpose. Other artists, sometimes in a more experimental way, do not attempt to differentiate any form of violence against women, perhaps leaving this task to viewers and readers or simply using acid-attack survivors as proxy for any woman who survived gender-based violence. In this case, why are acid-attack survivors the chosen ones to represent survivors of other forms of gender-based violence? The examples of *conflative* acid aesthetic that I encountered are more visual than textual. Given the visibility of the acid disfigurement, the scars of the acid-attack survivors materialize, symbolize, and memorialize any act of violence inflicted on women. This would explain why these artists also emphasize facial disfigurement over other less visible parts of the female body.

The presence of different forms of gender-based violence suggests female solidarity. Female solidarity is the explicit or implicit ethos of the *conflative* aesthetic. In other words, in an explicit representation of solidarity among female characters, a survivor from one gender-based form of violence helps a survivor of another form of violence. In this case, the acid-attack survivor is secondary, has less agency, or has not yet regained self-confidence. The implicit representation,

however, relies on subtle allusions to survivors of different forms of gender-based violence. On the one hand, despite a limited differentiation between various forms of violence against women, the characters present more depth, especially in terms of expressing their fears and thought processes, in order to portray a more complete human experience. On the other hand, these fears and thoughts can be co-opted by and lost in the overall narrative arc on violence against women.

The *conflative* aesthetic emphasized religious and spiritual experience, focuses on social justice, imagines happiness as a political and ethical stance, and abstracts the mirror as an emblem for both interiority and restoration. The *conflative* mode presents a problematically uniform narrative of overcoming that tends to depict a complete story arc from oppression to redemption. This mode of representation of acid-attack survivors, however, requires a deeper participation or engagement from the viewer or reader. Moreover, artists give the proper credits to actual survivors that collaborated in the production of their artwork.

In the following pages the reader will learn in detail about the *conflative* category of acid aesthetic through the analysis of the following examples: Megha Ramaswamy's art film *Newborns* and Ram Devineni's and Paromita Vohra's graphic novel *Priya's Mirror*.

The Gaze of Acid-attack survivors

Megha Ramaswamy's short film is a deeply abstract, experimental and ultimately allegorical exploration of gender-based violence figured by the face of the acid-attack survivor. The story line suggests recovery, but is not specific. Ramaswamy describes *Newborns* as a "documentary-hybrid short that follows the daily lives of acid-attack survivors" (Ramaswamy, "Work"). The experience of the viewer may be more surreal than this quotidian description

suggests, as the film is layered with symbolic images from lost shoes to elephants, wolves, and toy bears. The main idea explored in the film *Newborns* is suggested by its title. To be born anew refers not exactly to the life that survivors are faced with after the attack, but mostly after overcoming the consequences of the attack, be they physical pain, social ostracism, or shame. Interestingly, in the Indian context, the idea of twice born is a common element among the Hindu community.[37] Instead, Ramaswamy chose the word "newborn" to refer to women who face gender-based violence, especially acid-attack survivors, since the act of birthing implies some degree of violence, a sudden change of state. The art film, especially through its abstract and symbolic language, allows Ramaswamy to dive into the subjectivity of survivors in both private and public domains during an ordinary day in their lives.[38] The language in which this subjectivity is expressed is that of fear and victory. By doing that, survivors' inner questionings, with the support of external symbolic elements, open up to embrace a broader experience of gender-based violence. Survivors' subjectivity is also conveyed by complicating the concept of the gaze in cinema: "I did not want to exercise the power of 'the gaze,' and place myself in the safe bubble of 'the observer.' I did not want to view the survivors as 'the other,' thus perpetuating the cycle of pity and victim-isolation" (Women and Hollywood, "TIFF Women Directors"). Ramaswamy uses a less explored concept – that of the glare – to dive into survivors' subjectivity. However, aware of the limitations of her film to reach a large spectrum of audience, the director engaged in street activism in collaboration with the Chhanv Foundation to bring awareness of acid attacks throughout India.

[37] The word द्विज (*dvija;* from Sanskrit: "twice-born"), in the Hindu social system, refers to the members of the three upper *varnas,* or social classes - the Brahmins (priests and teachers), Kśatriyas (warriors), and Vaiśyas (merchants) - whose sacrament of initiation is regarded as a second or spiritual birth.

[38] Megha Ramaswamy is committed to bringing awareness of different forms of disabilities. Besides her art film *Newborns*, she also produced *PSA – Down Syndrome*, a short documentary portraying parents of children who were born with Down Syndrome and of children who were not born with the syndrome. The objective was to show that there are more similarities than differences between these two realities.

Three actual survivors of acid attack appear in Megha Ramaswamy's short film; they are: Laxmi Agarwal, Sapna Mahur, and Nasreen Jahan. As previously mentioned, Laxmi made headlines in India for being the first acid-attack survivor to take her case all the way to the Supreme Court seeking punishment for her perpetrator and for gathering around 27,000 signatures for a petition to control the sale of acid. Sapna was attacked in 2013 after refusing a marital proposal so that she could pursue her studies ("Human Rights Law Network"). Nasreen's story became public in 2016 when she auditioned for *MTV Roadies*, a reality television show on the channel MTV India. She was married to an abusive man and, when she filed for divorce, he threw acid on her face (VitalCaptionTV).

The *conflative* aspect of Ramaswamy's film is mainly situated in the imagery of the bus and symbolic/abstract language on gender-based violence. The image of the bus, as much as that of the train in India, has become a symbolic representation of violence. Trains and railway stations, which used to represent modernity and new subjectivities in India, after the Partition, started to represent communal conflicts (Prabhjot, 2007; Aguiar, 2011; Bhattacharya, 2011). As Omar Ahmed explains: "The train as a symbol of modernity remains, but the horrors of partition have transformed the train into a motif of separation and exodus" (74). Likewise the bus, in the post-Nirbhaya case, came to symbolize violence against women as a reference to her gang-rape and murder. For example, in 2014 the photographer Raj Shetye was criticized for making a photoshoot of a female model being groped by male models on a bus ("Delhi Gang Rape: India Outrage over Fashion Shoot"). Another example of the bus as a representation of violence against woman is Yaël Farber's play *Nirbhaya*, in which several sequences are performed amidst bus seats.

Fig. 32 - Representation of Jyoti Singh in Farber's play *Nirbhaya*

As a post-Nirbhaya film and influenced by the discussions on gender-based violence originated from this case, the imagery of the bus in *Newborns*, although representing a public sphere in which survivors participate, is also a reference to Jyoti Singh. The first appearance of Laxmi occurs at night, inside a bus in which she is the only female character. She is surrounded by peculiar male figures. Similarly, Jyoti Singh was returning from the cinema at night when she was attacked by six men on a bus in which she was the only woman.

Fig. 33 – Laxmi Riding on a bus with male figures

The abstract language of the film also works towards the conflation of different forms of violence against women. The film's opening line refers to Rashmi who, intentionally, loses her

shoes in each village she goes. In Sanskrit, the word *raśmi* (रश्मि) means "ray of light," which indicates a new beginning. In the film, the mention of this name/character also contrasts with the sound of flies and vultures flying over a dumping ground as if, in order for Rashmi to begin a new life, she has to overcome suffering and decay. The visual as well as verbal language of this art film present precisely the negative elements originated during the act of violence that survivors have to overcome in order to be born again.

It is important to emphasize that the oral narrative of the film is highly symbolic and we need to investigate what these symbols are actually representing, according to the cultural context. The language that actual survivors use to describe their post-attack experience is the language of fear, which is representative of their trauma. In the film the visual representation of fear is embodied by the male figures on the bus that surround Laxmi. This visual representation is supplemented by a verbal representation when the female narrator whispers (as if she were afraid) and explains that one day an elephant with black eyes brought her [Rashmi's] shoe home, and continues by saying that a lamb has blue eyes and a wolf has red eyes. Elephants in Indian culture are generally related to Gaṇeśa, a Hindu God, and represents wisdom, strength of mind, and the ability to remove obstacles (Zimmer, 1946; Krishna, 2014). Two are the main ideas related to elephants in the Indian context: The mind and obstacles. Mythologically speaking Gaṇeśa does eliminate obstacles, but can also choose when not to eliminate. Since symbolically the imagery of the elephant points to the mind, these obstacles are obstacles of the mind. In other words, survivors' fear, the memory of the attack that haunts them as the elephant bringing back Rashmi's shoes. The lamb, on the other hand represents innocence, and in the film represents women who are victims or preys of the red-eyed wolf, the predator or perpetrator.

Fig. 34 – Laxmi gazing at the camera

Fig. 35 – Grumpy man

The symbolic language of the film makes the fear of the wolf's red eyes not unique to acid-attack survivors, but to any woman: "The question arises… You're walking back home, on a dark night, through a lonely lane. And suddenly the wolf's red eyes glare at you." The camera turns to the man with a half-covered face sitting behind Lakshmi, although it does not focus on him. The camera focuses on a grumpy man, a reference to what the narrator said earlier about "another man in the same custom," the custom of perpetrator. The question is never concluded as the walk back home might also be interrupted by the wolf's red eyes glaring at its prey, the blue-eyed lamb.

If the abstract and symbolic language of *Newborns* places violence and fear beyond the context of acid attacks, it also gives depth to the discussion on gender-based violence by representing the subjectivity of survivors (not necessarily of acid attacks) and disrupting the realism of the film. Geoff Mayer, describing the characteristics of the art film, explains that they tend "to emphasize psychological realism and character subjectivity, which results in characters that are more complex and less goal-oriented" (149). Expanding Mayer's statement, Galt and Schoonover affirm that the hybrid aspect of the art film, "may be uniquely equipped to address equally incommensurate modes of experience and engagement" (17). The images of an art film, therefore, are reflective given that it is also a work of art (Neale 19). Subjectivity, however, can be expressed in different ways. For example, Grindon, while analyzing Martin Scorsese's film *Raging*

Bull, describes a subjectivity through sensation, rather than reflection (398). In *Newborns*, subjectivity is created through the explorations of mental dialogues that survey memory and fear, reflective still images, and the use of the gaze.

The *conflative* acid aesthetic differs from the *disfigurative* by diving deeper into the inner questions that survivors face. In an interview, Ramaswamy affirmed that she wanted to explore the gaze, which is ubiquitous in the lives of acid-attack survivors, since they are constantly the focus of people's gaze. The use of gaze in *Newborns* allows the director to explore survivors' thoughts and feelings. According to the director:

> A core aspect of the visual design of the *Newborns* is the cinematic conception of the Gaze, to engage with it only after taking into account, the myriad sociological, creative and psychological aspects of how one can interpret it, then transferring the essence to the medium of film. The effect is a visual diffusion of the instantaneous stigma that the survivors are subjected to, a thousand times a day. Of staring and gazing, in the standard Indian public sphere, with a multitude of crowds among its notorious flurry of chaotic activity. ("In Focus")

Ramaswamy takes the public spaces where acid-attack survivors become the focus of peoples' gaze and diffuses it by emptying these spaces and leaving only the survivors as both the subject of the viewers' gaze and agents of gaze.

The concept of "dialectical gaze", created by Slavoj Žižek (1992) and further developed by Alexandra G. Murphy (2003) is crucial for the understanding of the practice of gazing in *Newborns*. For Žižek the act of watching is the embodiment of unfulfilled desire. The person being watched is the object-cause of the desire, which remains unattainable because to attain it eliminates the desire and the spectator loses the subjective control. In other words, the object is only perceived

by a gaze that is "distorted" by desire. Without this distortion the object does not exist. However, while the spectator is constructing the other as the object of his subjective desire, the object is also controlled by this very spectatorship in a dialectic relationship. The gaze then simultaneously denotes control over the object of desire and impotence as passive witness. Adding to this theory, Murphy, while analyzing the relationship between customers and strippers, states that, in this context, it is not clear who is the object and who is the spectator, since the "female dancers watch the customers as much as they are watched" (310). In other words, the strippers also experience the dialectic of the gaze. Therefore, the gaze is not unidirectional. Expanding on Murphy's theory of the gaze as a dialectic of agency and constraint, I argue that the tension in the dialectic gaze in *Newborns* is focused, not on agency and constraint as in Murphy's case study, but on collaboration/solidarity and assessment. All the scenes in which the camera is the focus of survivors' gaze, their faces express neutrality, serenity, relaxation, and at times even a slight smile. From the first scene, in which Laxmi rides on the bus at night, to her last walk in the neighborhood, she looks at the viewers, mediated through the camera, as collaborators with whom she is sharing her deep feelings. She is not staring at the viewers, who she cannot actually see, in curiosity or even prejudice as they are stared at in their real and daily life. Survivors, through their gaze, invited viewers to learn about their deep experiences, thus, to see beyond the scars. To suggest viewers to only look at survivors' disfigurement would be to reproduce or update a freak show. The symbolic language and the discontinuity of images force viewers to plunge into the realm of survivors' emotions and feelings. Curiosity can be a form of desire, however, in the context of *Newborns*, both visual and oral narratives require more than curiosity from its viewers; it requires assessment. This assessment is not only of the object of the gaze, but of the viewers themselves. Viewers are forced to puzzle together this peculiar and uncomfortable narrative and question themselves if they

are equipped with the right tools to access it. Even when Laxmi is dancing in the private space of her apartment, while not looking back at the camera, she is not the focus of male desire because in this scene not only is her facial disfigurement exposed, but also the scars on her arms. The minds of the viewers wonder about the hidden stories behind those scars; stories that are not fully elucidated in the following scenes and oral narrative, but only further complicated. The viewers' gaze does not have enough time to rest on Laxmi because it is disturbed by a constant change in the focus of the camera and the mood of the film. The blurring of the scene in which Laxmi and her friend talk about Laxmi's childhood Teddy bear is used to depict a past whose continuity with the present was disrupted by the attack. A few moments later, the camera regains focus when the narrative is brought back to the present by the symbolic oral narrative and the atmosphere of fear.

Janice Loreck reminds us that since Laura Mulvey's publication on visual pleasure and narrative cinema, the way cinema positions women in relation to the psychic needs of the masculine spectator and the role of vision in the production of female subjectivity became one of the main interests of feminist scholars (27). Some ramifications of Mulvey's theory was May Ann Doane's understanding of gaze as driven by pleasure in knowledge. In other words, films can also turn an investigative gaze upon women, positioning them as objects of a text's hermeneutic impulse. The idea of gazing as knowledge-driven comes close to the aspect of assessment in the gaze discussed above. However, Mary Ann Doane argues that this type of gaze is premised on the assumption that visibility has representational truth: That 'the visible equals the knowable' (45). However, Ramaswamy's use of oral narrative complicates the visible and consequently the gaze.

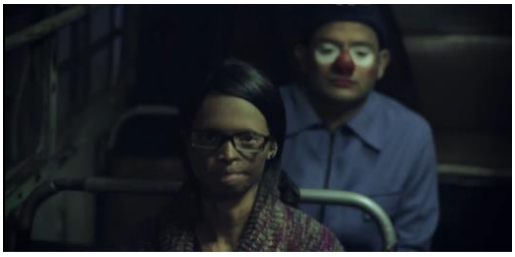

Fig. 36 – Gaze 1

Fig. 37 – Gaze 2

Fig. 38 – Gaze 3

Fig. 39 - Gaze 4

Fig. 40 – Gaze 5

Fig. 41 – Gaze 6

Fig. 42 – Gaze 7

While the visual design of *Newborns*, as Ramaswamy mentioned, "is the cinematic conception of the Gaze," the oral narrative explores the idea of glaring. These two forms of looking at an individual are juxtaposed in the film in order to make the visible not knowable in a tension between diegetic and non-diegetic elements. The idea of glaring is explored by symbolic

sentences that are repeated in a crescendo throughout the film. Each time these sentences surface, a new piece of information is added. They begin with the description of the wolf's red eyes. In Hindi, the word used to describe the color of the wolf's eyes is सुर्ख (*surkh*), which is translated as "red" in the English subtitles, but it actually approximates to crimson because it gives the idea of a blood red and, consequently, bloody eyes. The image of the wolf's eyes is further used to discuss fear (or trauma) when the narrator asks what would the survivor do if she were walking at night and the wolf's blood-red eyes glared at her. The word used in Hindi to describe this way of looking is घूरना (*ghūrnā*). This verb means an act of looking at someone or something that is far longer than usual; in other words to gaze. It can also mean lascivious gaze. However, the adjective that describe the eyes of the wolf as blood red transforms this act of looking from gazing into glaring because the color adds the idea of aggression and violence to this verb. The change in meaning of this verb is in consonance with the translation of it as glaring in the English subtitles. "The question arises: You're walking back home, on a dark night, through a lonely lane. And suddenly, the wolves'[39] red eyes glare at you. The question suggests a story that cannot be known by the gaze; it can only be inferred by a symbolic language that unsettles the viewers. Since the question seems to be directed at the viewers, this further proves the place of the audience as collaborators, as previously mentioned. Lastly, the suggestion that the wolf is glaring at the prey also represents the conflation of different forms of violence against women since it does not mention any particular experience that is exclusive to acid-attack survivors, but that is a constant experience for most, if not all, women.

[39] There is no indication in Hindi that the oral narrative confirms or rejects the English translation into the plural form of the word "wolf" since this word is not mentioned in Hindi. In Hindi, the narrator only mentions the red eyes glaring at the prey. However, since the word "eyes" is in its plural form, we cannot reject the idea that there are more than one wolf either.

The gaze is also used as a metaphoric mirror; in other words, as a self-recognition on the face of the other, which eludes solidarity. This technique is particularly explored when Laxmi, who is on the bus, sees Sapna on the street and they look at each other. I do not wish here to revise the vast psychological and philosophical explorations of self-recognition and self-recognition in the face of the other, which clearly points to the creation of self-concept or self-identity (Butler 91). What is important to understand is that the disfigurement becomes part of the survivors' history, memory, and identity. It is precisely this very intimate aspect of their identity that allows them to connect to other survivors in a way that non-disfigured people cannot. This self-recognition on the face of the other is responsible for the creation of a sense of community between survivors, as mentioned in the introduction, which allows them to help each other through the sharing of their experiences. That is why at the end of the film Sapna carries the yellow smoke, symbol of the transformation of Laxmi into Rashmi. This solidarity based on visual self-recognition on the face of the other survivor contrasts with Nasreen's symbolic language in which she recounts the attack that disfigured her and laid her on the ground in pain disregarded by the bystanders. She states: "I was there the whole day waiting for somebody nearby to give me a glass of water."[40] This statement reaffirms their expectation for the spectator to be a collaborator by means of solidarity.

Activism is one of the main characteristics of acid aesthetic. Ramaswamy's activism through the film is limited to the reach of her audience. Timothy Corrigan states that "the contemporary art film is largely supported by the international film festival circuit" (23).[41]

[40] The subtitles present a slightly different translation: "All day I yearned for a kind face and a glass of water."

[41] *Newborns* received the following awards: The German Star Award for Best Documentary at the Indisches Filmfestival Stuttgart, the Best Short Documentary Award at the Mumbai Women's International Film Festival and Delhi Shorts International Film Festival (Jury Prize), both the Audience and the Jury Award for Best Short Film at the London Asian Film Festival, and the CARTel Select Special Mention for Innovation Award in Los Angeles.

Although, *Newborns's* main audience might not be the commoners, Ramaswamy, by the juxtaposition of the visual and symbolic oral narrative, complicates and disrupts the knowledge of her highly elitist and scholarly audience on the gaze. As Andrew Jakubowicz and Helen Meekosha observe: "[F]ilm festivals, which feature films by and about disabled people, also provide a milieu to critique the 'mainstream'" (246). Besides, Ramaswamy decided to translate the activism from her film into street activism to reach the commoners. Thus, even while her film was being shot, she created the campaign "Spot of Shame" in collaboration with the Chhanv Foundation.[42] Ramaswamy was inspired by the death of Preeti Rathi who had just arrived in a train station in Mumbai when she was attacked in 2013. She had arrived from Delhi to join the Indian navy as a nurse, but was attacked with acid and killed by her neighbor, Ankur Panwar, after she rejected his marriage proposal. The film director decided to bring this and other acid attacks back into the public memory with the use of posters, street plays, and vigils (Recyclewala Films).

Religious symbols also integrate *Newborns*, since these are common elements in acid aesthetic. Besides the allusion to Gaṇeśa, Nasreen is first seen in front of རླུང་རྟ་ (*lungta*), wind horse or Tibetan prayer-flags. According to Jamling Norgay:

> [T]he lungta horse bears a deity carrying wish-fulfilling gems, which we need in order to thrive. But lungta also represents the degree of positive spiritual energy and awareness that propels people – their level of divine inner support. Sherpas say that if their lungta is high, they can survive almost any difficult situation, and if it is low, they can die even while resting on a grassy slope like Tiger Hill. (15)

[42] At the time of this campaign, Laxmi was still associated with the Chhanv Foundation and participated in all the gatherings.

The overall meaning of *lungta* is particularly significant in the context of this film that focuses on the symbolic rebirth of women after the attack. It represents survivors' inner strength responsible for the overcoming of fear, showing their face in public spaces and moving their disfigured bodies with the rhythm of songs. The last scene, which shows Laxmi reborn as Rashmi, displays yet another religious reference. The colorful smoke is iconic in cinematography to represent Holi, the festival of colors. All stories related to this festival symbolize strength and overcoming:

> Three stories are told to explain the festival. In the first it is said that Holi is the day that Shiva opened his third eye and turned the god of love into ashes. In another story Holika, the sister of the demon Hiranyakasipu, took Prahlada on her lap to kill him that day, but the devotee of Vishnu survived unharmed. Finally it is said that there was an ogress Dhundhi who troubled children in an ancient kingdom, until the shouts of the mischievous boys of the town (something heard often on the festival of Holi) made her run away, since she was, through a curse, made vulnerable to the taunts of children. (Jones and Ryan 170)

In the first story Śiva destroys Kāmā, the God of Love, who tried to disrupt his meditation. In the second story, Prahlāda survives due to his devotion to Viṣṇu. Lastly, the boys freed themselves from the troubles caused by Dhundhi by scaring her away.

This narrative of overcoming represents the time survivors need to recover from the fear imposed by the attack through the question that is constantly asked: "The question arises… You're walking back home, on a dark night, through a lonely lane: "And suddenly the wolf's red eyes glare at you. Will you glare back? Or just shut your eyes?" The camera shifts to Nasreen looking directly to the camera. One might think that to glare back is a synonym of empowerment due to its confrontational characteristic and the emphasis of the film on the gaze. However, as the film

progresses, to glare back means to use the same weapons, to have the same behavior as the wolf or perpetrator. The fact that the question is asked three times, each time a new part being added till it is finally concluded also illustrates and dramatizes the time that survivors need to heal, to face inner questions and a new identity. As a matter of fact, in an interview, Laxmi gave the following statement: "We do not believe in capital punishment. We do not ask for acid attacks in retaliation. All that we are asking for is a change in the mentality of society" (Khan). Therefore, to glare back, in this context, is not a sign of true resistance and defiance, according to Laxmi. These forms of agency are reflected in what the narrator says at the end of the film: "Shut your eyes and the wolf disappears. The elephant begins to walk away from you. He carries Rashmi's shoes. You are Rashmi. Did you hear me? You are Rashmi. Not a wolf. Not a lamb. Nor an elephant." The survivor, in reaffirming her agency instead of her victimization (lamb) overcomes her fear, which makes the elephant finally take her shoes away.

This non-confrontational agency simultaneously allies with and differs from the portrayal of non-violence, a religious/philosophical element common in the representation of acid-attack survivors. Very often non-violence is depicted in acid aesthetic through references to Gandhi and even Jesus. In *Newborns*, the non-violent agency of survivors is depicted through the conscious decision to shut her eyes as a way to not allow her fears to dominate her. In the film, non-violence also happens in terms of love, especially love of oneself. This love does mean an unconditional love that extends to her attacker, but a love that believes in legal justice, but not on a retribution that is similar to what was inflicted to her or death. If we analyze the song that Laxmi was dancing to, it points to the overcoming of challenges through love.

Oh friend! I am yours, teach me how to love

I have roamed the world, teach me how to love

Oh friend! I am yours, teach me how to love

I have roamed the world, teach me how to love

When my lover cares about me

Why should I care about this world

The world puts restrictions on me

I don´t belong to this world at all (Bhavsar).

The poetic persona, who faces the restrictions imposed by the world, wants to learn how to love because she does not belong to this restrictive world. Her world is a world of love. It is a world where she will not glare back. This conscious decision is not related to fear of glaring back. It is based on an inner growth and a careful choice of not lowering herself to behave in the same way as the wolf. In 2014, when Michelle Obama chose Laxmi, among many women across the globe, to receive the International Women of Courage Award, Laxmi read a poem she wrote that is in consonance with this discussion:

You hold the acid that charred my dreams.

Your heart bore no love. It had the venom stored.

There was never any love in your eyes. They burn me with caustic glance.

I am sad that your corrosive name will always be part of my identity that I carry with this face.

Time will not come to my rescue. Every surgery will remind me of you.

You will hear and you will be told that the face you burned is the face I love now.

You will hear about me in the darkness of confinement.

The time will be burdened for you.

Then you will know that I am alive, free and thriving and living my dreams (U.S. Department of State).

In the poem the poetic persona contrasts the feelings and attitudes of the culprit with those of the survivor. On the one hand, the words that are used to depict the criminal are negative and related to the properties of the acid, such as "charred," "venom," "caustic," and "corrosive." On the other hand, the survivor of the attack is represented by positive words as the following: "love," "alive," "free," and "thriving." These two sets of words contribute to the dramatic development of the poem. The attacker resembles the descriptions of the red-eyed wolf from the short film due to his caustic glare. He burnt the poetic persona's face and destroyed her dreams by throwing acid on her. However, in spite of being reminded of her attacker each time she sees her new face in the mirror, she will not fill her heart with anger. Similarly to the poetic persona in the song that Laxmi dances to in *Newborns*, the poetic persona of Laxmi's poem learned how to love her *self*. Different from the criminal, who will live his life in confinement and darkness, she will be free, thriving and living new dreams. While he will remember every day his bad actions, she will see the fruits of her strength. The disfigured face becomes a lovable face and defiant of all the odds. It reminds us of new possibilities, new ways of living, and even of freedom from norms imposed by the society. The last lines of the poem suggest that the real punishment to the attacker is the overcoming of social consequences of the attack by the survivor. As Monica Singh, a survivor of acid throwing, affirmed: "The biggest revenge — to this guy — is to live the way you wanted and to keep doing whatever you always wanted" ("The Acid Attack Survivor who Became A Comic Book Superhero"). To put it differently, the attitude of the poetic persona in Laxmi's poem and of Monica Singh is simultaneously the survivor's biggest revenge as well as a means of regaining their agency and empowerment through non-violence.

Finally, ethics is another dimension relevant for acid aesthetic. Ramaswamy affirms that the idea of the creation of the film was to involve Laxmi, Sapna, and Nasreen as co-authors and this can be mainly seen in the places where the film was shot. The scenes show metro and train stations, buses, restaurants, bridges, apartments, and neighborhood streets - places that are part of the daily life of survivors ("In Focus"). As primary collaborators, Ramaswamy acknowledges their participation in the credits of the film. However, due to the low-budget production, no monetary stipend was given to the survivors, even though the film is the recipient of awards that include prize money.

Ramaswamy's art film dives into the fears and feelings of acid-attack survivors through diegetic elements, such as the bus as a reference to the Nirbhaya case, and non-diegetic ones, such as the highly symbolic oral narrative. By doing that, the film opens up to other forms of violence against women, constituting itself as an example of *conflative* acid aesthetic. On the one hand, the visual narrative explores the complexity of both the viewers and the survivors' gaze. This form of looking at each other, when performed by two survivors, turns into a symbolic mirror. On the other hand, the oral narrative introduces the idea of glaring to disrupt the idea that the visible is knowable. Together, the gaze and the glare require a deeper engagement of the audience with the film, and they complexify common elements of acid aesthetic. For example, *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), a religious/philosophical element frequently present in representations of acid-attack survivors, gains a more bodily and emotional presentation through the act of shutting the eyes to overcome the fear resulting from the traumatic experience of the attack. In regards to the ethics of the film director, survivors are seen as active collaborators in the creation of the film. Ramaswamy's narrative of overcoming, contrary to Nirbhaya's last ride, ends on a positive note in which survivors of acid attacks recreate a new life.

Acid-Attack Survivors as Superheroine's Allies

Ram Devineni's and Paromita Vohra's graphic novel *Priya's Mirror* is another example of *conflative* acid aesthetic. I categorize this graphic novel as *conflative* especially because of the characterization of Priya as a gang-rape survivor who helps acid-attack survivors. Despite the effort to showcase female solidarity, and more specifically inter-disability solidarity, the distinction between these two types of survivors made by Priya herself oversimplifies the entire experience of acid-attack survivors. A consequence of this characterization is that acid-attack survivors become secondary to Priya's role. I will also explore the deeper engagement of the reader required by the *conflative* aesthetic while analyzing the dimension of the augmented reality that the graphic novel offers. As mentioned in the previous chapter, however, these aesthetic categories are not clear cut. For example, the depiction of acid attacks in *Priya's Mirror* subscribes to patriarchal norms. This form of representation points to elements from the *disfigurative* aesthetic. Moreover, I will investigate the general characteristics of acid aesthetic in this graphic novel, such as social justice, the image of the mirror, happiness, and religious elements.

Since *Priya's Mirror* is the sequel to *Priya's Shakti*[43] I will pause the analysis of this graphic novel in order to provide a summary of *Priya's Shakti*, a brief literature review, followed by my analysis of the sequel. It is also important to note that, since *Priya's Mirror* is a more recent graphic novel, its criticism is still incipient. *Priya's Shakti* tells the story of Priya,[44] a gang-rape survivor who seeks help from her family and the village *panchāyat*,[45] but is instead rejected and

[43] *Śaktī* (शक्ति) means power.
[44] The word *priya* (प्रिय) means "dear" or "beloved" in Hindi.
[45] *Panchāyat* (पंचायत) is a village council.

humiliated. Priya prays to Goddess Pārvatī as a last resort and the Goddess incorporates herself into Priya's body. Seeing Pārvatī being harassed by Priya's attackers while incorporated into Priya, Lord Śiva, by way of revenge, curses mankind to lose the ability to procreate. Goddess Pārvatī reasons with Lord Śiva and persuades him to reverse his decision, and instead, she gives Priya a magical weapon – a mantra that changes people's mindset about gender inequality – and a vehicle – a tiger called Sāhas,[46] who helps Priya regain her confidence. Going from village to village mounted on Sāhas and singing her mantra, Priya makes people love their daughters as much as their sons, keep their daughters in school, and respect women.

Priya's Shakti, as a book directly inspired by the Nirbhaya case, became globally known (perhaps more internationally than nationally) and generated enthusiasts, a phenomenon which Nicole Goulet properly calls "Priya's movement" (39). This movement, however, did not generate much criticism. Some of the few critics who paid attention to this graphic novel praised its success as a pedagogical tool for inviting "readers to see all cultural norms about gender and sexuality as malleable rather than fixed" due to the recasting of mythological characters (Shrivastava 212) and for creating awareness about rape through a culturally-centered comic book (Chattopadhyay 28). Goulet points out that the book addresses violence against women rather than normalizing or ignoring it, and it does so by becoming a "modern Purana"[47] (40-41). According to Goulet, Devineni's graphic novel drew such socially and culturally diverse actors to this movement that "polarizing binaries such as urban/rural, western/eastern, modern/backward, upper caste, lower caste are not given much credence, let alone reinforced" (40-41). This statement might be true of

[46] *Sāhas* (साहस) means "courage" in Hindi.

[47] The name *Purāṇa* (पुराण) literally means "ancient" or "old." These are Hindu and Jain texts covering a range of topics such as cosmogony, cosmology, genealogies of Gods, Goddesses, kings, heroes, sages, and demigods, folk tales, pilgrimages, temples, medicine, astronomy, grammar, mineralogy, humor, love stories, as well as theology and philosophy.

those who want to be perceived in the public sphere as fighting gender-based violence, but it is certainly not reflected in the plot of *Priya's Shakti*. Ram Devineni and Vikas Menon made a conscious decision to depict Priya as well as the gang-rape in a rural setting, despite the fact that the historical figure that inspired the creation of Priya was a college-student in Delhi, an urban area. The stigmatization of rural areas is reinforced by Nidhi Shrivastava's observation that there is "a pilot project to distribute copies of the comic book to schools in rural areas of India to create awareness among children and young adults about the treatment of rape victims" (213). Another apparent positive aspect of the graphic novel, according to Sandra Heinen, is that *Priya's Shakti* offers an optimistic ending "so that the stories can offer hope and point out escape routes for readers in similar circumstances" (125). She ignores the fact that this hope is given by the Gods and not by the legal system. Other less enchanted critics such as Jana Fedkte point out, legitimately, that Priya's agency is reduced if not canceled by the emphasis of the narrative on Sāhas and on the Gods (66).

In the sequel, *Priya's Mirror*, Priya is asked to help acid-attack survivors who are kept in the palace of an acid-spitting *asura*[48] called Ahankar, who intentionally kept survivors captive of their own fears, therefore, away from society.[49] In order to help Priya accomplish this task, Goddess Pārvatī gives her another magical weapon – the Mirror of Love. In the process of saving the girls from captivity, Priya learns that Ahankar was himself a survivor of acid attack, and it was his decision to seek revenge against his attackers that transformed him into an *asura*. Priya convinces the survivors that they can reintegrate into society. She fights Ahankar who is transformed into his original form – Prem[50] - after looking at the Mirror of Love, which has the

[48] A class of beings that are frequently battling the *Devas* (Gods).
[49] Ahankār (अहंकार) means "ego."
[50] Prem (प्रेम) means "love."

ability to show the inner qualities of a person. The survivors freed by Priya go on to create a café to help other survivors of acid attacks.

The inter-disability solidarity in *Priya's Mirror* is a unique facet of the main characteristic of *conflative* acid aesthetic – the conflation of different forms of gender-based violence. In the first graphic novel, Priya is already engaged in female solidarity by changing society's mindset about girls and women. Therefore, it is not a surprise that this main theme is further developed in the sequel when Priya helps a specific group of girls wronged by their patriarchal society – acid-attack survivors. However, it is in *Priya's Mirror* that female solidarity unfolds into inter-disability solidarity. By inter-disability solidarity I mean solidarity between differently disabled persons. In the context of *Priya's Mirror*, these disabilities are: Psychological trauma and disfigurement, both disabilities resulting from crimes; the first from a gang-rape and the latter from acid attacks.

What makes *Priya's Mirror* unique then is not necessarily the portrayal of female solidarity, but the depiction of inter-disability solidarity, which promotes disabled people as agents, not as mere recipients. The idea of solidarity between disabled and non-disabled people has been promoted in many societies, but not so much the inter-disability solidarity. Solidarity between disabled and non-disabled people is promoted including by means of law. An example of this is India's Equal Opportunity Protection of Rights and Full Participation Act passed in 1995, which covered only seven disabilities, later replaced by Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act in 2016, which covers more than 15 disabilities including dwarfism, acid-attack survival, intellectual disability, and specific learning disabilities (Kochhar et al 126). These laws are based on the principles of social solidarity and responsibility, which are frequently ableists in the sense that disabled people are seen as recipients while non-disabled people are seen as agents. Scholars such

as Teodor Mladenov have pointed out the paradox that disabled people face between seeking independence and relying on social solidarity (178).

Priya is depicted both as survivor of trauma and an activist in inter-disability solidarity. It is only in the sequel that Priya's psychological trauma is portrayed as a nightmare in which she experiences once again the day she was gang-raped. The nightmare is a device that introduces Priya's disability and also updates first-time readers to the complete story. The dream then brings an element of disquietude and forces the readers to reposition themselves within the text and re-assimilate the unsettling events of the dream into the text (Earle 83). Since trauma is encoded in vivid sensations and images, there is an immediate relationship between the comics form and the nature of trauma (Earle 77). The main medium of comics is visual, and trauma is typically seen to be encoded in image and sensation more than in words. After a traumatic event, continues Earle, "the individual returns to a world that has not intrinsically changed, though their experience of it has. Their identity, too, has shifted, they have become a victim or survivor, or both" (97). Even though in the first graphic novel Priya has effectively changed the perspective of several individuals towards women, crimes against women are still happening, and this unsettles her. The changes that the traumatic events cause in the survivor call into question deeper forms of solidarity. This confluence of events is symbolized by Sāhas's disruption of Priya's traumatic dream. Her nightmare happens just before Rafi arrives and asks for her help to free the acid-attack survivors from Ahankar's palace.

Although psychological trauma has originated its own field of studies, disability studies in the past decade have been slowly and consistently embracing psychological trauma in the development of its theories, especially those regarding aesthetics. While trauma studies have been frequently focusing on the idea of metaphor as an expression of trauma, disability studies have

moved away from metaphors in favor of a more embodied experience. Tobin Siebers, however, explicitly connects disability and trauma via an investigation of disability aesthetic and the "corporeal substrata on which aesthetic effects are based" (1). Likewise, Casper and Morrison (2012) have refocused the attention of disability studies on the body and the effects of impairment to productively connect disability and trauma. Since Siegers' publication the concern about trauma has been progressively expanded by theorists: Alison Kafer (2013; 2016) and Broderick and Ellis (2019). Broderick and Ellis, in analyzing *Mad Max* films (1979-2015) affirm that: "Disability is invoked in these films as a central aesthetic concept, not only because it symbolizes human variation but also because it represents the fragility of human beings and their susceptibility to dramatic physical and mental change" (5). What Broderick and Ellis call "representation of human fragility" can be mobilized towards a positive social change.

The positive aspect of inter-disability solidarity in *Priya's Mirror*, however, also oversimplifies the differences between disabilities. When Priya tries to convince the survivors that Ahankar made prisoners of their own fear, she uses the Mirror of Love to show survivors that they should see beyond their disfigurement. At the beginning, Priya faces resistance. One of the captive women expresses her disbelief when she sees the mirror: "How could you be so mean to show a mirror to a victim of acid attack" (Devineni and Vohra 26). They complain that Priya does not know their stories by saying:

> - I cannot forget how the police kept asking me, 'why did the boy throw acid on you? You must have done something'
>
> - I was in an abusive relationship, and he felt that, to be a man, he had to beat me. When that was not enough…

- When that boy threw acid on me, I lay on the road, burning. People threw 30 buckets of water on me and yet when my father came and held me, his shirt got burned. My parents went bankrupt taking care of me. (24)

Some of these experiences are particular to acid-attack survivors, and survivors of different types of gender-based violence, like Priya, cannot fully comprehend. Making a parallel to the real lives of survivors, Sonia explains that her own relatives suggested to her parents that they inject her with poison because she was supposedly useless. In other words, her worth was represented by her physical beauty, which was forever altered. Moreover, whenever questioned about what had happened to her, she would say that she was involved in "a car accident, gas, or burnt by a pressure cooker. But never an acid attack. Because if I say that, then they would blame me" ("Priya's Mirror: Sonia"). These are just some examples of differences experienced by acid-attack survivors that, in the graphic novel, are oversimplified by Priya's binary perspective of visible and invisible scars: "It's not like that. I too was like you, except my scars could not be seen. I was raped and cast aside. But I learned I could find strength by believing I was more than a victim. It was hard. But I could make myself whole again" (24). Priya does not explain what she means by making herself "whole" again. Even though Priya might be able to make "her *self*" once again whole, the scars that rarely disappear from acid-attack survivors' bodies, despite many reconstructive surgeries, might make this inner process much more difficult and slow. Moreover, the binary visible-invisible can be complicated if acid-attack survivors whose disfigurement is not facial are considered. These women cannot be easily recognized as acid-attack survivors. Therefore, in order to simplify the complexity of acid disfigurement to a visible matter, artists, such as Ram Devineni and Paromita Vohra, have to emphasize the facial disfigurement, creating characters that do not portray the diversified range of acid-attack survivors.

Any movement towards solidarity made by Priya is accompanied by an act of homogenization of disabilities. Priya reminds them that, although a great part of society blames the survivor for the attack, it was not their fault: "Why should we hide our wounds and why should we hide because of our wounds? You are much more than a face" (Devineni and Vohra 25). The nature of Priya's scars is hidden, while that of acid-attack survivors are generally not, as she has already marked.[51] After the pushback Priya face by survivors, it is Anjali who decides to look at the mirror first and, by doing that, she sees herself as a lawyer fighting for other women. Little by little every woman sees herself in the mirror, focusing on their abilities and potentials.

The representation of acid attacks re-centers the focus of the sequel on the corporeality of the characters and agency, which was lost in the first graphic novel due to the emphasis on the Gods. In the sequel, not only is the psychological pain mentioned, but the physical pain is also openly stated by the survivor Anjali: "Over the years, I endured dozens of painful operations on

[51] It is important to note that in India the disclosure of a rape victim/survivor's identity is prohibited under Section 228A in the Indian Penal Code. This prohibition was intensified on December 11th 2018, when the Supreme Court of India banned media to "publish or air the names or any material which may even remotely reveal the identity of victims of sexual crimes" (Rajagopal). According to Section 228A in the Indian Penal Code:

> (1) Whoever prints or publishes the name or any matter which may make known the identity of any person against whom an offence under section 376, section 376A, section 376B, section 376C or section 376D is alleged or found to have been committed (hereafter in this section referred to as the victim) shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to two years and shall also be liable to fine.
> (2) Nothing in sub-section (1) extends to any printing or publi-cation of the name or any matter which may make known the identi-ty of the victim if such printing or publication is—
> (a) by or under the order in writing of the officer-in-charge of the police station or the police officer making the investigation into such offence acting in good faith for the purposes of such investigation; or
> (b) by, or with the authorisation in writing of, the victim; or
> (c) where the victim is dead or minor or of unsound mind, by, or with the authorisation in writing of, the next of kin of the victim: Provided that no such authorisation shall be given by the next of kin to anybody other than the chairman or the secretary, by whatever name called, of any recognised welfare institution or organisation. Explanation.—For the purposes of this sub-section, "recognised welfare institution or organisation" means a social welfare institution or organisation recognised in this behalf by the Central or State Government.
> (3) Whoever prints or publishes any matter in relation to any proceeding before a court with respect to an offence referred to in sub-section (1) without the previous permission of such Court shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to two years and shall also be liable to fine. Explanation.—The printing or publication of the judgment of any High Court or the Supreme Court does not amount to an offence within the meaning of this section]. ("Central Government Act")

my eyes, nose, ears, throat, lips, and hands" (Devineni and Vohra 8). The reference to physical pain brings the focus back to the materiality of the female body, instead of its divinity, which was emphasized in *Priya's Shakti*. Both gang-rape and acid attack are violations of the borders of women's body. As the writer Shobha Rao explains, in societies or in specific historical moments that disenfranchise women, their only possession is their body whose limits they try to protect. These crimes, however, disrupt the borders of women's body, over which women should have sovereignty (Rao). The reasons for this forceful crossing of the borders of women's body lie on the patriarchal structures embedded in social and cultural norms. On these terms, it is important to highlight that like the fictional character Anjali, who chose her studies over an intimate relationship, actual survivors of acid attack are generally attacked because they stand for their dreams, wishes, and objectives, be it studies instead of marriage, as was the case of Ritu, divorce instead of an abusive relationship, like Farah, or their own wishes to refuse sexual advances, such as Dolly, to provide a few examples. The attack is itself a way to take away the agency that these girls and women have over their lives and bodies and submit them to patriarchal norms. The differing material result of gender-based violence are elided in the *conflative* aesthetic.

As much as representations of female and male acid-attacks survivors in *Priya's Mirror* shed light on gender-based violence, patriarchal norms also differentiate these same representations, which is an aspect of *disfigurative* aesthetic that permeates this artwork. For example, the acid attack against a female character is not depicted, but only implied, while not just the acid attack, but other forms of violence against the male character are clearly depicted in the panels. Let me first analyze the case of Anjali who was attacked because she rejected a marriage proposal. Surprised that a worker of Ahankar's palace, Rafi, was not afraid of her disfigured face, Anjali explains to him how the attack happened. She was in the final year of law school when she

had the courage to confront Raj, a boy who had asked her out many times. Despite his insistence, she was interested only in her studies and career, not in him. As revenge he threw acid on her. The exact moment of the attack, however, is neither textually nor visually represented. The attack happens in the *gutter*, the space between the panels of a comic strip where "human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea" (McCloud 63). The reader has to fill in both textual and visual narratives based on the pieces of information given. Raj, a Hindu character whose name means "king," is shown holding a glass with a yellowish liquid behind his back, followed by the image of Anjali's head and upper torso enveloped in gauze with reddish stains suggesting blood, indicating the aftermath of the attack, and in the center of the panel lies Anjali's uncovered disfigured face. The central panel has an oval shape that frames Anjali's face as if the reader were seeing her image reflected in a mirror. In *Priya's Shakti*, likewise, the gang-rape of Priya happens in the gutter. In the sequel, however, the acid attack of a male character is depicted quite differently from that of Anjali.

Fig. 43 – The attack happens in the gutter
(Reproduced with permission from the author)

The comparison of the aesthetic choices between the acid attack on the female character – Anjali - and that on the male character – Prem – shows the perpetuation of patriarchal norms in the representation of gender-based violence by Ram Devineni and Paromita Vohra. The second acid attack is carried out by Kusum's brothers on Prem for seeing him with Kusum without their permission. After beating up Prem, they force him to drink acid. These attacks are clearly depicted in the panels. Although Prem is forced to drink acid, his face is not disfigured. He rises from the water where he had fallen with green lines throughout his body as marks of the power of the acid that now possesses him. Despite some physical transformation, there is no disfigurement, even though the acid was poured into Prem's mouth. Instead of physically disfiguring his body (lips, throat etc), the acid disfigures his character. Prem's features do change in order to visually portray his new vitriolic existence. Instead of the fine lines, he is now a giant, ugly, and fat man, a common representation of *asuras* in pictorial Indian tradition. Prem chose to kill Kusum's brothers by spitting acid at them, which is another example of violence against men by men that is depicted explicitly within the panels. While killing the boys, the acid accidentally spills on Kusum, who gets physically disfigured. In this process Prem (love) became Ahankar (ego) because he was dominated by anger and the desire for revenge. As for Kusum, Ahankar promised to take care of her and she became the prisoner of her own guilt (Devineni and Vohra 13-20). These aesthetic choices transform violence against men into a visual spectacle, overshadowing the attacks on women.

The authors made interesting choices to represent the attack. First of all, the attackers are male characters who submit another man to violence. This distinction deviates from the expected male-female conflict, especially taking into account that the focus of the narrative is Priya helping female victims of acid attack. Second, Kusum's disfigurement is not Prem-Ahankar's objective,

but an indirect consequence of his revenge on her brothers. Instead of the narrative being focused on the physical disfigurement of Prem, in a twist, he becomes a malevolent powerful character, while Kusum, who was not the target, acquires the common type of injuries among real survivors - face and arms disfigured. This incidental disfigurement is yet another example of patriarchal influence in the depiction of acid attacks in *Priya's Mirror*. The "accidental" disfigurement of Kusum is a classic example of what Gail Simone calls "women in the refrigerators," a term popularized after her website of the same name. Simone verified that in comic books female characters are frequently "injured, killed, or disempowered as a plot device that is used disproportionately on female characters" (Simone). It is precisely Kusum's unexpected disfigurement that motivates Prem to create a sanctuary for survivors of acid attacks. Later in the narrative, when Priya shows the Mirror of Love to Ahankar and he sees his true nature (love) he transforms back into Prem. This "return to the origins" is an example of what John Bartol calls "dead men defrosting." In other words, differently from most female characters who generally do not return to what they were before the event that transformed them, male characters have the chance to return to their original states (Bartol). Tropes and stereotypes then impact the representational strategies of both violence against women by men, which happens in the gutter, and violence against men by men, which comprises of unveiled representations. The female character is forever changed with disfigurement, while the male character returns to his previous state.

Fig. 44 – Violence against man
(Reproduced with permission from the author)

Fig. 45 – Attack on Prem
(Reproduced with permission from the author)

Fig. 46 – Prem becomes Ahankar
(Reproduced with permission from the author)

Dan Goldman, the illustrator of *Priya's Mirror*, used the division of the story in panels, which is one of the main characteristics of comic books, to impose some stereotypical and patriarchal constructions about representations of violence against women and against men. The

explanation of the aesthetic philosopher David Davies about the artistic medium helps us to think about the ways violence against men by men and violence against women by men are portraited differently in this graphic novel. Davies observes that: "In appreciating a work, we must always attend to how an 'artistic statement' has been articulated in a particular artistic medium, and how the articulation exploits the qualities of the vehicle that realizes that artistic medium" (190). The comic strip provides a perfect format for the veiled violence against women through the use of the gutter and the imagination of the reader to create what is implicit, and the main panels for the depiction of violence against men, perpetuating representations of violence against men and women.

Facial disfigurement is often understood as loss of humanity. In *Portraits of Violence*, Suzannah Biernoff, focusing on Western soldiers' disfigurement and disability caused by war, observes that the loss of limbs by soldiers during the WWI is a sign of their bravery. Their artificial amputated limbs were visible proofs of these soldiers' valor and sacrifice. Facial disfigurement, on the other hand, presented a problem and was often concealed through masks that resembled their features before the injuries. According to Biernoff, the facial mutilation is understood as concerning the identity of the embodied self, rather than bodily function such as the limbs, even though in many cases facial mutilation also resulted in loss of functions, such as sight and hearing. Facial disfigurement is related to being a man, in other words, rather than acting as one (76-80). In the context of the Indian graphic novel, however, the idea of humanity seems to be complicated. On the one hand, the facial disfigurement of female characters does represent the loss of humanity, and consequently, their ostracism by society. As an example of this, Anjali says that, despite graduating at the top of her class, she "couldn't get a job because people were frightened" of her (9). On the other hand, for male characters humanity is related to their character and actions, to

their capacity of loving or to seek revenge, given that Prem becomes an *asura* when he loses his ability to love.

Disfigurement has been historically connected to the idea of loss of humanity as well as artistically and aesthetically conveyed by the image of the monster (Stiker, 1999; Shildrick, 2002; Smith, 2012; Biernoff, 2017; Godden and Mittman, 2019; Anand, 2020). According to Safwat Marzouk "the category of the monster is an embodiment of abnormality and anomalism" (46) Garland-Thomson adds that "The historical figure of the monster, as well, invokes disability, often to serve racism and sexism… As departures from the normatively human, monsters were seen as category violations or grotesque hybrids" ("Integrating Disability" 79). It is this monstrosity perceived by society that Anjali experiences as a disfigured woman. Contributing to this perception is the fact that in the Indian context, as in many other countries, women's physical beauty and "purity" are still a valuable currency. Likewise, physical beauty is one of major currencies in arranged marriages in India. Physical beauty comprises skin color and features. A glance at matrimonial advertisements leaves no doubt about the importance of physical beauty for prospective brides, but not so much for prospective bridegrooms. Expressions such as "fair good looking girl," "beautiful fair," and "fair beautiful girl" populate advertisements of those who are seeking brides and of those women highlighting their qualities for prospective bridegrooms. On the other hand, society does not see Ahankar (Prem after the acid attack) as less human. On the contrary, families entrust their disfigured female relatives to his supposed protection. These families trust him because, despite being forced to drink acid, his disfigurement is not depicted as being physical. Therefore, nobody is scared of him as they are of the female survivors.

The authors provide an alternative masculinity to that founded in violence, which is based on the idea of non-violence or love and compassion. Prem's inner disfigurement – by inner I mean

his personality – is influenced by the ideal of masculinity set by Gandhi; in other words, a masculinity supposedly based on non-violence and authority.[52] Prem's transformation into Ahankar is based on his desire for revenge. More explicit in *Priya's Shakti* than in the sequel, the authors project in their narratives the notion of *ahiṃsā* – non-violence. *Ahiṃsā* is depicted in different ways; one of them is Prem's decision to kill Kusum's brothers, instead of choosing non-violence. It is this attitude that transforms him into Ahankar, and it is his remembering of his loving and peaceful nature that turns him back into Prem. The problem of this masculinity is Gandhi's concept of *swarāj* (स्वराज) or self-rule. In other words, *swarāj* is the continuous and ceaseless struggle to shed one's attachment to the ego (Chakrabarty and Majumdar 83). However, Gandhi's *swarāj* is characterized by a patriarchal protectionism. David Hardiman describes Gandhi as a person who "ran his ashrams as a benevolent but authoritarian patriarch. In his own family life he

[52] Gandhi encouraged women to emulate the example of Sītā whose devotion to her husband, Rama, and self-sacrifice became a traditional model of honor for Hindu women. Gandhi exalted women's ability to "suffer non-violently for their beliefs" (Tunzelmann 52). Even though he might have focused on the so called women's virtues of sacrifice, suffering, and quiet non-violent struggle as a means to oppose the British colonization, the reality is that he only transferred women's traditional qualities from the private sphere to the public domain. By doing that he reinforced these qualities that are applied to women. They had also a secondary position in his movement. Despite participating actively in different ways, from making *khādī* (hand-woven cotton fabric) to selling the "salt of freedom," the role of women was still overshadowed by the male figure of Gandhi and after India's Independence they got little credit for it. Gandhi's idea of non-violence is itself controversial. A few days after the British army had killed around 379 and injured at least 1200 civilians in the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in the city of Amritsar, a letter written by Gandhi was published in the newspapers with a surprising response to the "civil disobedience." He apologizes for the attitudes of the civilians and says they were no heroic martyrs. He criticizes them for taking "to their heels" instead of facing death calmly. Very little was said by him about the British firing on unarmed people, including women and children, besides his concurrence that the British should face justice (Tunzelmann 49). Regarding women's condition in his ashram, he broke up several marriages by persuading the women to renounce sex (Tunzelmann 78). His wife, Kasturba, seems to have been the special focus of his contradictory non-violent approach. After seeing her lugging a pot of excrement down the stairs outside their house, he angrily shouted saying that "not only must she carry around buckets of excrement, but that she should do so cheerfully. She threatened to walk out, at which point Mohandas grabbed her roughly by the arm. He dragged her to the gate and tried to shove her through it. She sobbed that she had nowhere to go. At this, he relented, and let her back" (Tunzelmann 27). When his wife Kasturba got seriously ill after an untreated bronchitis had developed into pneumonia and needed penicillin, their son Devadas had the medicine flown from Kolkata. However, upon learning that the penicillin would be applied in the form of an injection, Gandhi opposed it and he engaged in an argument with his son. Instead of giving her the injection, he filled the room with followers who sang devotional songs. In a few days "Kasturba died, after a long, slow and painful illness, her suffering unrelieved except by prayer" and Gandhi praised himself for not backing down when God tested his faith, letting her pass away in his lap: "Could it be better? I am happy beyond measure" (Tunzelmann 127).

demanded obedience from his wife, Kasturba, and his four sons and their wives. It was hard for him to accept when a 'daughter' or 'son' – real or adopted – sought to assert their independence; there were acrimonious quarrels, leading in some cases to sharp and bitter breaks" (94). In this form of patriarchy dialogue is limited and so is the consideration for the needs and even rights of others. Gandhi's numerous instances of harassment of his wife are well known. Even after taking his vows of celibacy, which he claimed had improved his relationship with Kasturba, in reality, he still saw her as "being ignorant and lacking any worthwhile opinions of her own. All she had were her prejudices that she had learnt to keep to herself" (Hardiman 97). The non-violent ideal of masculinity suggested by the authors, however, institute other forms of patriarchy. This Gandhian patriarchy helps influence the depiction of Prem as non-disfigured, turning back into his old self after living as Ahankar, and having Kusum, who was disfigured as a result of his anger, taking care of him as an unconditional and devoted beloved.

The *conflative* acid aesthetic requires a deeper engagement from the audience, which in this graphic novel is required by the augmented reality, a term coined by Tom Caudell in 1990. Augmented reality is a combination of virtual reality and real life. With augmented reality, users are in touch with the real world while interacting with virtual objects around them (Sural 202). The immersion that augmented reality provides to the reader/audience is also understood as an enrichment by scholars such as Nathan Shafer:

> Augmented reality as a new media practice is squarely situated in the context of STEM pedagogy (Science Technology Engineering Math), but AR blends in other fields of study/practice that are not necessarily STEM-themed, and tend to fall under the aegis of humanities enrichments. As enrichment strategy for all students, including special

education, augmented reality offers a format that can move between the dichotomy of STEM and humanities-based education. (320)

At the same time that the augmented reality[53] provides an supplementary insight into the narrative because it enhances the capacity of the reader to be affected, it also gives continuity to the conflation between acid attacks and gang-rape. For example, after listening to Rafi's story, Priya decides to help the acid-attack survivors and flies to Ahankar's castle riding on Sahas. The augmented reality creates a multimedia experience for the reader by illustrating Priya's fight with a video clip of the song "Don't Stop the Fight" by the Indian singer Ishani Chakravarthy. The song was inspired by the 2012-gang-rape in Delhi and, according to the singer: "The aim [of the song] is to empower. Don't Stop the Fight means don't give up. It shows what it feels like to walk in the shoes of a girl who has faced abuse. There is a hero in all of us. Sometimes, the most courageous

[53] The authors and illustrator imbedded hidden images, videos, and written texts that can be accessed through an app called Blippar. This feature creates two levels of the same narrative, one with the information given by the augmented reality and another without it. Its presence also makes us think about which readership the authors are targeting. Based on the content, it promotes a discussion about gender-based violence. However, who would have access to this extra material? First of all, the readers must have a smartphone in which they can download this app and be sufficiently technologically literate to understand how to use it. There are about 650 million people in India who possess a cellphone, from which about 300 million are smartphones (Iyengar). With a population of more than 1,350,000,000 people, less than five percent of the population possesses a smartphone. Another restriction imposed on the readership is the languages in which the graphic novel was published. In a country with more than hundred scheduled languages, it is surprising that the graphic novel is translated into more European languages, such as Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian than into Indian languages. In fact Hindi is the only native language which it is translated into. Taking into account these factors, it is likely that the authors have targeted a middle class Indian population, but above all a Western readership, despite some efforts to popularize *Priya's Shakti* and the sequel through community outreach and mural paintings in Delhi and Mumbai that can also be used for augmented reality. The idea that the intended audience is mainly international is supported by definitions of social and religious structures characteristic to India that are offered by the augmented reality. For example, concepts such as "panchāyat" and "Hinduism," the names of Gods and Goddesses such as Parvatī, Śiva, Durgā, and Kālī, which are definitely well-known to Indians (even non-Hindu Indians), are some of the words defined for the readers. Notwithstanding the efforts to educate the readers, it is surprising to see that the authors provide incorrect information about the meaning of the Gods' names. In the description of Śiva's name, for example, it says that it "means 'shakti' in Sanskrit, which translates into English as 'power'" (Devineni and Menon 15). In none of the entries of Sanskrit dictionaries can "shakti" be found as one of the meanings of Śiva's name. Instead, depending on the context, it means "auspicious," "propitious," "gracious," "favorable," "benign," "kind," "benevolent," "friendly," and "dear." Likewise, "death" is given as one of the meanings of Kālī's name (19), even though it does not feature in the main Sanskrit dictionaries (Benfey; Monier-Williams; Macdonell; Sūryakānta). It is relevant to note that the augmented features of both graphic novels are inactive in the application Blippar.

thing you can do is to listen" (Shankar). Chakravarthy not only refers to the inner courage that the survivors have to find in order to continue fighting for equality and social justice but also the importance of bearing witness to their experience as listeners or as readers. In the video clip Ishani created for the graphic novel she wears a blouse with a tiger's face printed on it as a reference to Sahas, and images from the graphic novel often appear in the video. On the other hand, her official video clip of the same song is more elaborate. It portrays five different women ready to go out and enjoy the night. However, after a few hours, their encounters with abusers change the course of their lives. Some are depicted with their bodies covered with bruises while one lies dead in a park. They experience a series of feelings from isolation to self-repulsion. Despite all these abuses, the song proceeds: "I don't know your name. I won't get in your car. I don't care what you say. I don't easily stray. I don't want to be friends. I don't want to have fun. I don't want to become yet another victim" ("Premiere: Ishani"). The emphasis of the video, however, is on women's efforts in not becoming a victim, instead of calling out men to change their behavior. Moreover, the lyrics emphasize what women do to avoid abuse while the images show abuse rather than their resistance. The video clip made for *Priya's Shakti* and the sequel ends by showing the statistics of rape of women in India: "Over 34,000 reported rapes in India, but only 21% of them makes it to trial. Rape survivors are frequently discouraged from pursuing justice because the blame is put on them" (Rattapallax, "Don't Stop the Fight"). The statistics that the video presents creates an uncomfortable counterpoint between the song/graphic novel and the real world. While in the graphic novel women's empowerment is emphasized, the statistics depict a reality in which women are victims of gender violence and of the legal system that discredits them. Moreover, the connection between rape, which is the focus of the video, and acid attacks, the focus of the sequel, is not made.

The augmented reality becomes a fertile field for the conflation of different gender-based forms of violence that unfolds into a discussion of distinct types of masculinity. A masculinity based on respect instead of violence and physical strength is the focus of a video created by the NGO WEvolve Global. In the video, the Indian film director, actor, and TV host Farhan Akhtar affirms that his objective is to redefine masculinity in India. What inspired him into this activism was: First, the 2012-gang-rape in Delhi. Second, children as young as five-years-old being abused. Third, the death of Pallavi, a girl who was murdered for resisting rape by the security guard of her apartment building; the same building where Akhtar works. These factors motivated him to pursue venues such as his shows, schools, and community meetings to talk about the parameters of masculinity, respect for personal space (or what I would call body borders), especially of women. The video ends by requesting the active participation of the viewers because gender inequality and gender-based violence will only end when everybody is involved in this cause (WEvolve Global, "Farhan Akhtar Took a Stand, What Will You Do?"). Besides the engagement with the audience through augmented reality and the continuous connection between different forms of violence against women, this video helps men rethink masculinities because, as Jackson Katz brilliantly demonstrates in his book *Macho Paradox* (2006), violence against women is a men's issue. However, once again the connection between sexual abuse and acid attack is ignored.

Finally, the augmented reality offers three more ways to deepen the engagement of readers with the graphic novel: Videos of real survivors, a selfie with Natalia Ponce's "last mask," and "a selfie with Priya." The first feature that deepens the involvement of readers is real acid-attack survivors narrating their own experiences in four videos featuring Laxmi, Soniya, Monica Singh, and Natalia Ponce de León. Natalia Ponce is an acid-attack survivor from Colombia who fought for more rigorous laws on acid attacks in her country together with Gina Pontes, considered the

first acid-attack survivor in Colombia. After the attack, Natalia wore masks of silicon as part of her treatment for several years to reshape her face. The second feature comprises of readers interacting with the book through the Blippar app by taking their own photos and placing Natalia Ponce's mask in front of their faces. They are invited to post their photos wearing the silicon mask on social media with the hashtag #thelastmask to show support to survivors of acid attacks (Rattapallax "Natalia Ponce De Leon Foundation's The Last Mask"). The third feature allows readers to take a selfie with Priya and Sahas. In the image there is a speech balloon with the words: "I stand with Priya," which readers are also invited to post on social media. Therefore, through these three devices, augmented reality works to make the experience of readers more active and immediate. The augmented reality has the potential to become a model of representational and creative engagement that bring viewers closer to the process of survival experienced by survivors.

The image of the silicon mask summarizes the aesthetic model of disability that I propose. The mask was worn by the Colombian acid-attack survivor Natalia Ponce as part of her recovery process. Then it becomes a symbol of survivors' struggle and overcoming, which is used by people around the world through a mobile application to make a statement against acid attacks. This entire process shows how cultural, social, medical, and the artistic dimensions of acid attacks are interconnected.

There is a strong presence of religious elements in *Priya's Mirror*, which is one of the main characteristics of acid aesthetic. Priya's imagery is that of a Hindu Goddess and appeals to all those readers who are acquainted with the myths and iconography of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses that are found quite often not just in the private domain but also in the public sphere in India. According to Ram Devineni:

> In India, Hinduism and its iconography are ever-present. The image of the Goddess Durga astride a tiger can be found in homes, businesses and places of worship across the nation. Our project references and transforms this image through our iconic image of Priya sitting on a tiger — Priya conquering her fears. Priya is a survivor of rape and is the catalyst for change in our comic book. Our goal is to make the image of Priya on the tiger a powerful symbol for fighting gender-based violence. ("Priya's Shakti Augmented Reality Street Art")

The description of Priya suggests she is an *avatāra* of Goddess Durgā, albeit in a modern context due to her iconography. It is a perfect symbiosis between traditional religious and mythological iconography and modernity. Priya's comic books simultaneously update Hindu mythology to a modern context and embed the fight of women against patriarchal oppression with a divine, religious, and spiritual dimension.[54] As part of Priya's divine characterization, she has a specific mantra, which was given to her in *Priya's Shakti,* and also a sacred animal vehicle, which is the same as Goddess Durgā's.[55]

Saurav Mohapatra considers the iconography of super-hero rebirth across comic books and graphic novels. Drawing from the theory of *karma* (action) and *saṃsāra* (cycle of rebirths) as described in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Mohapatra explains that "the universe that contains the hero(es)

[54] The fact that a gang-rape survivor who also belongs to a lower economic class is accepted by the same society that humiliated her through a depiction borrowed in large part from the iconography of a Hindu Goddess shows the criticism of the authors against a discriminatory society. However, it is my belief that they do this by means of sanskritization. According to Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas, "Sanskritization is the process by which a "low" Hindu caste, or tribal or other groups, changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, 'twice born' caste" (6). In other words, the way sanskritization is depicted in *Priya's Shakti* is not just to say that every girl and woman is a Goddess, but that they can only be respected by becoming a Hindu Goddess. This aspect of Priya is attenuated in *Priya's Mirror* since the character Rafi, apparently a Muslim, respects Anjali for her humanity, not for her divinity.

[55] Goddes Durgā is one of the forms of Goddess Pārvatī.

itself is reborn and bound by the illusion (*māyā*)[56] of the parameters of their existence" (122). Some changes in the characterization of Priya could suggest that in *Priya's Mirror* the reader encounters a heroine who is reborn. Her rebirth would explain the traumatic dream, already discussed here, as her *saṃskāra* (संस्कार).[57] Moreover, despite the ideal of *ahiṃsā* and the presence of the Gods, Priya is less passive and less influenced by the Gods or Sāhas.

Another facet of non-violence in Devineni's and Vohra's graphic novel is itself a main characteristic of acid aesthetic – the mirror. In the next chapter I will discuss how survivors themselves explore the iconography of the mirror in their self-portraits, but here I focus on the mirror as a tool for conflation while being an instrument of non-violence. In the sequel, the mirror, differently from the film *Newborns*, is an actual object that becomes Priya's second weapon. Her first weapon – the mantra – already pointed to *ahiṃsā* since this weapon is not used to hurt anyone, but to change peoples' mindsets. Likewise, the mirror is a non-violent weapon in the sense that it cannot cause physical harm. A looking at the Mirror of Love causes people to see their true nature, their qualities, and capabilities. Although mirrors, as a common object,[58] are used to reflect people's physical appearance, this magic mirror helps survivors to see beyond their scars.

The depiction of survival builds on major religious references in the graphic novel. When Kusum sees her brothers attacking Prem, she prayed intensively to God Śiva. From Mount Kailāśa,

[56] Edward Domick in his article "On Māyā" discusses the various interpretations that the notion of *māyā* presents in the different Hindu philosophical schools. In the West it is common to see the translation of this term as illusion, that is, something that is not true. However, Domick rejects this interpretation. He demonstrates how the Gaudya Vaiṣṇavas define the term *māyā* as the *śakti* or power of the deity. Therefore, *māyā* is true manifestations of the deity. This interpretation is not exclusive to Gaudya Vaiṣṇavas, but is adopted by all Vaiṣṇava schools. At the same time that *māyā* is part of the deity, she does not exhaust it. This ambiguous relation which at the same time demonstrates the identity and difference is called *bhedabheda* and is at the basis of the relation of all that we perceive as oppositions (524). Also according to the Vaiṣṇava philosophical school, *māyā* would be the self-limiting power of the deity. It is the aspect of the power of the deity that allows us to know it, which allows the relation between finite and infinite to be established, even if not fully understood. Therefore, *māyā* should not be understood as an illusion, but as modes of being of the deity (526).

[57] *saṃskāras* are mental impressions, recollections, or psychological imprints from previous lives.

[58] Even magic mirrors in fairy tales, such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, reflect physical beauty.

he heard her prayers and decided to intervene by drinking the acid from Prem's body. This passage is certainly influenced by the myth of *samudra manthana* (the churning of the ocean).[59] In *Priya's Mirror*, Śiva gave Prem the boon of survival by drinking the acid from his body. Śiva, however, states that although the acid would not kill Prem, the effect of it could not be avoided. He could be saved only by his own choice between forgiveness and revenge.

Social justice gains centrality as a general characteristic of acid aesthetic in *Priya's Mirror* compared to the previous graphic novel. In *Priya's Shakti*, Priya was abandoned by all forms of legal apparatus and had to rely only on the help of the Gods. In *Priya's Mirror*, despite the presence of the Gods, social justice is also restored through the legal system. The acid-attack survivor Anjali, after establishing an art center and café, is responsible for that: "Priya, do you know that after I got my law degree, we fought a case together? Selling acid is now illegal" (Devineni and Vohra 35). This passage draws on the real life of the acid-attack survivor Laxmi who presented a petition to the Supreme Court of India to control the sale of acid, and with the Sheroes Hangout Café, where most of the workers are acid-attack survivors. The graphic novel portrays acid-attack survivors as agents of change without resorting to divine forces. Survivors restore the trust in the Indian judicial system.

The Mirror of Love Café becomes a place where survivors develop their potential, their sense of community, and their contribution to society at large. Their happiness is depicted in conjunction with ideals of social acceptance and skill development. For instance, while Priya is

[59] The myth begins with the sage Durvasa feeling offended by the way the God Indra greeted him and was careless with the garland the sage had given him. As a consequence of this event, Durvasa curses that Indra and all the other Gods would lose their power and strength. After this event, the *Devas* (Gods) are defeated in the battle against the *Asuras*. Advised by Viṣṇu, the Devas sought a diplomatic solution. They allied with the *Asuras* in order to churn the ocean of milk to obtain the nectar of immortality (*amṛta*). The *samudra manthana* released several things into the ocean; one of them was a lethal poison called *halāhala*. Since the poison could destroy all creation, the Gods approached Śiva for help. He consumed the poison, which was impeded by Parvatī to flow in Śiva's body. Instead, it accumulated in his neck. Hence one of his names is *Nilkantha* (The one with the blue throat) (Chaturvedi 23-28).

visiting the café, one survivor observes that "People have been hearing about the café from everywhere and dropping in," while another states: I never knew I liked business so much!" (Devineni and Vohra 35). The survivor's shared enterprise embodies a version of well-being. Influenced by Aristotle's concept of eudaemonia, Antonella Fave affirms that the well-being of those who have to cope daily with extraordinary circumstances derives not only from the cultivation of personal resources and strengths but also from the pursuit of collective values, leading individuals to actively contribute to the well-being of their community (90-91). There is a direct relationship between these forms of well-being and happiness, since Dan Goldman chose to depict the acid-attack survivors smiling whenever they were engaged in contributing to society and dedicating to their self-growth.

In the *conflative* aesthetic, authors take credit for the production rather than sharing that credit with survivors, an approach that raises ethical questions that must be considered as aspects of the aesthetic itself. It is a preoccupation of the authors, Ram Devineni and Paromita Vohra, not only to represent acid-attack survivors, but also to let them speak for themselves. The authors provide short videos through the augmented reality in which survivors recount their experience. However, while the authors provide a list of credits at the end of the graphic novel, the names of the survivors appear only in the "special thanks" section alongside with names such as Alok Dixit, the founder of Chhanv Foundation, who does not appear in any video embedded in the graphic novel. Thanking rather than crediting might suggest that the survivors did not receive any honorarium, although the graphic novel was financed by the "World Bank's WEvolve Global Initiative, which is aimed at changing attitudes and behaviors that lead to gender inequities, including gender violence" (Devineni and Vohra 38). Moreover, the graphic novel was initially supported by the TFI Media Fund and the Ford Foundation. Another aspect of the authors' ethics

is their targeted audience. Although there is a suggestion that the graphic novel places acid attacks as a global issue by adding the character inspired by Natalia Ponce de León, the setting of the graphic novel is still India and the authors are Indians. It is surprising, however, as I previously mentioned, that the graphic novel is translated into so many European languages, but appears in only one Indian language. This attitude of seeking attention from the West seems to speak more about the authors' self-promotion than the real objective of the book, which is to bring awareness about gender-based violence among its Indian readers, an approach at odds with the street art done in the Indian streets, and the project of distributing the graphic novels in rural schools in India (Shrivastava 213). In fact the mural activism by Devineni seems to equate to Megha Ramaswamy's street protests as a way to compensate for the shortcomings of their respective artworks.

Conclusion

Megha Ramaswami, Ram Devineni, and Paromita Vohra, like those artists discussed in the previous chapter, also engage with acid-attack survivors through acid disfigurement art with the objective of bringing awareness to their audience on the issue concerning acid attacks in India and the life of survivors. Acid-attack survivors also collaborate with these artists with the intention of promoting social justice and gender equality in society. In contrast to the *disfigurative* aesthetic, these artists have a preoccupation with discussing other forms of gender-based violence alongside acid attacks. Other forms of gender-based violence are either explicitly depicted or implied through narrative. This aesthetic choice of not limiting these representations to acid attacks call for solidarity among survivors of different forms of violence against women. Although the *conflative* aesthetic tend to dive deeper into the social and inner conflicts experienced by acid-attack

survivors, it also does not clearly differentiate the different forms of violence against women, their long term implications for the survivors, or how these distinct types of survivors are related in the context of the artwork. Differently from the *disfigurative* aesthetic, these representations depict acid-attack survivors in a more empowered manner, although, they can have less centrality and agency than characters that represent the other forms of gender-based violence. Despite the intent to seek social justice for acid-attack survivors, the focus is somewhat lost due to the conflation. The *conflative* aesthetic requires a deeper engagement by viewers and readers. In *Newborns*, Ramaswamy disrupts common notions and assumptions regarding the gaze in order to seek viewers' engagement. In *Priya's Mirror*, Ram Devineni and Paromita Vohra adapt augmented reality to expand readers' insight into the issue of acid attacks. In terms of the artists' ethics, actual survivors are credited for their participation in these artworks, even if they are not duly compensated.

4. ACID AESHEIC:

THE REFIGURATIVE CATEGORY

The *refigurative* acid aesthetics, like the two previous categories, very often portrays a narrative of overcoming. However, it does so in a more nuanced and fragmented manner. In other words, nuanced because it decentralizes the face and fragmented because these artists resist a linear visual narrative, preferring structures of interruption, memory, and iteration. By nuancing and fragmenting, the focus is not necessarily on the starting and ending points of this narrative, but on a series of smaller and more ordinary events that happen along this narrative arc. Moreover, depending on the medium through which the *refigurative* aesthetics is conveyed, the disfigurement as the starting point is implicit through the survivors' scars. The ending point might be naturally postponed because it is being constantly fed with new representations in a continuous enlargement or transformation of the narrative.

The *refigurative* aesthetic is possibly the one that demands the most engagement from readers and viewers exactly because its nuances disrupt stereotypes of victimization or exotism of the survivors, thus the name of the category suggesting the need to figure survivors again or anew. This aesthetic category, besides the specifics of what becoming an acid-attack survivor means, seeks to place survivors in an everyday life narrative, exploring the different dimensions of survivors' humanity in society. These representations compel viewers and readers to see survivors not just as active members of society but also as contributors to a better society.

Regarding the general aspects of acid aesthetics, some elements gain a renovated presence, others remain more constant. For example, given that the emphasis of the *refigurative* acid aesthetics is on survivors as agents, religious elements can be either complicated or almost

completely dropped from representations. On the other hand, in these representations social justice becomes a call for legal justice as well as social acceptance and recognition. In addition to these two characteristics, the mirror can be an explicit or implicit object, such as the lenses of the camera as discussed in the previous chapter. At times, the mirror reaffirms the survivors' pain and suffering, but it often conveys acceptance and overcoming. Furthermore, the smile gains a central role in *refigurative* representations as self-realization. Finally, artists demonstrate more ethical commitment to survivors than in previous categories.

Similarly to the *conflative* category, some *refigurative* representations can also illustrate female solidarity. However, in the *refigurative* mode, acid-attack survivors are neither the symbolic materialization of all forms of violence against women due to the dramatical element of their scars nor are they secondary and passive characters in comparison to those who represent other gender-based forms of violence. In these representations, acid-attack survivors are equally agents of transformation. The differences between these women are either thoroughly explored in the artwork or implied by social contexts.

In the following pages I will analyze Rahul Saharan's series of photographs that later composed the *Bello* calendar (2015) with the addition of two photographs taken respectively by Pascal Mannaerts and Surabhi Jaiswal. The calendar was launched by the Chhanv Foundation. In addition, I will analyze Adeeb Rais's short film *Aunty ji* (2018), and a selection of survivors' selfies, which were posted on their personal Facebook accounts.

Neither Victims Nor Heroes

Disability theory offers some frames through which to understand the representation of acid-attack survivors, and particularly addresses the problematic roles into which survivors are ascribed. Some of the most common stereotypes conveyed by representations of disabled people are: Victim, villains child-like, and hero (Pound 2008; Johnstone, 2012; Apelmo, 2016; Okuyama, 2020).With few exceptions, disabled people are largely missing from popular mainstream media globally. If they happen to be included, they are frequently represented as victims, people who should be pitied, heroes, superhumans to be admired, villains, people who should be disliked, or who are child-like, people who are innocent and immature, especially in matters of sexuality. These images support Jack A. Nelson's (2003) "six stereotypes" of disabled people (victims, heroes, threats, people unable to adjust, people to be cared for, and people who should not have survived). The trickiest stereotype is, however, the heroic due to its supposedly positive nature.

Although a hero is a person noted for courageous acts or nobility of character, when this term is used to describe disabled/disfigured people as "supercrip" or "disabled hero," it can overshadow their struggle as well as perpetuate some biases (Berger 2004; Hardin and Hardin 2004; Swartz and Watermeyer 2008; Peers 2009). An example of this is the prevalence of the word "despite" in characterization of disabled athletes as heroes in the sports media. Apelmo explains the use of this preposition as follows:

> Despite his/her impairment, the hero manages to attain something that would not attract attention if the person in question did not have an impairment, or, in some cases, something that is rare and difficult but is seen as an even greater achievement if it is performed by a person with an impairment. (13)

The greater achievement of the disabled heroes manifests itself in different ways. For example, Celia Cain, in studying the relationship between music and disability, identifies the fact that disabled musicians tend to hide their disabilities because, when recognized, their lives are often seen in terms of an imaginary ability to overcome a personal tragedy. This attitude, according to Cain, is attributed to "the cliché that 'great art requires great sacrifice'" (747). Moreover, the disabled heroes make the able-bodied people feel safe and secure, since they demonstrate that it is possible to take control over their body. In other words, people with disabilities who are perceived as heroes become role models more for the able-bodied than for themselves, since they do not have role models; they have to become role models. And in this process, they are further alienated or isolated by their disabilities or disfiguration. This role model, however, serves non-disabled people, strengthening the idea of the Other. I do not mean that acid-attack survivors' emotional strength to deal with their psychological trauma and constant social ostracism should not be acknowledged. After all, they were victims of a horrendous crime and had to reinvent themselves with the new identity that was shaped by this crime. Yet, an admiration of their adaptations to physical challenges can turn into an exaggerated expectation of consistent, permanent super heroic capacities, expectations that exceed the parameters of the human. The struggle, the emotional cost, the physical effort, all these are subsumed under the expectation of heroism. In order to rethink the stereotypical images previously mentioned, Yoshiko Okuyama states that "What we need instead are authentic representations of disabled individuals who are simply living their normal lives. Authentication is necessary to break down such stereotypes and help promote acceptance of people with differences (34)." Breaking down stereotypes is precisely what Rahul Saharan, Pascal Mannaerts, and Surabhi Jaiswal portray in their series of photographs of acid-attack survivors.

Rahul Saharan, the photographer whose work is most prevalent in the *Bello* calendar,[60] is based in Delhi and portrays acid-attack survivors by depicting them as people with ordinary goals. This ordinariness is precisely what makes his series of photographs an example of *refigurative* aesthetics. Saharan, in collaboration with a Mumbai-based photographer, Surabhi Jaiswal, and a Belgian photographer, Pascal Mannaerts, selected twelve photographs that depicted acid-attack survivors' dreams and goals to compose the *Bello* calendar, published in 2015 by the Chhanv Foundation. Planned to be launched on International Women's Day, the calendar has a unique chronological arrangement that goes from March 2015 to February 2016, differently from most Western calendars that are arranged from January to December of the same year. Their calendar, then, spans the year between two International Woman's Days rather than following a Julian calendar. Besides this unique arrangement and most important is the fact that these photographs, through the use of simple techniques, escape stereotypes of disabled/disfigured people by presenting acid-attack survivors enjoying their lives and suggesting their dreams and goals to the viewers.

The series of photographs cover three main topics: Celebration of womanhood, beauty, and survivors' dreams. The photographs address the celebration of womanhood, female solidarity, inner beauty through the act of smiling, and participation of women as contributors to society at large (See appendix C).

[60] An interesting fact about the release of the calendar is its name. During my interview with Alok Dixit, one of the founders of the Chhanv Foundation, I enquired about the title of the calendar. He told me that *bello* was the Italian word for beauty (literally meaning "the beautiful"). What intrigues me is that in Italian the word *bello* is an adjective in its masculine and nominalized form. So, why choose this word when in Italian itself there is the noun *belleza*; the exact translation of the noun "beauty"? Also, why not use the equivalent word from any Indian language? Is it an attempt to internationalize the issue of acid attacks by the NGO? Is this a hint that the NGO is catering to a Western audience? Unfortunately, at this point these questions cannot be answered. What is certain is that the title of the calendar points to a critique of standards of beauty, as discussed earlier.

Since acid attacks are a gender-based form of crime that targets mainly women as a way to impose patriarchal norms, celebrating womanhood (through a disfigured body) and strengthening it through ties of solidarity is an act of resistance. Moreover, it is an act of passive resistance distinct from notions of Gandhian *ahiṃsa* (non-violence). In the first photograph of the calendar, Roopa,[61] Soniya, and Ritu, dressed in clothes made by Roopa, play together with soap bubbles in a private domain, contrasting with the stereotypical perception that acid-attack survivors, due to their disfigurement, live a life of sadness. This positive representation of survivors is further developed in the fourth photograph, in which Ritu enjoys herself in the public domain, also contrasting with the common idea that survivors should live a life of reclusion. It is important to highlight that I do not mean that acid-attack survivors do not face moments of sadness, pain, and suffering, otherwise, I would be creating another stereotype, the one of the forever happy survivor. What I want to convey is that, acid-attack survivors are generally imagined by non-disfigured people as victims and pitiful beings, when in reality, they also experience moments of happiness and cheerfulness like any other person. It is the ordinariness of these images that are so meaningful and powerful. The ordinariness of these photographs is also seen in the simplicity of the settings, clothes, and techniques used. The third photograph, for example, shows Soniya, who is a beautician, attending to a client. The solidarity among women shifts from the members of the acid-attack survivors' community to the solidarity between non-disfigured and disfigured women. This entire dynamic, as women while disfigured not in spite of it female disfigured self to participating of solidarity among women, in which participants are disfigured and non-disfigured showcase a non-violent resistance to patriarchal structures that propelled acid attacks on these survivors.

[61] Although in the calendar, Roopa's name is spelled "Rupa." I will use the spelling that she uses in her Facebook profile.

This portrayal is directly linked to *refigurative* acid aesthetics. The contribution of acid-attack survivors to society at large through the depiction of their professional goals is a form of social inclusion that has a direct benefit to their well-being. According to Debra Harley, social inclusion "provides a starting point in reframing how society constructs and views disability." Social inclusion makes the focus move away from viewing disabled people as helpless and dependent toward being self-advocates (211). While Harley understands social inclusion as being rights-based, Andrew Marcum sees is as humanity-based. I understand both theories as being mutually complimentary. In Marcum's view: "The bodies of the disabled become tools for challenging social constructs that equate disability with deficit and justify oppressive policies and practices. In using their bodily difference as an instrument to challenge oppression, they are staking a claim to inclusion" (152). This inclusion is, however, not based on sameness, but on the inherent dignity and value of their difference. It is precisely because of survivors' contributions to society at large and their consequent inclusion that Rahul Saharan and Surabhi Jaiswal depict their goals and professional dreams. Laxmi is depicted as a model, Soniya as a beautician, Neetu as a singer, Roopa as a fashion designer, Rajwant as a photographer, Geeta as a knitter, and Gita as a chef. Besides these survivors, Sonan and Chanchal wanted to give continuity to their studies and Dolly wanted to become a doctor. At the time of my interview with Dolly, when she was only sixteen years old, she wanted to be a dancer, not a doctor anymore. The change of goals due to the indecisions that are natural to her age might explain the past tense used to describe her dreams. Being able to be an agent of transformation through their contribution to society refigures common stereotypes of disfigured/disabled persons as pitiful and victims into a positive one.

These photographs are intersectional. Although not always clear to most viewers, these photographs present some unique features: The religious and caste diversity, the display of

multiple disabilities per individual, and the hidden disfigurement. While in most series of photographs of acid attacks there is an emphasis on Hindu survivors with some occasional photographs of Muslim women, in this series, Sahran depicted Rajwant Kaur, a Sikh survivor. The depiction of survivors from different religious background reinforces the fact that acid attacks are not religion-based as many people believe. Secondly, the portrayal of Sonan and Chanchal brings two elements to this discussion: Caste and multiple disabilities. Sonan and Chanchal were sisters and members of the Dalit community.[62] Sonan, who was born blind, was sleeping next to Chanchal when her sister, the main target, was attacked. With acid spilling on her, she became herself also a survivor. Chanchal and Sonan were attacked on October 21st, 2012 by four male assailants from the higher caste of Yadav who had been demanding that Chanchal have sexual relationships with them.[63] In an interview, Chanchal explains: "Two of them held my hands and the other two intruders poured almost a litre of acid on my face. As I writhed in agony, they laughed at me. One of them said: 'Now you see we do whatever we say'" (Krishna, "Nobody Wants to Help us Because We Are Dalits"). Chanchal, who was nineteen-years old at the time of the attack, died in 2017, but not before venting her complaints about the Indian legal system and how they treat those who belong to Dalit communities. When asked why she had not reported the assailants' sexual harassment to the police prior to the attack, she stated: "We thought what will the police do? We are from the lower caste and are always silenced. What can we do? We didn't officially say anything, I didn't imagine something so gruesome would happen to me."[64] In this same press conference, Chanchal stated that she wants the highest level of legal punishment for her attackers,

[62] The word Dalit (दलित) means "broken," "oppressed," and is basically a caste defined in the Indian Constitution under Article 341, listed as the Scheduled Castes.
[63] VideoVolunteers, "Rise to Support Acid Attack Survivor, Chanchal." *YouTube*. 11 Feb. 2013. Web. 10 Jan. 2021. < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oBpqgFsOfY&feature=emb_title>
[64] VideoVolunteers, "Chanchal's Statement at Press Conference, Patna, Bihar." YouTube. 8 Mar. 2013. Web. 10 Jan. 2021 < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZBh3jmiPwo>

debunking representations of survivors' passivity that does not hold the judicial system of India accountable for their situation. Still about the judicial system, she said:

> I have been told that the badi adalat (Supreme Court) has ordered compensation and free medical treatment for acid victims like me. This has rekindled the hope in my heart. If my face can be restored, this dalit ki beti (daughter of a Dalit) still has it in her to make something of her shattered life. Jab tak saans hai, tab tak aas hai (Till there's life, there's hope). But the sarkar (government) has not done much for me so far. We have just returned from Delhi's Safdarjung Hospital after receiving treatment for some complications in my neck. The doctors there told me I have 90 per cent burns on my face. But we are left with no money for further treatment. (Krishna, "Nobody Wants to Help us Because We Are Dalits")

In her statement, Chanchal not only criticizes the government for its inefficiency in helping acid-attack survivors, especially a Dalit, but also points to her need of treatment to improve her quality of life. This aspect of survivors' lives is reflected in Saharan's photograph in which she is depicted with her cervical collar as well as plastic tubes to keep her nostrils from closing (a medical tool also seen in the photograph of Dolly). The depiction of these tools used in Chanchal's and Dolly's treatment showcase the aesthetic model of disability studies I propose in which the medical, social, cultural, and aesthetic aspects of the disfigurement/disability are intertwined. With proper treatment and the government's financial support, Chanchal believed she could continue her studies, graduate as a computer engineer, and contribute to society.

The depiction of hidden disfigurement showcases the activism of the acid-attack survivor community. The photograph of Sonan not only depicts a hidden disfigurement, but also multiple disabilities, which is something unique in acid aesthetics. By multiple disabilities I mean the

presence of concomitant disabilities/impairments in the same individual. Although the viewer can notice Sonan's blindness because her iris is white in appearance, her disfigurement, mainly on her right arm is not easily noticed. Her photograph side by side with those of survivor's with facial disfigurement depicts her choice in being identified as an acid-attack survivor and being seen as a member of this community. Moreover, her photograph disrupts the centrality of facial disfigurement in the portrayal of acid-attack survivors, giving more complexity to acid disfigurement art, the subcategory of disability art I describe in the dissertation's introduction

The absence of religious elements allows for a focus on the materiality of the disfigured bodies. Differently from other representations previously analyzed that either associated survivors' images with that of Gods/Goddesses, were populated with external sacred iconography, or were loaded with philosophical/mythological narratives, this series of photographs allows viewers to see the humanity of survivors. Besides the implicit presence of religious diversity discussed before, a sacred thread is seen tied around Ritu's wrist, and the *māng ka sindūr* (मांग का सिंदूर)[65] in Gita's upper forehead. These elements precede the photograph rather than being introduced into the image for a rhetorical purpose or to underscored religious diversity difference. The women embody their spiritual worlds rather than merely representing them.

The mirror, a common element in acid aesthetics, is represented in these photographs metaphorically. This metaphor is illustrated mainly by the photographs of Rajwant and Soniya. Although all these survivors are photographed by the lenses of the camera and are being contemplated by the viewers, who can certainly be considered as a form of mirror, Rajwant points

[65] *Sindūr* is a red pigment traditionally applied at the beginning or completely along the parting-line of a woman's hair (*māng*) or as a dot on the forehead as a mark of a married woman in Hinduism.

her camera at us, and Soniya is the mirror of her client. They show us different possibilities of existence and, above all, of beauty.

In fact, the smile that is seen in almost every photograph is the survivors' statement on beauty, which will be more thoroughly explored in the next section. In sum, survivors' smile is the result of a long inner process of exploration of their disfigurement and their acceptance as acid-attack survivors. Their happy disfigured bodies question ideals and standards of beauty based on physical appearance and body symmetry. Beauty, for them, is an ethical process of being a good person and citizen, which derives from their desire to be an agent of transformation in society.

Ethics, in the context of my research, means being responsible to the subject represented, representing the subjects' own ideas or as close as possible, without benefiting from them. Regarding the ethics of the artists, Rahul Saharan, Surabhi Jaiswal, and Pascal Mannaerts did not financially profit from these photographs, since this work was done on a voluntary basis, neither were survivors directly paid for their participation. The profit from the sales of the calendar was received by Chhanv Foundation. Although we tend to think that the NGO will share the profit with the survivors or the profits will be used to pay their salaries for their work in the café, there is no way to confirm that. The fact that the names of survivors are displayed in a bigger font than the names of the photographers, however, speaks for the centrality of survivors, instead of the photographers themselves.

In summary, the series of photographs taken by Rahul Saharan, Surabhi Jaiswal, and Pascal Mannaerts, that composed the *Bello* calendar, is representative of the *refigurative* category of acid aesthetics because it portrays acid-attack survivors outside common stereotypes, such as victims and heroes. These photographs seek to depict the ordinariness of the life of survivors to disrupt pre-conceived notions of viewers about disfigured people. These representations force viewers to

rethink their knowledge and values regarding those possibly different from them, beauty being one of these values. The photographers, through the simplicity of their techniques and settings, place an emphasis on the sitters. Moreover, they disrupt the centrality of facial disfigurement by photographing survivors whose disfigurement is not easily apparent. The emphasis on survivors, more than on the artists themselves, is also shown in the highlighted display of survivors' names in comparison with the artists'.

Disfiguring Selfies

In the following pages I analyze digital photographs, especially selfies[66] and compositions created by the survivors, as artworks that illustrate the *refigurative* aesthetic. Most of the survivors who identify as acid attack fighters or anti-acid attacks activists created social media profiles after the attacks and after engaging with senior survivors. Therefore, their timeline does not show a journey from a non-disfigured person to a post-acid attack self-acceptance as most of the representations previously analyzed depict. Their photographs show the development of these women as survivors, activists, citizens, and individuals. Survivors' photographs are based on the idea of community-building through a performative activist narrative while also participating in a global selfie aesthetic. Survivors' activism is further enriched by photographs of daily life and ordinary activities. Even though some people might think that selfies are not necessarily empowering because they operate according to normative scripts, these are self-representations of subjects that are often not expected to be visually depicted. Therefore, their self-representations

[66] Selfies can be defined as "a photographic practice of self-portraiture with the conflation of photographer and subject" (Humphreys 97), whose material product is not just created, but also circulated through a non-human structure (Helfand, 2019). They also entail the subject of the photograph holding the camera or cellphone with his/her hand or selfie stick, instead of using the camera timer.

disrupt a context of normative beauty and selfie aesthetics, questioning and expanding it. In order to advocate for social justice for acid-attack survivors, they explore the visibility of their own scarred face mainly on Facebook and Instagram. I perceived a few trends in their selfies that illustrate the *refigurative* aesthetic: (i) photos that equate beauty with happiness emphasizing their smiles, (ii) collages that compare their bodies before and after the attack and photos that represent the struggles experienced by survivors, (iii) photos that showcase structures of support for self-acceptance, and (iv) photographs of daily routine or ordinary activities.

Survivors' collaborations with photographers do not mean that they agree with how they are being represented. During my interview with Ritu, for example, I showed her Gera's photographs and she asked me to send one of them to her. When I showed another photograph he took of her and asked her if she also wanted that, she said she did not want that because she had not liked it. Their agency is not minimized by being sitters of photographers. They cooperate with them because, in their view, the photographers are tools to "spread their cause." This attitude means that they collaborate in raising consciousness about acid attacks, but not in the aesthetic representation. This practice also explains the fact that, even though they were not being paid for the exploitation of their facial image nor did they receive a percentage of the profit Gera makes with their photographs, they still agreed to be photographed by him. Before diving into the analysis of survivors' photographs I will give a brief overview on recent discussion on disability, media, and self-representation.

The notion of self-portraiture is not new to the digital age, as Sanchita et al remark (2). From the earliest days of the art form, painters have produced self-portraits. However, with the advent of the digital camera, something that only the upper class could afford, and later, with the popularization of photo studios, the middle class, now can also be afforded by many individuals

that comprise the lower class. Moreover, the new technology allows the operator to take as many photos as needed to perfect the image or realize a particular aesthetic intention. Although, as mentioned in the first chapter, not all Indians possess smart phones or digital cameras, this new technology certainly contributes to the democratization of photography. It is not only that people can more commonly afford being photographed, but they can also take their own photos and retake them until they are satisfied with the outcome. Combined with social media, selfies simultaneously promote a sense of individuality and the integration of these individuals into a global community. Selfies represent the story of an individual who reclaims her agency and can use these images for social purposes. For examples, survivors can use social media to post their selfies with the purpose motivating others to join their cause. In fact, Senft and Baym's definition of selfie is particularly useful in the context of this work: "a selfie is a photographic object that initiates the transmission of human feeling in the form of a relationship (between photographer and photographed, between image and filtering software, between viewer and viewed, between individuals circulating images, between users and social software architectures, etc." (1589). As Senft and Baym observe, this definition emphasizes the "emotional involvement between the selfie and its user and impact of the same" (2).

Affect or emotional involvement as an implicit element of aesthetics plays a crucial role in the empowerment of disabled/disfigured people through selfies. This emotional involvement mediates through the advocacy for the representation of non-normative bodies, allowing the creation of aesthetic communities and allyships that disrupt contemporary beauty standards. What Jacob J. Climo (2001) and Aya Yadlin-Segal (2019) call "community of affect" is encompassed by what I call "aesthetic community," as discussed in the introduction. An aesthetic community in the context of my research is a socio-political community composed of acid-attack survivors that

embrace non-disfigured allies and that, through art and activism, seeks to achieve cultural, social, and political change. According to Aya Yadlin-Segal, selfies can become "a communicative medium that reveal the multiple dimensions of marginality experienced by individuals with physical disability (37). As a photograph that one has taken of oneself and frequently posted on social media platforms, it is infused with social, cultural, and political relevance. Especially when taken by members of historically marginalized groups, these photographs can serve educational purposes to show us how to be more considerate of "others" (Warfield, 2018). This practice helps users and viewers who have similar experiences negate body-shaming practices and social taboos (Tiidenberg, 2014). Therefore, selfies empower marginalized groups such as acid-attack survivors.

Survivors' photographs become a form of activism that not only disrupts pre-conceived notions of non-normative bodies, but also challenge government policies and cultural misconceptions through the sharing of their perspective. In this cultural and social context, the disfigured smile becomes a subversive symbol. Culture theorists such as Hand (2017) and Rubenstein and Sluis (2008) have pointed out that the dynamic circulation of screen-based digital images changes our visual perception in ways that are much more dependent on the understanding of communicative flows and streams than on seeing pictures on social media as isolated media texts and single images. While I single out specific images from survivors' Facebook pages as examples, I also recognize that these are part of social media practices that are highly dynamic and intertextual. In the case of survivors, the narrative of what it means to be a survivor of a specific crime – acid attack -, is intertwined with a subversive narrative of being a disfigured girl or woman in a society that imposes body-normativity through cultural practices.

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motivating others to join their cause. In fact, Senft and Baym's definition of selfie is particularly useful in the context of this work: "a selfie is a photographic object that initiates the transmission of human feeling in the form of a relationship (between photographer and photographed, between image and filtering software, between viewer and viewed, between individuals circulating images, between users and social software architectures, etc." (1589). As Senft and Baym observe, this definition emphasizes the "emotional involvement between the selfie and its user and impact of the same" (2).

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"My Beauty is My Smile"

Survivors make a socio-political statement in which they question dominant cultural assumptions about physical beauty. On 18th November 2018 the official Facebook page of Sheroes Hangout posted a photo of Geeta with the caption "My Beauty Is My Smile." This idea is widespread among survivors. Their smile actually points to their emotional state – happiness – and inner values, such as goodness or solidarity, which in turn become the representation of their beauty. Therefore, their idea of beauty points to an inner form of it.

Guided by captions, the exploration of the disfigured faces in selfies posted in social media challenges the idea of beauty as limited to the physical appearance. Current notions of beauty in

India comprises of a fair skinned and able-bodied persons. Although the issue of colorism has been thoroughly discussed by scholars in India, matters of symmetry and able bodies are still rarely discussed in relation to social media and photography, which makes the visual statements of acid-attack survivors even more remarkable. [68]

Fig. 47 - Ritu Saini – 22 January 2018
" मुझे खुशी हो रही है ये बताते हुए की मैं अच्छी फ़ोटो ले सकती हूं क्यो की इस फोटो में हम ने अपना खुद का ही फ़ोटो शूट किया है किसी को मेरी फ़ोटो पसंद हो या न हो मुझे तो बहुत पसंद है मेरी स्माइल मेरा फेस ओर मेरा फ़ोटो शूट भी!"[69]
(Reproduced with permission of Ritu Saini)

Very often the captions of survivors' photographs frame viewers' understanding of these images because captions "may go beyond simple explanation to lead one deeply into the picture to point out an obscure feature" (Bradshaw and Hahn 133). Ritu's selfies are frequently accompanied by the word "smile" either as a caption or as a hashtag. She participated in a fashion show on 22 February 2018. While she was aware of being photographed during the event, she took

[68] Cf.: Parameswara and Cardoza, 2009; Nadeem, 2014; Mishra, 2015; Sims and Hirudayaraj, 2015; Utley and Darity, 2016.
[69] The original spelling of the captions written by survivors in both Hindi and English was preserved.

her selfie (intentionally in diagonal) and posted it on Facebook with the following caption: “I am happy to say that I can take a good photo of myself because I did my own photo shoot. It does not matter if somebody likes my photo or not. I like it a lot; my smile, my face, and my photo shoot too!” (free translation). More than being proud of taking part in a fashion show, she was proud of her skills as a photographer and took the chance to express how much she liked her disfigured face, in particular her smile. Despite the makeup, clothes and jewelry made by designers, it was her face, her smile, and her skills as a photographer that she emphasized.

Fig. 48 - Ritu Saini – 6 August 2018
😊
#smile
@ritusaa
(Reproduced with permission of Ritu Saini)

Although the smile in disability studies can be considered as an outward sign of a psychological defense (for themselves and for the other) against what some scholars have considered the burdens of handicap (Sinason, 1992; Lloyd, 2008), survivors’ posts demonstrate

that, for them, the smile is the result of a process of acceptance and subversion of standards of beauty and stereotypes of disability. Moreover, accounting for context is crucial: their social media timelines are not composed only of happy and smiley images. They do create posts in which they vent their complaints about the government, the patriarchal structures embedded in their culture, etc. For example, after Roshni was found deceased, they all pressured the police to investigate the case through posts on social media. In the next photograph, Ritu has her hair covered and, although her face shows a more somber expression contrasted with the enthusiastic smile from the previous photo, she guides the perception of the viewer to understand the happiness in her face by adding an emoji of a smiley face, followed by the hashtag #smile and her name with the acronym for Stop Acid Attacks - "@ritusaa." The acronym associated with the hashtag implies a long process of refiguring her identity through the disfigurement. As much as her choice of caption, her attitude is also the result of a conscious decision that is reflected in all the stages of this selfie; from the dressing, angle, type of smile, caption, and posting on social media.

A survivor's release of photographs does not follow the same narrative arc as, for example Gera's series of photographs. They are not telling only a story of forward progress toward healing (physical and emotional); they also post photographs of damage as a form of memorializing their past through the lenses of the present (caption). Their posts are not prescriptive, progressive, or didactic, but both commemorative and subversive of both beauty scripts and patriarchal control of their bodies.

The emotional engagement, conveyed by the release of these photographs, reflects a "politically engaged work" (Seigworth and Gregg 7), in which both viewers and survivors interact with "emotive attachments and matters of affective belonging" (Yadlin-Segal 38). These consistent repetitions of practices of power and resistance to it are expanded by survivors'

reflections on viewers' reactions to their photographs. As I mentioned earlier, Ritu critically analyzes the reactions and comments of her viewers. After posting a post-attack photograph on Facebook on 13th December, 2018, she noticed that this specific photograph had yielded only eighty four likes, which later increased to one hundred fourteen. Ritu understood this low number as the desire of viewers to see photographs of survivors that comply with standards of beauty. She also understood that these standards are a counterforce to the frame that she offers to her viewers through the caption of such photographs. Adressing the undesirable reaction of her viewers, she articulated her dissatisfactions.

Fig. 49 - Ritu Saini – 18 December 2018[70]

[70] (free translation follows) आज कुछ तो बात याद आ गई कि ये चेहरा सामने आया और अच्छे से ये पल याद है मुझे की कितने दर्द में थी मैं की आज भी रूह कांप उडती है मेरी सोच के ओर इस टाइम को ओर दिमाक मैं कुछ नही आता था सुने को भी मिलता था कि बच भी पाए गी या नही एक उमीद तो थी मुझे की मैं ठीक हो जाऊं गी पर वो उमीद मेरे फैमिली ने बना के भी रखी थी पर कभी कभी वो लोग भी नही समझ पाते थे कि किस तरीके से समझाया जाए कि सब ठीक हो जाये गा उस पल को शब्दो में बयां नही कर सकती कि कितना कुछ फेस करना होता है उस सोसाइटी ओर रिलेटिव के सामने मुझे तो ज्यादा कुछ पता नही फैमिली ने बहुत कुछ सहा है ऐसा मुझे पता चला खेर सब बीते हुए पल है।
खुश रहो और खुश रखो! ☺
Today, I remembered something when I saw this face that appeared in front of me. I remember this moment very well. I was in such a pain that even today my spirit trembles. Thinking about this time nothing used to come to my mind. I could hear people discussing whether I would be able to survive or not. I still had a hope that I would be alright. My family had made me hope that, but sometimes even those people could not understand how to explain to me that everything would be alright. I cannot put in words how much I would have to face in front of that society and relatives. I did not know very well that my family had to endure a lot. I came to know this. However, all this is in the past.

(Reproduced with permission of Ritu Saini)

Survivors memorialize painful moments to showcase their current understanding of the attack in the context of their present life. Given the blisters that cover Ritu's face, mixed with dried blood and the bandage that is also wet and stained by her blood, this photograph certainly exudes pain. Moreover one of her eyes seems to be melted closed. How can a viewer "like" this photo? In other words, how can someone "like" the pain? Possibly the immediate reaction awakened in the viewer would evoke a sad face emoji, a feature purposefully created by Facebook. The caption of this photograph, however, not ignoring the pain felt by the survivor, shifts the focus from suffering to survival by observing that all the suffering is now in the past. The fact that Ritu ends her caption with the words "be happy and keep others happy" guides the viewers to focus on the present moment as well as on their part in a shared responsibility to make society a better place. Her words and her dissatisfaction towards her viewers' interpretation of her post raises the question of how one should read these photographs and posts ethically, more than simply aesthetically.

Ritu's ethic is modeled by her analysis of "like" patterns that suggest viewers' emotional response to her posts. Her aesthetic is one that patterns response to painful images, not ignoring the wrongs that caused the pain, but rather focusing on an optimistic interpretation of the subject's past suffering. This is part of her activist aesthetic, as it is of many other survivors. In other words, she does not only show her scarred face but also emphasizes the refiguring of her identity.

Be happy and keep others happy! ☺

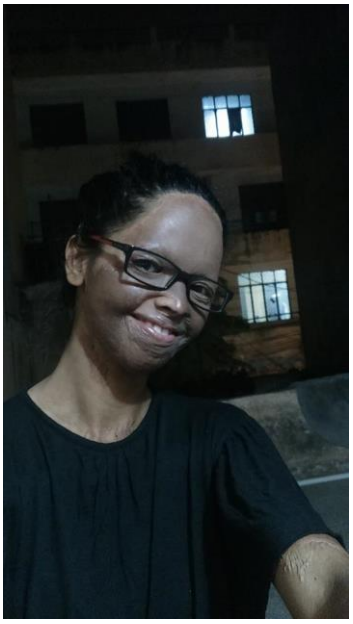
Fig. 50 - Laxmi Agarwal – 25 December 2017
Selfi[71] 😊
#Love #life #zindaginamilegidubara #SmileForever #acidsurvivorLaxmi
(Reproduced with permission of Laxmi Agarwal)

Like Gera, survivors also edit their selfies with applications and filters, however, seeking positive aesthetic responses and outcomes. This is the case of Laxmi SAA's selfie in black and white. Comparing this photo with Gera's set of black and white photographs, suffering and pain have a secondary importance in this photograph, which is suggested by her scars and by the hashtag #acidsurvivorLaxmi. The brightness of the photos conveys a sunny day, and her smile is emphasized by the caption. In fact, the caption provides a hierarchy of the things she values and that becomes her teaching to her viewers. First, she affirms her love of life. Then she explains why she loves her life – "zindagi na milegi dubara" – which means "one will not get a second life,"

[71] Survivors' adaptation of English language show how language is a living entity that is constantly changing and how they appropriate it as their own. Survivors' captions also show the arbitrariness of English language. Similar practices happens in the captions in Hindi.

which is also the title of a popular Bollywood film, in which the main characters decide to do what they desired, living in and for the moment. She smiles because she loves her life and this is the only opportunity she will have to live. Only after stating her philosophy of life, does she present herself as an acid-attack survivor. With no explicit pronouns in these hashtags, her caption can be read in a slightly different way: presenting not only how she feels towards herself and her life, but acting also as a prescription she offers to her viewers. Therefore, we could read it as "Love life because there is not a second one. Smile forever." This word play reinforces Laxmi's role as a motivational speaker and a survivor who changed the laws in India regarding the sales of acid.

Laxmi's captions also seem to serve an activist rhetorical purpose because the idea of only one life contrasts to the reference to a next life in the caption of her selfie from 14 October 2014. The caption is a poem written by Mayank Bokolia whose poetic persona is a survivor of acid attack addressing her attacker.[72]



[72] The poem later became part of a song called *Tezaab*, in collaboration with singer Ankisha Srivastava and musician Sumit Pareek.

Fig. 51 - Laxmi Agarwal – 14 October 2014[73]
(Reproduced with permission of Laxmi Agarwal)

The juxtaposition of poem and image produces a dramatic irony. Without the presence of Laxmi's selfie the poem suggests some of the feelings explored by Gera such as bitterness, pain, and even a subtle revenge that is carried out to the next life of the poetic persona. Her image, however, indicates otherwise. The dark background and black clothes she wears work as a frame for her face, point of focus of viewers. In her smiley face there is no trace of sadness, bitterness, or pain. How to reconcile the tone of the poem with Laxmi's pose?[74] In the context of acid attacks, the smile of a survivor symbolizes their victory over their attacker as Laxmi Agarwal pointed out in her TEDXTalk. It signifies their will to live, and their self-acceptance. By staging her selfie, she appropriates Mayank Bokolia's poem and gives a new and more positive meaning to it.

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[73] (free translation follows) चलो,!फेंक दिया / सो फेंक दिया .... / अब कुसूर भी,बता दो मेरा / तुम्हारा इज़हार था / मेरा इनकार था /बस इतनी सी बात पर / फूँक दिया चेहरा ..... / गलती शायद मेरी थी / प्यार तुम्हारा देख न सकी / इतना पाक प्यार था / के उसको समझ न सकी... /अब अपनी गलती मानती हूँ / क्या ...अब तुम अपनाओगे मुझको ? / क्या ...अब अपना बनाओगे मुझको ? / क्या ...लबो से चूमोगे मेरे होठों को ? / जो अब दिखाई नहीं देते / क्या ...सहलाओगे मेरे चेहरे को ?/ जिन पर अब फफोले हैं / मेरी आँखों में देखोगे / आँखें डाल कर ? / जो अब अन्दर धस चुकी है / जिनकी पलके सारी जल चुकी हैं / चलाओगे अपनी उंगलिया,मेरे गालो पर ? / जिन पर पड़े छालो से अब / पानी निकलता है .... / हाँ ! शायद तुम कर लोगे ... / तुम्हारा प्यार तो सच्चा है / है ना ??? / अच्छा ! / एक बात तो बताओ / ये ख्याल तेज़ाब का,कहाँ से आया ?/ किसी ने बताया ? / या ज़ेहन में तुम्हारे,खुद ही आया ? / अब कैसा / महसूस करते हो तुम / मुझे जला कर ? / गौरवन्वित ??? / या पहले से ज्यादा / और मर्दाना ??? / तुम्हे पता है / सिर्फ मेरा चेहरा जला है / जिस्म अभी पूरा बचा है / एक सलाह दूँ ! / एक तेजाब का तालाब बनवाओ / फिर उसमे मुझसे छलांग लगवाओ / जब पूरी जल जाउंगी मैं / फिर प्यार तुम्हारा गहरा होगा / और सच्चा होगा .... / एक दुआ है ... / अगले जन्म / मैं तुम्हारी ,बेटी बनू / और तुम जेसा सच्चा "आशिक़" / फिर मिले .....!
Ok, you threw it / So, you threw it / Tell me my fault also / You expressed yourself / I refused / Only because of this / You blew away my face / Maybe it was my fault / Couldn't see your love / It was such a pure love / That I didn't understand it / Now I admit my fault / Will you take me back? / Will you make me yours? / Will you kiss my lips? / which cannot be seen now / Will you tolerate my face? / Which is now in blisters / Will you look at my eyes now, with yours? / The eyes that have gone inside / Whose eyelashes have all burnt out / Will you run your fingers on my neck? / Whose skin has fallen off / And water comes out / Yes, maybe you will do that / Your love is true / Isn't it? / Ok, tell me one thing / This idea of acid, where did you get it from? / Did anybody tell you? / Or did it come from your own mind? / Now how do you feel? / After burning me? Proud? Or more masculine than before? / You know that / Only my face has burned / My soul is intact / Let me give you one piece of advice / Make a pool of acid/ Then make me jump into it / When I become completely burnt / Then your love will become deeper / And more true / One blessing I ask for / That next life / Become your daughter / And I meet again / A "true lover" like you.

[74] Donald Lateiner, in his book *Sardonic Smile* (1998), does a thorough investigation of nonverbal behavior in the Homeric epics, as a means of promoting appreciation of dramatic irony in imbalance of power, as a symbol of insolence, dignity etc.

Fig. 52 - Roopa SAA – 4 December 2017
Good .morning friends
(Reproduced with permission of Roopa SAA)

The mirror is further complicated in self-representations of acid-attack survivors. Different from other representations, in this selfie, Roopa does not look at her reflection in the mirror, but through the mirror at the camera. Roopa's selfie contrasts with the way Gera depicted Rupali looking at herself. And while in Gera's photo, the back of the survivor is out of focus, here the viewer sees the face of both images looking directly at the camera. It creates a sense of double selfie. The fact that Roopa is in front of the mirror but looks directly to the camera through it suggests that she accepts the reflection of her new identity that embraces her disfigurement. Now she invites the viewers, whom she address as "friends" in the caption, to see her as she is. The gaze of the survivors in the photographs is self-reflective, but also generates community. It anticipates and even expects emotional bonding from the public in general, whether they are disfigured or non-disfigured.

Social media becomes a platform for survivors to participate in a global community: a quick look at the list of friends of these survivors on Facebook shows that, first of all, they are connected with well-known acid-attack survivors such as Adele Bellis and Katie Piper from UK and Natalia Ponce de León from Colombia. Second, they are followed by disfigured people, who are not necessarily acid-attack survivors, from Scotland, United States, Brazil, UK, Uganda, Canada, New Zealand, Germany, and other countries. Third, they are also followed by people with different special needs from around the world. Moreover, some of their followers use survivors' photos as their profile photos as a sign of solidarity.

This global community of mutual solidarity and support helps survivors to resist social ostracism. Social ostracism as a demonstration of power often pushes survivors to cover their disfigured bodies. However, as a resistance to this structure of power, Roopa re-signifies the idea of hiding her face. Differently from Gera's images, she does not hide her face due to shame, embarrassment, or fear. Her facial expressions, and poses showcase different objectives behind the hiding of the face. On April 4th, 2018, Roopa posted the following sequence of photographs. Had she posted only the first selfie, the viewer could think that the use of large sunglasses was a strategy to partially hide her facial disfigurement, especially because her facial expression is neutral, and she points to her face as if to indicate the focus of attention to her viewers. However, posting the two selfies side by side, they can be read as two segments of a narrative. The second selfie encourages viewers to reconsider the first photograph. Her hair is tight so that it does not contribute to hiding her facial scars. Moreover, Roopa does not look through the sunglasses. In other words, she does not hide behind them. She looks above them directly at the camera. The sunglasses, that in the second selfie rest on her head, are a mere adornment with which she plays. In the second selfie Roopa show her smiley face trying a new pose and proud of herself.

Fig. 53 - Roopa Saa – 4 April, 2018
Selfi, 😀😀😀 ####pic 😃😃😃😃###roopa 😊😊 😊😊😘😘😘
(Reproduced with permission of Roopa SAA)

Survivors' attitudes of hiding their faces are updated by their posts and captions. The caption once again emphasizes her happiness and the pride that lies in showing her disfigured face as a display of her self-acceptance. The series of emojis with smiley faces and kisses become supportive elements for the hashtags along with her name and the metalanguage of photography. As in the above photograph, Roopa once again hides her face. However, her eyes show a different feeling from those portrayed in Gera's photographs. She has a playful mood and instead of bandages, she is adorned with jewelry. There is an air of mystery as if at any moment she would lower her arms and show her face.

Fig. 54 - Roopa Saa - 7 February, 2018
Happy Rose day friends
(Reproduced with permission of Roopa SAA)

These photographs also teach readers how to read groups of images in conjunction with textual narratives and other visual elements such as emojis. As in the previous composition, posting this photograph side by side with another one in which she holds a bouquet of roses and does not cover her face contextualizes her attitude of covering her face as being unrelated to shame or embarrassment. She frames her photograph in a way that emphasizes not only the roses but also her disfigured face that smiles and gazes at the viewers. It is the feeling of happiness that is shared in celebration of the "rose day" with her friends that endows the hiding face with a playful mood.

Before and After Challenges

From time to time social media is swept off with challenges and hashtags, such as the ten-year challenge that shows how much the looks of a person changed in the span of ten years. For survivors, however, these visual changes do not follow only the passage of time, but that of pre-attack, post-attack, and post-reconstructive surgeries. If most people consider that their identity lies in their face, then survivors are constantly adjusting to their new face as their identity. The fact

that their visual appearance is constantly changing due to many reconstructive surgeries is a reminder of the crime they faced and that they will always being an acid-attack survivor is part of their identity.

Fig. 55 - Ritu Saini – 26 May, 2018
आज के दिन से 6 साल पहले की 2012 की फ़ोटो ओर बिफोर की पर आज के दिन मैं बहुत खुश हूं[75] 😀
#smile😊#after#beforeandafter#khusi#forever#stopacidattacks#sheroes #chhanv
@ritusaa
@stopacidattacks
(Reproduced with permission of Ritu Saini)

In this collage Ritu offers yet another way captions can challenges stereotypes of happiness and sadness regarding acid-attack survivors. On 26 May, 2018, Ritu posted this collage of a pre-attack photograph, a photograph from the year of the attack, and one from six years later. The pre-attack image is part of the photograph Ritu holds in Niraj Gera's photograph 15 "Tears of Nostalgia." Differently from Gera's artwork in which Ritu is crying while looking at her old image, as if dreaming of going back in time to a life without pain, in this collage, she emphasizes her

[75] "This photo is from six years ago, in 2012, but today I am very happy."

happiness before and after the attack. In other words, the attack might have changed her life, but not her happiness as described in the caption. The caption reinforces an idea that opposes Gera's correlation between survivors' life before the attack with happiness and their life after the attack with sadness. Ritu affirms that six years after taking the first post-attack photograph she is very happy. There is an intimate relationship between her smile and her activism represented by the hashtags #smile #beforeandafter #stopacidattacks #sheroes.

The word "sheroes" used by Ritu suggests the heroic stereotype that disability scholars, activist, and artists frequently reject because it "recalls the stereotype of a disabled hero that is premised on sentimentalization of and low expectations for disabled people in society" (Millett-Gallant 400). Paraphrasing Ann Millett-Gallant's questioning of Marc Quinn's sculpture of Alison Lapper – *Alison Lapper Pregnant* -, what kind of hero are acid-attack survivors suggesting with these hashtags? One that subscribes to notions of disability as a social construct or one that challenges ideals of body-normativity and its dichotomy between "appropriate bodies vs "shocking bodies"? (Millett-Gallant 400). The word "sheroes" points to a nuanced heroic narrative. First of all, it is frequently accompanied by other hashtags, such as "chhanv" and "hangout" that point to where they work and to the community of survivors they participate in. Secondly, taken separated from the Chhanv Foundation or Sheroes Hangout Café, the word questions gender normativity in Indian society and challenges the construction of body-image of heroines. Moreover, in the context of their other photographs, they problematize the idea of the hero itself, since survivors also place themselves in a narrative of commonality with non-disfigured people as will be shown further in this chapter.

Very often the heroic reference is dropped from survivors' post in order to focus the viewers' attention to visible elements of their collage other than their scars. The same photograph

from Ritu's previous collage is used in the next, however, this time her image is cropped to focus the attention of the viewers on Ritu's face. Therefore, the before-and-after comparison becomes even more dramatic. Although Ritu compares her face before the attack with a post-reconstructive surgery photo in which she still displays the bandage around her face, her caption does not mention her scars, but her smile. The emotional appeal of Ritu's photograph contrasts with Niraj Gera's photograph 8 "The Bandage of Misery." Here the bandage neither serves to hide Ritu's face nor is a synonym of suffering. Ritu once again highlights the importance of her smile (before and after) as a sign of an intrinsic characteristic of her that was not changed by the attack.

Fig. 56 - Ritu Saini – 7 June 2018
Before after smile all time 🙂
#ritu#smile#before#after#rohtak#delhi
@ritusaa
(Reproduced with permission of Ritu Saini)

Before-and-after images are filled with cultural assumptions that the second photograph will show visual improvements, such as the effects of diets, physical exercises, or even plastic

surgeries with the sole purpose of appearance enhancement. In the case of acid-attack survivors, a post-reconstructive surgery photograph certainly expresses some level of appearance or physical enhancement; the nostril that was melted closed now is open, the neck that was stiff now can move. However, the reconstructed face of an acid-attack survivor will most likely never look similar to the pre-attack face. In the previous collage, Ritu does not show the results of the surgery. So, what exactly, is she showing? She shows her transformation into an acid attack fighter, a transformation into an activist that is embedded into her own personal experience as survivor, besides the pleasure of being alive.

Fig. 57 – Laxmi Aggarwal - 14 October 2017
आपके दिल मे प्यार नही, तेजाब हुआ करता था.
आप मुझे प्यार की नजर से नही तेजाब की नजर से देखा करते थे.
आज भी में जिंदा हु और अपने सपने को साकार कर रही हु।
(Reproduced with permission of Laxmi Agarwal)

"Caption content is your last opportunity to tell what makes a photograph significant" according to Tom Regina (20), and this is precisely what Laxmi does in the caption of the above

collage. Laxmi addresses her attacker by saying: “There was no love in your heart, only acid. You did not see me through the eyes of love, but through those of acid. Today I am still alive and living my dream.” The collage is not about enhancement or about nostalgia about a supposedly ideal time before the attack. It is about survival.

Fig. 58 - Laxmi Aggarwal – 17 January 2019
#YearChallenge
#10YearChallenge
#14YearChallenge
#FbYearChallenge
(Reproduced with permission of Laxmi Agarwal)

The ten-year challenge is customized by Laxmi who expands her visual narrative. She includes two photographs taken in the same year. A few months apart, they show the results of the attack. Although one can imagine the pain she was feeling, there are no tears in her eyes or any other exaggerated pose that could be immediately identified as a sign of despair, as in Niraj Gera’s photographs. In my interview with Laxmi, she recounted the day of the attack and her recovery. She mentioned how deformed her face was and how short her hair was cut. She continued saying that while in the hospital, seeing her disfigured face, she started loving it. The same narrative of

survival and courage is here visually retold. Four years after the attack, she is seen smiling again and ten years later she was not just participating in a Facebook 10-year challenge, but changing it to include photos that recounted her story from the beginning of her life as a survivor and activist. The attack or the scars are not the starting point of her narrative. The attack is a major event that is memorialized in her scars, but it is neither the starting nor the ending point.

Supporting Elements

Solidarity among survivors is an important bonding element responsible for the existence of a community of acid-attack survivors that thrives. This solidarity depicts them as simultaneously not only as recipients but also as agents. Senior survivors give support to those who are still learning to maneuver all the aspects that entail what is to be a survivor. One of these aspects is that of reconstructive surgeries as shown in the photograph below.

Fig. 59 - Laxmi Aggarwal and Ritu – 7th December 2016
"Ritu ka operation start ho gaya hai… #Stopacidattacks"
(Reproduced with permission of Ritu)

Contrary to Gera's photograph "The Bandage of Misery," in which he emphasized, through visual and textual elements, the pain and the suffering survivors undergo every time they undergo reconstructive surgeries, in Laxmi's selfie, she is seen giving a supportive smile next to Ritu who is ready for her new surgery. While in Gera's photograph Roopa displayed the loneliness expressed by the overwhelming black background that engulfed her body, leaving only the bandaged head in sight, here Ritu's facial expression accompanied by Laxmi does not show any sign of loneliness, despair, or torment. Ritu seems confident about the success of the procedure that will soon begin. Once again the activism is present in the hashtag "#stopacidattacks." She reminds us of the necessity to fight against acid attacks, so that other girls do not need to undergo situations such as the pain of reconstructive surgeries. However, once they survived the attack, a surgery does not seem so scary.

The elements of support in self-representations of acid-attack survivors are more nuanced than those described by Gera and analyzed in the first chapter. Besides the portrayal of survivors as recipients of other supports, such as friends and family member, acid-attack survivors, as agents of solidarity, also display their support towards other women. This support is, however, not in a *conflative* manner. In the following photograph, Laxmi poses with Laxminarayan Tripathi, one of the most important *hijras* in India who fight for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, and Asha Devi, the mother of Jyoti Singh, who took the homicide of her daughter as a mission to fight against gender-based violence in India. Laxmi addresses herself and the other two women as "strong women" for fighting against patriarchal structures for gender equality and social justice. Given how well-known these women are, there is no need to further differentiate their experiences through the caption. The Indian audience does not need a narrative that explores the differences among these three women given the audience's long exposure to their narratives and visual

presence in the media. The moment of this powerful encounter, which is captured by this photograph, is the convergence of their pasts that suggest to the viewer that together (with their differences) they seek a better society. The acid-attack survivor in this photograph is neither secondary to those who experienced other forms of gender-based violence nor more emphasized than the other two women. There is equity in the solidarity displayed in this photograph that does not erase the differences behind the personal stories of these women and the respective causes they fight for.

Fig 60 - Laxmi Agarwal – 23 April 2019
With Nirbhaya Mother Asha Devi Aunty & @laxminarayan_tripathi
#strongwomen 🙏

Religious elements, which are a common characteristic of acid aesthetics are further elaborated in self-representation of acid-attack survivors. First of all, the emphasis on Hindu religious elements, common in Gera's work, is diluted in the photographs of the survivors. Secondly, they present a religious fluidity. They not only rarely post photographs that depict religious elements, being most of them from celebrations of main festivals, but they are also not

confined to their own religion. Survivors post photographs celebrating *Holi* (a Hindu festival), Christmas, or in front of *dargahs*, (a shrine over the grave of a Muslim saint), and in front of Gurdwaras (*Sikh* temples), such as the following photographs of Laxmi, who is Hindu, but poses in front of two Gurdwaras.

Fig. 61 - Laxmi Agarwal – 11 February 2018
Golden temple Amritsar 😁
(Reproduced with permission of Laxmi Agarwal)

Fig. 62 - Laxmi Agarwal – 28 November 2018
Gurudwara Shri Dukhniwaran Sahib,
Patiala 🙏Good morning 😊
(Reproduced with permission of Laxmi Agarwal)

Ordinary Activities

Disability scholars have argued in favor of disability art that challenges conventional sensationalist and static visual representations of disabled people (Sandahl and Auslander, 2009; Strauss, 2013; Jackson et a., 2014; Hall, 2014). Similar to Saharan's photographs, self-representations of survivors' daily life and ordinary activities disrupt stereotypes of disfigured women. The following photographs showcase Roopa's and Farha's patriotism. While Roopa celebrates Republic Day with balloons of the colors of the Indian flag in the background, Farha and Garima show the purple mark on their index fingers as proof that they voted in the general

elections. The background chosen by Farha and Garima also demonstrate ordinariness and simplicity. The background of Garima's photograph, despite showing the door of a closed shop, is actually one of the selfie booths spread throughout Indian cities for people to take selfies after voting. A tiny part of the purple booth can be seen at the top of the photograph. This selfie practice emphasizes survivors' participation in matters of their country as citizens. Such photographs invite viewers to see them neither as victims nor as heroes, opening up the discussion of disability as a social construct that challenges ideals of body-normativity.

Fig. 63 - Roopa SAA – 25 January, 2019
(Reproduced with permission of Roopa SAA

Fig. 64 - Farha Khan – 29th April, 2019
(Reproduced with permission of Farha Khan)

Fig. 65 - Garima Aswanthi – 6th May, 2019[76]
(Reproduced with permission from Garima Aswanthi)

Roopa's and Farha's photographs also challenge Western ideals that these girls and women have to be rescued from the violence that exists in their country. Elora Halim Chowdhury (2011), while investigating acid attacks in Bangladesh, demonstrates how Western agencies bring Bangladeshi survivors to the West in order to give them "proper treatment," with the intention of self-promotion, eliminating the work of Bangladeshi grassroot agencies from their narratives. Roopa's, Garima's, and Farha's photographs display their pride at being Indians and their commitments to their country as citizens.

Finally, their photographs of ordinary and daily activities challenge the centrality of the face representation of acid-attack survivors. Differently from most representations analyzed in the previous chapters, survivors' photographs showcase a variety of objects, sceneries, and other parts of their own body. Examples of this practice are Farha's photographs in which she emphasizes her red bangles, hand, and her nail polish.

Fig. 66 - Farha Khan – 17th October, 2020
रेड चूहड़ीया
#ilikeread
#beaitifulcolors

Fig. 67 - Farha Khan – 20th October, 2020
New नेल पेंट
(Reproduced with permission of Farha Khan)

[76] The 2019 Indian general election was held in seven phases from 11th April to 19th May.

#myhendbeautyfull
(Reproduced with permission of Farha Khan)

In the captions, Farha emphasizes her excitement about her new bangles and nail polish, and emphasizes that she likes the color red. Her last statement in the first photograph is that her hands are beautiful. The second photograph shows the visibility of her scars. However, she guides her viewers to pay attention to her new nail polish, suggesting that her scar is secondary.

In sum, Even though the aesthetics created by Niraj Gera of acid-attack survivors culminates in the idea that they are brave and courageous individuals, he engages his viewers primarily through pity. On the contrary, survivors' self-representations reject pity by contextualizing photographs that depict pain with positive messages that frequently connect happiness with survival and activism. These are elements that awaken in the viewers a more positive emotional response and engagement. Intentionally or not, survivors avoid the use of lighting, backdrops, and facial expressions that suggest sadness and suffering. Even in black-and-white photographs there is an exploration of brightness that undermines any possibility of identifying the absence of colors with negative emotions. Their self-portrayal reflects on their idea of inner beauty that is expressed through their smiles, attitudes, and inner qualities.

As for the structures of support, acid-attack survivors certainly portray more nuances than those created by Gera. Like Gera, survivors also acknowledge the importance of building a community of acid-attack survivors. However, this community is not restricted to India. It is a global community, in which they are also agents of support, not only recipients. Family and society at large are also collectives that receive more distinctions in survivors' photographs. For example, they depict collaborations with other public figures who are committed to gender equality and social justice.

Survivors' *refigurative* aesthetic present complex layers of representations. For example, these self-representations showcase aspects of survivors' ordinary life portraying their commitment to India as citizens. They embrace the religious diversity of their country and challenge the centrality of facial disfigurement by depicting objects and other parts of their body. These daily and ordinary aspects of their photographs place them outside common stereotypes of disfigured women..

As much as other members of society, survivors wish to engage artists in their cause by collaborating with them. This engagement, however, does not mean that they agree with how artists portray them, but understand these representations as a way to reach more people. The representations might be a tortuous way for the common people to start to know the real survivors and by then whatever misconception these representations might depict, the self-representations will correct.

Looking beyond Stereotypes

Aunty Ji (2018), directed by Adeeb Rais, tells the story of Parveen Irani (Shabana Azmi), a widow who is often called Aunty, and Geetika (Anmol Rodriguez), an acid-attack survivor. The two characters causally meet on an important day: While Geetika begins to work in an advertisement company, Parveen decided to get a tattoo. The short film follows the lives of both characters while they deal with ageist and ableist stereotypes respectively.

Rais's short film is an example of *refigurative* acid aesthetic for depicting solidarity among women, in which one is an acid-attack survivor, without conflation. This solidarity among women evolves into two major intersectionalities: First, the exploration of different forms of prejudice

based on stereotypes of elderly women and disfigured women. Second, solidarity between women who are followers of different religions.

Apart from this complex form of solidarity between women, the film portrays both Parveen and Geetika as agents who resist people's assumptions about elderly women and acid-attack survivors. This resistance is non-violent. However, differently from analogies to Gandhian *ahiṃsa*, their non-violent resistance is based on self-assertion and self-ownership. Throughout the film Parveen's and Geetika's comments force viewers to question their own assumptions and preconceived notions about elderly women and female acid-attack survivors. Besides, the film demonstrates that disability is a social construction. The challenges and questions that both characters pose to viewers are directed towards social justice as equality. In other words: To be treated like any other person, to have an opportunity to work, to show their capabilities, to have their wishes and dreams respected.

Aunty ji can be considered a narrative of overcoming, however nuanced. It does not focus on the acid attack as the starting point of the narrative. The emphasis of the film is on how non-conformative characters maneuver society's ostracism. Of particular interest is the use of the mirror, which reflects the survivor's naturality and comfort with her scars. In fact, the real disfigurement, like in *Newborns*, instead of a disfigurement created through make up, as in *Akira*, gives more depth to the film.

Adeeb Rais's film, which is illustrative of the *refigurative* aesthetics, nonetheless presents a *disfigurative* characteristic: the "all persons fictitious disclaimer."[77] As discussed in chapter 1,

[77] "Disclaimer: This is an entertainment programme. Resemblance of any character(s) in this programme to any person(s) living or dead or resemblance to places or events is purely coincidental and all characters are fictional. This programme is not intended to offend the religious or moral sentiments of any community, region, race, gender, linguistic groups, profession or to vilify any person(s) living or dead or to intrude on the privacy of any individual, group, community, set or association. Any decision and or acts of viewers and or any third party based on the contents

where I analyzed the presence of this same disclaimer in the film *Akira*, the "all persons fictitious disclaimer" states that: "All characters in this film are fictitious and bear no resemblance to any person living or dead. Any similarity is purely coincidental." Although the function of this disclaimer is to reduce the possibility of legal action for libel, the fact that an actual acid-attack survivor was chosen to perform the role of an acid-attack survivor, speaks to the director's intention to create a story that is closer to reality, to convey credibility, and to change viewers' perspectives on survivors, including the same survivor featured in the film, in society at large. Moreover, as I am going to discuss in the next few pages, Anmol faced experiences similar to those faced by Geetika, the character she performs. One might almost surmise that Geetika is based on Anmol, as such the "all persons fictitious disclaimer" reduces the credibility of Anmol as an actual survivor. The *disfigurative* aspect of the disclaimer, however, does not prejudice the overall *refigurative* investiture of the film based on the solidarity between Parveen or Aunty and Geetika.

The basic characteristic of an aunty, according to scholars, is her age since the term points to an older woman (Wong, 2006; Qamar, 2017; Lee and Shanmuganathan, 2020). Additionally, the figure of the aunty is socially and culturally complex, incorporating aspects that vary from kindness to propensity for gossip, behavior policing, and reinforcement of traditions and gender norms. Maria Qamar, humorously defines the aunty as:

> A cross-cultural phenomenon that isn't limited to a family member; she could be a neighbor, a family friend, or just some lady on the bus who wants to throw some casual black magic your way. Most commonly featured in Indian soap operas, an aunty is a feisty and dramatic powerhouse of a woman who enters your house with plans to take over your

of the program shall be entirely at his/her/their own discretion and free will and the Channel and/or Broadcaster shall not be responsible and or liable in any manner whatsoever for the same (Madmidaas Films)"

> life for a very small and strangely particular reason. When aunties combine into groups of two or more, their plotting power is instantly multiplied. They are at family parties or friendly get-togethers with your mother, finding ways to make your life difficult, trying to get your married to their sons, and telling you to lose weight while simultaneously trying to feed you a second dinner. (1)

While some of the positive aspects of the aunty Qamar describes are preserved in the construction of Parveen as a character, the negative aspects are replaced. Instead she challenges social conventions whilst facing social ostracism. For example, Parveen is considerate towards Geetika, tells her how she should talk to her mother on the phone, and makes sure that Geetika is well fed after leaving her first day at work. However, Parveen never pushes Geetika to conform to normative expectations, probably because Parveen herself breaks stereotypes. Her goal on the day they meet is to get a tattoo with the name of her deceased husband. Since a permanent tattoo is seen as something appropriate for youngsters, Parveen is asked if the appointment in the tattoo salon is for her daughter or son. When Parveen replies in the negative, she is asked if the appointment is for her grandchild. With kindness and humor, she resists being ashamed, and affirms that the appointment is for her. As if she were talking to a kid, the receptionist explains to Parveen what is going to happen: "Look, it is ink that will be put through a needle. It will be a little painful." Parveen, smiling, affirms that she knows what a tattoo is, making the girl feel embarrassed for over explaining. A few minutes into the appointment, Parveen receives a call from her son, who not only cancels their weekend meeting, but also tells her not to have the tattoo done: "I just cannot believe it. What is this obsession with this tattoo? It is absurd! People will think you are crazy. This is silly and you know it… Everyone will make fun of you. Are you some kind of hippie now? This is not the business of a grandmother… You will not have a tattoo and that is

final." Until the very end of the film, the viewer does not know if Parveen persisted in her goals or gave up having the tattoo, a tattoo she finally reveals during her dinner with Geetika. Parveen challenges social conventions that are actually ageist. In my view, it is Parveen's endurance against the stereotype of an elderly woman in India that makes her sensitive to the stereotyping of others, such as acid-attack survivors.

Geetika, like Parveen, contests ableist assumptions in order to assert her goals, particularly her actions resist repulsion and pity, as problematic responses to disfigurement. Geetika meets Parveen at a pharmacy, while trying to change money to pay her taxi before going to her first day of internship in an advertisement company. At the pharmacy, a client turns the face of her son away from Geetika's view as if the sight of her disfigured face were repugnant. After hearing the pharmacy employee telling Geetika that he does not have change, Parveen turns to her to give her a smaller bill to pay her taxi. When Parveen looks at Geetika for the first time, it takes her a second to understand that Geetika's face is non-normative. However, she immediately realizes that Geetika's face is not the focus of their interaction, but the change for the taxi is. When Geetika tells her that the money she offered is still more than the taxi fare, Parveen told her she could return her money back later and gives Geetika her home address. In the company, Geetika is mocked, pitied, and exploited by her coworkers and employers. For example, during the coffee break, an office mate asks Geetika if she likes Mumbai. She says she likes Mumbai, but her hostel is not good. Her coworker then replies: "There are so many problems in our daily life. So much tension. But seeing you like this we realize we are so blessed! We are actually so lucky. Look! Poor thing! Seriously. Your life must be so bad. I feel so bad for you." The sentiment of pity at first can be mistaken for solidarity, but in reality it victimizes the survivor, supplanting her self-perception. Sean Aas reminds us that disabled people "are harmed by a widespread perception that their lives

are worse than the lives of able-bodied people. This perception promotes damaging attitudes of pity; and makes it difficult for anyone, including disabled people, to see a disability as a source of pride" (187). The camera focuses on Geetika's facial expression, which conveys her disappointment at her coworker's comments. After a few seconds, however, she presents a different point of view on her disfigurement: "It is not all that bad. Sometimes I get lots of attention from cute guys." She smiles and waves at two young guys who are looking at her.

Geetika is constantly refiguring herself even when the challenges she faces take a toll on her emotional strength. To refigure, in this case, is to assert the meaning of one's own appearance against the perceptions and reactions of others. She asserts herself as a *figure* by re-figuring responses. In one instance, one of the senior designers analyzes the interns' brand designs. She criticizes the design one intern created and is very pleased with the one Geetika creates, which causes an intern to say that it was "pure sympathy," as if Geetika's facial asymmetry would impede her creativity or be a supplement necessary to what is, in actuality, a fine piece of work. Notwithstanding appreciation of Geetika's work, this senior designer also mistreats her intern: she mocks her in front of all interns by saying: "What an irony. This is her first assignment and it is about beauty products." Everyone laughs while the designer completes: "I am just kidding. Don't be mad at me." Yet her "kidding" serves the purpose of solidifying a particular vision of beauty that cannot encompass the acid-altered face. The impact of mocking is amplified because it is the designer, a senior woman, who ridicules Geetika, in stark contrast with solidarity across differences, which is the focus of the film. After this humiliating incident, Geetika is called to her boss's office. He explains to Geetika that the advertising sector is very superficial and that he has plans to use Geetika's image to showcase the fact that their company looks beyond people's physical appearance. He arranges her photoshoot without ever asking her permission about it.

When she asks him about the photoshoot, he says he wants her photo on a billboard with sentences that suggest their company is compassionate, sensitive, and fearless. Geetika politely remarks that she likes the company and appreciates the opportunity given to her, but tries to redirect their attention to her talent: "I would appreciate it if you used my talent, not my face." Geetika's boss and his secretary seem offended that she did not sound happy about their plans. The secretary tells her that her boss was only trying to be nice, to which Geetika responds: "He shouldn't have to try." Geetika, like Parveen, seeks through non-violent means to challenge prejudices, in the attempt to regain their agency that was minimized or cancelled by child-like talking, stereotyping, mocking, teasing, pitying, and other discriminatory attitudes.

Parveen and Geetika's solidarity is based on supporting each other's worldviews stripped from any sort of judgement and prejudice, which is perhaps an attitude acquired based on their own experiences with discrimination. At the end of the day, Geetika visits Parveen to give back the money she had lent her. Parveen asks how Geetika's first day in the office was. When Geetika replies that it was "ok," Parveen enquires as to the reason for her lack of enthusiasm. Geetika states that that was her dream job, but that they had hired her because of her face, not because of her talent. Therefore, she would not go to work the next day. When Geetika finds out that Parveen had got the tattoo with the name of her deceased husband – Zubin -, she expresses her excitement. Parveen, however, remembers that her son says many adverse things about her decision. Geetika, in support of Parveen's tattoo says that: "It was a good thing you didn't listen to your son. Why would we sacrifice our dreams because of other people?" Parveen takes the opportunity of this encouragement to make Geetika reflect upon her life through her own words: "Exactly! To make others happy why would we sacrifice our dreams?" Geetika thinks and after a few minutes she asks if Parveen can pack some food for her to take the next day to work, implying that she will

not give up her dreams. Providing food is the stereotypical, interfering activity of the Indian aunty, but it takes a different form in the film. Despite being the "Aunty," Parveen's solidarity is not patronizing; she only affirms, mirrors Geetika's own world view. Parveen also receives from Geetika the support and encouragement for her tattoo that her own son does not offer her.

In contrast to the *conflative*, the encounter between Parveen and Geetika does not erase the specific social and cultural experiences of oppression and resistance of either character. On the contrary, the intersectionality between gender and age is clearly developed, above all, when Parveen's son feels entitled to determine that his mother should not have a tattoo. Likewise, the intersectionality between gender and disfigurement is also carefully developed, especially during the mocking of Geetika for creating the design for a brand of makeup. The solidarity between these two women is also an interreligious solidarity given that Parveen is Parsi[78] while Geetika is Hindu, who is seen to be taking her image of Ganesha to her workplace.

Fig. 68 - Parveen and Geetika meet for the first time
Parveen wears a Faravahar pendant

Fig. 69 - Geetika's first day in the office.
She places the statue of Ganesha on her desk

[78] A descendent of Persian Zoroastrians who migrated to India to escape the Islamic conquest of Persia of 633–654 CE.

Fig. 70 - Geetika visits Parveen
There is a photograph of Meher Baba on the desk on the left

The Parsi symbols that the viewers see associated with Parveen summarize her ethics; these are: the Faravahar, the sacred fire, and the image of Meher Baba, whose name means "Compassionate Father". At times we see Parveen wearing a pendant that looks like the symbol of Faravahar. This same pendant, however, appears differently in some scenes; perhaps displaying the sacred fire, another important symbol for the Parsi community. Regarding the Faravahar, Christoph Bauman explains that:

> In the Faravahar the human figure represents the connection to the Spirit and the three layers of feathers on each wing, the three ethical principles of "correct thought", "correct speech" and "correct action". By contrast, the lower part of the Faravahar symbolizes the "incorrect thought", "incorrect speech" and "incorrect action" that lead to destruction. The loop that falls forward from the ring stands for the good to which we should orient ourselves, and the loop behind the ring represents the evil on which we should turn our backs. The circle in the centre of the Faravahar symbolizes the eternity of the Spirit. Finally, the hand gesturing upwards shows the path to true knowledge, while the ring in the other hand refers to loyalty to Zoroastrian principles. (Baumer 204)

As much as Parsis should strive for the correct thought, the correct speech, and the correct action, represented by the Faravahar, the sacred fire, also points to their nobility of character. Together with "light, and the sun, whom they call Mithra, were the objects of their religious

reverence, because they considered them as the purest symbols, the noblest productions, and the most powerful agents of the divine power and nature" (Karaka xxix). The Parsi ethical approach of correctness, goodness, and interreligious respect were embodied by Meher Baba, born Merwan Sheriar Irani, whom Parveen looks up to, given that his photo is displayed in her living room.[79]

For Geetika, since she is a Hindu character who has to deal with social barriers in her workplace, the presence of the statue of Ganeśa points to the overcoming of these obstacles and, therefore, to the achievement of social justice in the workplace. Ganeśa, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, is the God that removes obstacles, and, therefore, the one that can also create difficulties and impediments, if not pleased. Royina Grewal reminds us that: "To call upon Ganeśa at the beginning of a new book is particularly important, for as Ganesha made it possible for sage Vyasa to complete the Mahabharata, so too did he impede the sage's compilation of the Puranas when he was not invoked" (3). Geetika is seen placing the statue of Ganeśa on her office desk. When her supervisor asks her to change seats with another intern, clearly placing Geetika in the back of the room where she was most distant from the sight of one of her bosses, she takes her little Ganeśa with her and places him on the other desk. Ganeśa's role as the remover of obstacles resonates with how Parveen motivates Geetika not to leave her internship, so that others can see her past her scars; in other words, seeing her as the passionate and talented designer that she is. To be respected for the quality of her work, instead of her physical appearance, is for Geetika, social justice.

[79] Merwan Sheriar Irani was born in 1894 in Pune, India, in a Persian Zoroastrian family. He studied at St. Vincent's High school, a Roman Catholic School, and later studied languages and poetry, particularly the Sufi poets, at the Deccan College in Pune. At the age of eighteen he became a disciple of Hazrat Babajan (?-1931), a Pashtun Muslim saint. In 1915, Merwan Sheriar became disciple of Upasni Mahraja, a Hindu *satguru* ("true *guru*"), who gave Merwan the title Meher Baba, "Compassionate Father." In 1925 he started a period of complete silence that lasted until his death in 1969 (Moore xix-xx).

The mirror in *Aunty Ji* has the interesting function of reflecting the multiplicity of body forms as well as the acceptance of them. To get past physical appearances does not mean to ignore the fact that Geetika is an acid-attack survivor in a "color-blind" manner,[80] which in this context I call "disability-insensitivity," but to understand and accept that bodies can be non-conformative. Both Parveen and Geetika get ready for an important event. While Parveen is getting her tattoo with the name of her deceased husband, Geetika will start her first day as an intern in an advertisement company. The two characters look at the mirror and display the excitement of the day ahead in their smiles. Their smiles are not only the approval of their images reflected in the mirror, but also indicate their positive expectations for the day ahead.

While in the beginning of the film the mirror is depicted as a concrete object, throughout the film it gains abstract forms. On the one hand, the mocking, an attitude that Geetika experiences in her workplace, is a form of a verbal mirroring that distorts the person who is mocked as if Geetika were further disfigured. On the other hand, Parveen's solidarity takes the form of a verbal mirroring parallel to the visual mirroring survivors employ in the *refigurative* self-presentations.

Fig. 71 - Parveen looks at herself in the mirror while getting ready to have her tattoo done

Fig. 72 - Geetika looks at herself in the mirror while getting ready for her first day at work

[80] Disability scholars have constantly criticized references to disability in expressions that are not related to disability. Take, for example, the expression "color-blindness" referring to people who pretend they do not see differences between persons who belong to different racial groups. People with visual impairments can be sensitive to the disparities, benefits, and difficulties that specific groups experience due to their skin color, since racism is a social construction. Therefore, to associate blindness with the unconscious or conscious lack of racial sensitivity is simply incorrect and one more example of how ableist our language can be.

In terms of the director's ethical approach, I was not able to verify if Anmol was paid for her participation in the film. Adeeb Rais, however, properly acknowledged her participation in the opening credits, giving centrality to Anmol in the film *Aunty Ji*.

Although, overall *Aunty Ji* is a great example of *refigurative* aesthetics, the "all persons fictitious disclaimer" is a vestige of *disfigurative* aesthetics that proves that these categories are not monolithic. The film's disclaimer becomes even more problematic because some experiences that Anmol had faced in a workplace have strong similarities with those experienced by her character, Geetika. Anmol was two months-old when her father attacked her mother with acid for having given birth to a girl, instead of a boy. Since Anmol was on her mother's lap at the moment of the attack, the acid fell on her. As her mother died, Anmol survived and stayed in a hospital for five years. After that she was handed over to an orphanage. However, following governmental rules, at the age of eighteen she could not stay in the orphanage any more. She tried to find jobs, but during the interviews, she would always be rejected. She finally got a job in a company, but was fired after two months because some of the employees complained that they could not keep seeing her face. Anmol, however, as much as her character in the film, refigured her life through insisting on the visibility of her disfigured face:

> "After 2014-15 I created an account on Facebook. I saw that my friends were uploading their photos and getting "likes" and comments. I also thought I could upload my photos. But a friend told me I should not upload my photos because social media is not a good place for me because trolls would come and say bad things about my photos. But I uploaded my photo anyway. Luckily I didn't receive many negative comments. I got many good comments. I also got "likes." So I realized that whatever other people do on social media:

upload photos of travel, in restaurants… I can also do. Through social media I got offers to do photoshoots and modeling. So, that face that nobody wanted to see, this is the face that they are seeing." (TEDx Talks)

Anmol's strategy to refigure her life was centered on inner strength. In an interview she explained: "I personally think that everyone has problems in life. Some are small, some are big, but everyone has problems; some are facing trauma, depression. So, self-motivation is the key. I mean, I have to be positive because whatever happens I can move on. What I am to do with my life, what I want to achieve is what I have to focus my attention on" (Shameroo). Like the character she plays in the film who receives a little push from her new friend Parveen, Anmol also learned how to find her inner strength with the help of a friend (TEDx Talks).

In summary, *Aunty Ji* portrays the social ostracism faced by acid-attack survivors and how they, sometimes through solidarity with other discriminated members of society, seek to change people's mindset to see them as whole human beings. They are agents of transformation.

Conclusion

The *refigurative* aesthetics present a much more nuanced and fragmented narrative of overcoming compared to the previous aesthetic categories. At times, how these girls and women become acid-attack survivors are not relevant because the focus is on the present and future. Their past experiences are only memorialized in their scars, which remind them who they are, and also their plight relative to social justice and gender equality. Social justice also means to be viewed and treated like any other person who wants to study, to work, to form a family, to participate in celebrations and festivals, and to be a citizen. To be seen and treated like any other person,

however, does not mean to have their scars ignored or erased because they are part of who they are. What these representations seek is to depict survivors beyond the surface of their scars. In this process they create alliances with other women who face gender-based violence or prejudices. These alliances, differently from the *conflative* category, display equality among the individuals. These coalitions often display a diversity of other elements, such as caste, religion, and different disabilities. The *refigurative* category does not only fragment the narrative of overcoming, but also the visual representation of the disfigured body, diluting the centrality of the face to the acid aesthetics. Religious elements are also supportive of survivors' agency without overshadowing it. Likewise, the mirror is not used to reflect pity or suffering, but happiness and confidence.

5.CONCLUSION

In the previous pages I showcased the new aesthetic form that has been emerging in India following the Nirbhaya case. This aesthetic is centered on representations of acid-attack survivors. Using disability studies as the framework for this research, I described how acid disfigurement should be considered a form of disability given the physical, psychological, and social consequences of this form of crime. In order to seek social justice, survivors not only explore the visibility of their scars through artistic and digital platforms, but also form coalitions with non-disfigured artists through solidarity. These coalitions are possible because of the creation of an aesthetic community specific to acid disfigurement. It is this community that is responsible for the creation of a new aesthetic form – the Acid Aesthetic.

The multiple individuals engaged in pursuing the acid aesthetic explore its common characteristics differently, thus generating what I categorize as *disfigurative*, *conflative*, and *refigurative* acid aesthetics. The acid aesthetic is firmly rooted in the gendered as well as bodily experience of survival. There are a number of elements common to this aesthetic across the *disfigurative*, *conflative*, and *refigurative* approaches: the mirror and the smile as visible signs, the spiritual as a domain of development, and happiness as an aim and a survivance process. The exploration of survivors' visible scars is emphasized by the presence of mirror, both as an object and as an abstraction of it. It becomes a testimony of survivors' suffering and self-acceptance, and also of the viewers' gaze, and solidarity. Another aspect of acid aesthetic is the presence of spiritual and mythological/religious elements in the artwork that very often support overall ideals of non-violence. Adding to this positive aspect, the smile represents a particular, culturally distinct, concept of happiness that is also related to an ideal of a specifically gendered form of heroism. Finally, this aesthetic is oriented to the future and it activates people's solidarity towards social

justice and gender equality. The way artists and survivors articulate these and other elements create major distinctions among these representations and the effects on the viewers and readers. I consider *disfigurative* those representations of acid-attack survivors that, although seeking social justice and inclusion, tend to engage the audience through pity, emphasizing images redolent with suffering and despair. In addition, the *disfigurative* art often perpetuates gender stereotypes and patriarchal structures. The *conflative* acid aesthetic, on the other hand, gives more depth to the representation of survivors' emotions and inner conflicts. However, it does so by means of conflation of acid attacks with other gender-based forms of violence. This conflation is presented as female solidarity. However, in this depiction of solidarity among women, acid-attack survivors become either proxy for a generic discussion on gender-based violence or perform secondary roles. The third category - the *refigurative* – is exemplified by representations that seek to portray acid-attack survivors as empowered agents, but also as ordinary individuals. In these representations, survivors are not depicted stereotypically. Because these artists and survivors challenge stereotypes, viewers and readers are also required to challenge their own biases and assumptions regarding disfigured women.

My lasting impression of the representations that I encountered during this research has a lot to do with the ethical implications of this art. At the end of 2020, the Chhanv Foundation launched a project called A Gift Story, an online shop where people from all around the world could buy artwork and handicraft produced by the survivors. The objective was to financially help survivors during the pandemic. I was surprised to see that one of the paintings being sold on the website was titled *Faceless* and depicted six female figures, as the name of the painting suggests, without faces. Although survivors never use this technique in self-representations, they were commissioned to create this artwork. This painting is a visual representation of how they are often

treated even by those who declare solidarity. It also testifies to the fact that there is no perfect solidarity, since that these extreme cases coopt their voices.

While I indicated this type of treatment in some passages of my dissertation, many of the ethical considerations I signal are increasingly evident and demand further inquiry. The film *Chhapaak* (2020) directed by Meghna Gulzar highlights the processes behind the scenes in the NGOs I had contact with in India, and demonstrate that their founders exploited survivors images and labor for their own benefit. In one of my conversations with survivors who work at Sheroes Hangout Café I was shocked to know that their salary was only R$5000 a month (approximately $68), a low salary even by Indian standards. Moreover, I learned that their payment would be reduced to R$3000 (approximately $41) if they ate the café's food during their shift, even though most of them work 10-12 hours a day. This example prompts us to think about the ways artists can be accountable to their subjects and how aesthetics can be useful to the people it represents.

I started to pay attention to the NGOs' founders and artists' posts on social media. For example, I remember one photograph in particular posted by Niraj Gera next to Jyoti Singh's mother, Asha Devi, after her daughter's murderers had been executed. Gera congratulated Asha Devi for the execution and called it a "happy day," although there was no indication on how she reacted to this execution. His smile elided the many other gang-rapes, murders, and acid attacks that happened after Jyoti Singh's death. There was no critique evident in that photograph. Nothing was being said of the violent structures that make these attacks possible – the patriarchal mindset of these individuals – and what could be done to definitely change this scenario.

This situation brings me back to the question I posed in the prologue of my dissertation: "Do these representations offer survivors the social justice that they lack in real life?" The answer is not clear-cut due to the heterogeneity of these artworks. The painting Faceless certainly does

not offer any comfort to survivors because it further disfigures them. *Chhapaak,* on the other hand, brings to light the exploitation of survivors by NGOs in the hopes for a positive change.

On the other hand, through social media survivors still have a better chance to bring a real change to their society. During the pandemic, survivors engaged with the current affairs of their country. Rani, for example, posted a video, in which she not only criticized models of protective masks that were not accommodating of non-normative bodies, but also taught survivors how to remain safe during the pandemic. In her video, she tried a mask that is hooked behind the ears. However, since she lost one of her ears due to the acid attack, she shows that that type of mask is not suitable for her body. She then gets another mask, which can be tied on the back of the head and easily ties it, demonstrating that, with that type of mask, she can be protected during the pandemic. Rani not only shows her scars to the public via social media, she does so with the intent to educate people, both acid-attack survivors and non-acid attack survivors. Therefore, there is a social commitment in her performance in front of the camera, a social commitment deeply embedded in the *refigurative* acid aesthetic. While on an immediate level, Rani's performance is didactic, it should also be understood as performative, bringing her subjectivity into being by acting for an audience. She provokes neither pity nor social action but performs jesting and accommodation.

Many survivors post videos of themselves dancing to the soundtrack of Indian film songs to critique standards of beauty. Rupali, for example, used to be a professional dancer before being attacked with acid. She often posts videos of herself dancing. These are not just expressions of happy moments. The depiction of the disfigured female body dancing to an Indian film song has to be understood in contrast to the stereotypical female body of actresses in these films. These are very rich materials that one can work with to further the understanding of representations of acid-

attack survivors in India and survivors' own aesthetic choices. Engaging the aesthetic as a production of beauty with only tenuous and very complex connections to didacticism, politicization, or social movements.

Some survivors, however, have had their social media platforms coopted by non-disfigured people. I have mentioned in my dissertation that I was surprised to know that a volunteer at Sheroes Hangout Café was posting for the survivors as if they were the creators of the posts. Recently, I have seen some survivors, who do not speak English, posting very often in English. This might be a sign that volunteers are again posting as survivors. Some of these posts are created in a *disfigurative* charity mode, emphasizing survivors' facial scars, and with the objective of arousing pity in the viewers. In one instance, I asked a volunteer if one specific post in English by a survivor had been created by her or by someone in the NGO. The volunteer not only confirmed that that post had been created by a volunteer, but also said that many posts in Hindi are also created by volunteers and posted for her. This attitude not only caters to an international audience, but also undermines the capacity of survivors to communicate their thoughts, ideas, and emotions directly to their viewers. Volunteer posts do not accord with the priorities of the survivor's aesthetics which are far more focused on the production of happiness as survivance.

My last thoughts on this material refer to its apparent didacticism as well as its political aspect. I will raise some concerns here in order to activate my readers' opinions. However, I will address these questions in future works. As an aesthetic form that seeks overall social justice, inclusion, and solidarity, these representations also seem to be didactic at different levels. The main concern with an art that is didactic is whether there is something misrepresentative about the didactic imperative in reading survivors' selfies. Is this approach an instrumental view of art that reduces the aesthetic experience of the viewer? If didacticism is an imperative in reading these

representations, does it instrumentalize the women they represent? Is the political aspect of this aesthetic coopted by its didacticism or are there other ways to think about the political beyond social movements? When we read this art politically, do we miss the artistic, the pleasure, and the contemplation? What I can say for now is that this art has given voice to those who have been injured in order to teach us. By doing that, the didactic aspect of the art changes it for itself to an art for the other. In this process the political aspect of art happens through the engagement with the readers.

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APPENDIX A

SUMMARY OF AKIRA

As a child, Akira lived happily with her family in Jodhpur and had a special connection with her father who, having speech impairment himself, was a teacher of Indian sign language. One day, Akira witnessed a young girl being attacked with acid at a bus stop by a boy this girl had rejected. The survivor returns to her house and is frightened by the sight of her new face in the mirror. She screams in front of all her terrified neighbors in a perfect display of acid disfigurement as spectacle that shocks everyone, including Akira.

After the police ask if anyone had seen the crime, Akira comes forward with the information about the attacker who is then arrested. The attacker's friends, frustrated with his imprisonment, threaten Akira with a knife and inflict a small cut on her face. Akira's father then enrolls her in a karate class, so that she can protect herself. The fact that Akira's father never goes to the police to report the incident and opts only to train Akira is a way to portray a failed judicial system. The Indian judicial system becomes even more discredited throughout the film. Due to the attacker's family political connections, he is soon released. When Akira goes to the bus stop she sees that he and his friends are harassing other girls. Akira tells her father who they are. Her father, in sign language, tells her to beat them up, which she does. Angry for being hurt by Akira, the attacker gets his bottle of acid and tries to throw it on her, but he is faced with a karate move that makes him drop the acid on his own face. Akira is arrested for supposedly attacking him. "Everyone saw what happened, but the boy's father had a huge vote-bank supporting him", says the narrator. "Your honor, this girl assaulted my client first. It was an unprovoked attack," affirms the prosecutor. Akira spends three years in jail while her attorney tries to prove her innocence.

The plot fast-forwards fourteen years and by this time, Akira's father is already deceased. Akira becomes an introverted young woman who rarely smiles. When Akira and her mother move to Mumbai to help her brother with his newborn, Akira prefers to stay in her college dorm. She sees herself using her karate skills against bullies at the Holy Cross College.

One night, the police officer Govind Rane bumps into one of the college professors with his car and beats him up because the professor complains about Rane's behavior. The college students organize a protest to deliver a petition against Rane to the Commissioner. The police officers use brutality to scare the students away. Only Akira persists. She hands over the signed petition to the Commissioner when he arrives.

Later, while patrolling the highway, Rane sees a car crash and goes to investigate. He finds a bag of money in the trunk of the car. Thinking that the driver is dead he decides to keep the money. However, the driver recovers and confronts him. Rane then kills the driver. Rane's lover, Maya, records Rane talking on the phone about the crime and tries to find two hitmen to kill him and get the money from him. However, while in a café, the daughter of the principal of the Holy Cross College steals the camera from Maya's bag and later calls Rane to demand the money in exchange for the recording. Rane, after killing Maya, finds out that the camera was stolen by a student from the Holy Cross College and sends two officers to kill the student. Meanwhile, the principal of the college places a bag with stolen items, including the camera, in front of Akira's room. When the police officers arrive and sees her with the bag, they take her away. They also find the two men Maya tried to convince to work for her as hitmen and take the three of them to the forest to be killed. When only Akira is left to be shot at, Rane calls the officers saying they got the wrong girl. The girl who had stolen the camera was not Akira. Akira sees an opportunity to escape. However, since she witnessed the murder of the two men by the police officers, she is

captured and sent to a mental hospital. There she is kept drugged so that she would not give away the names of the police officers involved in the killing of the brother of a North Indian politician, during the car accident, and the stealing of his money, among other crimes.

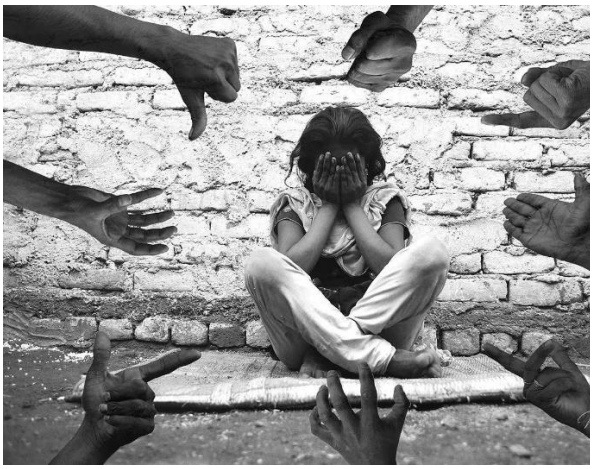
Doctor Tiwari lies to her family telling them that she was diagnosed with recurrent persistent delusion. The broken Indian justice system, which has already failed Akira, fails her once again. She escapes with the help of a transgender patient and manages to come up with a plan to prove to her family that she is not delusional. Rabiya, a pregnant police officer who is investigating possible crimes by officer Govind Rane and his team, arrives to arrest them and free Akira. However, the police Commissioner calls Rabiya and tells her not to arrest the officers because the man they murdered on the highway was the brother of a north Indian political party's top leader – Bablu Tiwari – who was involved earlier in provoking riots in Mumbai. His brother was coming to Mumbai to give money to host a huge political event. If Bablu Tiwari were to find out that his brother did not die in a car accident, but that the Mumbai police had killed him, he would provoke riots once again. The Commissioner had talked to the Secretariat and he ordered the case closed. The only honest police officer depicted in the film (who happens to be a woman) is powerless to bring justice to Akira because only by her going to the governmental asylum can thousands of lives be saved from a possible riot in Mumbai. Akira would be compensated after spending a few months in the hospital, which she describes as: "First you gouge both my eyes out, and then give me an expensive walking-stick." Even though Rabiya lets Akira kill the corrupt officers, including Rane, Akira has to go once again to the hospital in order to fake the report. Both Rabiya and Akira's agency are limited by the wishes of the police Commissioner and Secretariat. Once again Akira is played by the system and is incarcerated. After being released, she moves back to her village in Jodhpur to teach speech-impaired children.

APPENDIX B

GERA'S SERIES OF PHOTOGRAPHS "SACRED TRANSFORMATIONS"

"Gudiya"
Description: The photograph is symbolic of the damage caused to girls and women in our society because of crimes like, female [sic] foeticide, dowry death, human trafficking, sexual offences etc. It shows the existence of the deplorable reality of a life as good as that of this breathless Gudiya.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Missing the Springtime of Life"
Description: This picture represents the sad reality of our children, specially girls, who are devoid of their childhood. They spend their days, not in school, but in their and others' homes doing the daily household chores. They are devoid of the love and care which is required to nurture them. The gendered conditioning starts at an age too young to believe.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)



"A Confined Life"
Description: The picture shows how the restrictions, questions, threats, violence, demoralization, harassment, societal pressure etc. is imposed upon a female in order to keep her 'in control'. Her freedom is left at the mercy of the patriarchal society and her life is confined to their command/wishes.

"Weapon of Massive Destruction"
Description: The picture captures the harsh reality of open and unregulated sale of acids which can be conveniently acquired by the perpetrators and be used as a tool for disfiguring and destroying lives.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Flames of Revenge"
Description: The photograph of an acid attack shows how a spark of revenge or anger can burn down somebody's life to ashes by the inhumane act of acid attack.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Inflamed Uproar"
Description: The photograph is only an attempt to express the unimaginable intensity of inflammation and excruciating pain that an acid attack survivor goes through when attacked by acid. It not only causes the skin tissues to melt but also sometimes can dissolve the bones too. The severe damage which is caused can also pose a great risk of death.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Inscribed Trauma"
Description: The photograph shows how such news are far more than just the remains of injustice. The regret of having stepped out on the fateful day, the fear of never being able to get back what is lost, the guilt of having caused the family and her own self physical, mental and economic hardship are only a few things which keep coming back as nightmares on reading such news.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"The Bandage of Misery"
Description: The photograph depicts that the very first operation is only a start to the several other operations which they have to undergo, and that the bandage is a constant reminder of the fear of entering into a skin which wouldn't look any where near to familiar the one she is accustomed to. It is no less a fear than that of a serious identity crisis. There are many acid attack survivors who undergo more than 20-30 operations for the reconstruction of skin.

(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Haunted by Myself"

Description: This picture expresses the hatred which grows inside of the survivor because of the behavioral change in people around her, including her very own family members. Many times, even their own family members refuse to support and stand by the survivors, they, in fact, try disassociating themselves with them. This puts the survivors in a state of repulsion against her own self.

(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Trapped in Agony"

Description: Amidst the hardship and sufferings, there is a soul, which is troubled, shaken and trapped into something it could never dream of. It feels like a nightmare, where the person is struggling to wake up and get back to reality.

(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Unendurable Reality"

Description: Sometimes it is difficult to bear the truth, especially when it is unendurably painful. The photograph is about the disheartening struggle with reality. It shows the inability accept the jarring fact of life.

(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"A Struggle to Break Free"

Description: Coming to terms with the reality wasn't easy, but accepting to live with it is even more torturing. The emotional upheaval which keeps resurfacing pushes against the heart the desire to break free.

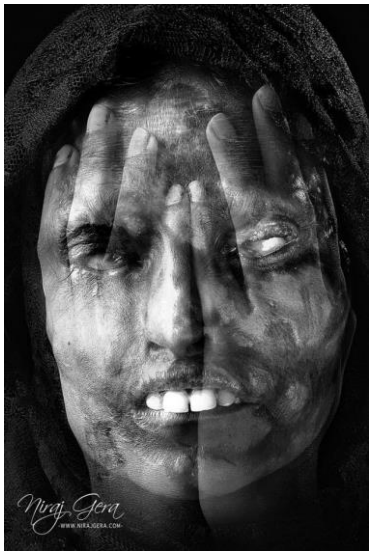
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Lost Hopes"
Description: This powerful photograph captures the feeling of emptiness expressed through the eyes of an acid attack survivor. It represents the lost hope in her own self and in everything around her.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Bars of Stigmatization"
Description: The photograph shows that because of the stigmatization and insensitive treatment by the society the acid attack survivor not only loses her self-confidence but is also fettered and victimized by notions which the world builds against her.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Tears of Nostalgia"
Description: The photograph depicts a moment where the acid attack survivor nostalgically looks at an old picture of her and wishes to rewind time. There are also survivors who don't even have a picture to share how they used to look prior to the attack.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"The Better Half"
Description: Both the pictures are of the same person, sharing the same life and experiences. How one judges which is the better half will be based on their perception of beauty.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)



"Unconcealable Scathe"
Description: The photograph shows that no matter how hard the acid attack survivor may try to hide her burns, in order to escape any embarrassment or awkwardness, the discomfort will continue to haunt her.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Veil of Reluctance"
Description: It is not very easy to face the world, knowing that the world is not going to look at you the same way as it used to. The photograph shows an acid attack survivor resorting to veil by compulsion because of the stares and insensitivity which instils reluctance in them
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"The Wounds Heal, but the Scars Remain"
Description: The survivors usually have to undergo multiple surgeries for treatment. The surgery might help them recover, but it cannot take away the scars (physical as well as mental) the incident has left upon the survivors.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Befriending Isolation"
Description: The photograph shows the plight of the survivor, and the sense of isolation which creeps in as a result of not being able to 'fit in' in social or economic setups. Many a times the insensitivity makes them want to quit their life
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Behind the Smile"
Description: The photograph symbolically shows the sadness and pain which they carry behind their smile. It is important to take notice of that and help them cope with it.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"A Token of Love"
Description: The photograph shows the irony of love and its expression. On the one hand, we have lovers like Shah Jahan who created memorial like the beautiful Taj Mahal as an expression of an everlasting love for their beloved, while, on the other hand we have fanatics who mistook their desire for love and tried to attack and disfigure the identity of their 'beloved' by throwing acid upon them. This was his token of love for her.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Unfair & Dreadly"
Description: The photograph tries to show the harsh reality of our society, where acid is available as easily as any beauty cream, and its one time use is more than sufficient to impact one's entire life, by turning it upside down, tearing them apart and pulling them to the scariest darkness of life.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Stepping Inward"
Description: The photograph shows a small but a significant step towards bringing a transformation in the survivors' lives. It shows how meditation can help them connect with themselves and help them regain the lost hope. Meditation and spiritual practices help in bringing positivity in life.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Untainted Love"
Description: No matter what the world throws at you, from a mother you can always expect unconditional Love. The photograph captures an intimate moment between a mother and her daughter, both of whom were attacked by her own husband. It also tries to send across the message that, love moves the world. We can be more generous by being more loving. A loving environment helps the survivors overcome and cope with the trauma soon.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"The Power of Faith"
Description: The photograph shows that the survivor's faith in the almighty helped them sustain through the toughest phase of their lives and has made them stronger with time and experience. It has also imbibed in them the quality of appreciating and being grateful for every the little thing which lighten up their life
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Neglect the Negatives"
Description: Negativity around the survivors only solidifies the misery. The photograph shows a survivor resolving cheerfully to not let her conscience get consumed & troubled by any negative speech, sight or dialogue and to establish positivity into her life by learning to channelize the energy into everything uplifting and positive.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Evolution"
Description: The photograph portrays the courageous emotional journey of a transfiguration after the attack. Her evolution from a broken and hesitant woman to a woman full of confidence and resilience.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Rising from darkness"
Description: No misery has lasted forever, and this one too had to pass. The photograph shows the growth of the survivor from hiding behind the veils, to leaving the veil behind her, from fighting the darkness of reluctance, self-doubt, lack of confidence and value for the self to rising from it. None of the scars can put her to shame anymore, because she is now comfortable in her own skin.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Body, Mind & Soul"
Description: The compilation tries to show the value of a wholesome growth through yoga, meditation and spiritual practices which helps in sustaining a healthy life. It heals even those injuries which might not be visible to the eyes, helping them to relax and let go things which are not required to be accumulated (stress, negativity etc.)

"My Smile is my Strength"
Description: I no longer use a smile just to hide my pain. My smile comes from within, and I cannot afford to lose it! It has taken me time and courage to understand the value of smile. Truly, it's priceless. The joy which comes from within is priceless. A simple smile can brighten your day and also somebody else's too. So remind yourself often to smile.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"My Confidence speaks for me"
Description: This photo depicts the confidence which the survivors have come to acquire. They no more hold back themselves and have gone on to participate & inspire others to value everything they have got, through their experiences and to stand against what's wrong and to encourage what's right. They stand against acid attack, and have become the voice of many who are yet to come out of their veil and face the world.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Because I have a brother, I'll always have a friend"
Description: It is always assuring to know that someone's got your back. To know that you have a friend, a family whom you can trust and look forward to in times, good or bad. This is a photograph of one such assuring relationship.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Falling in love with myself"
Description: The world appears beautiful when one is happy from within. The photograph shows one such moment, where the survivor adores herself. She is no more stuck with the nostalgia and has been able to break through the shackles of societal norms of beauty. She is now in love with herself!
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Together We Smile, Together We Rise"
Description: The photograph shows a shining example of a great support system. The survivors and their loved ones, in all unity, stand by each other. This has helped them overcome fear and spread happiness.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"The circle of Love"
Description: We all know about the circle of Karma, but nothing can defeat this circle. The survivors live like a family. They have fun, the also fight, just like any of us. But what binds them strong is their love and understanding for each other.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"I am Beautiful"
Description: The photograph shows the confidence which the survivor has come to acquire and the belief in her ownself might also end up giving you a complex.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"A Heart Full of Soul"
Description: We all carry a heart in us; the photograph show that they too have one which knows understands the language of love just like ours. It shows that love is a connection between souls, and cannot be bound by differences.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Victorious Beauty: The Unrobable Joy"
Description: The photograph displays the joy and enthusiasm of the survivor, which she realized, is her very nature and nobody can rob her of what exclusively belongs to her.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

"Make a Wish"
Description: The photograph depicts the beauty of a survivor and how, just like any of us, she too has a beautiful world of her dreams full of wonders which nobody could, and nobody can ever snatch away, not even her perpetrators.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

“Breathing Freedom”
Description: The picture depicts the spirit of freedom and a sense of hope that is withheld in the eyes of the survivor for an ever growing and ever evolving self.
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

APPENDIX C

PHOTOS BY RAHUL SAHARAN, SURABHI JAISWAL, AND PASCAL MANNAERTS

Photograph by Rahul Saharan
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

Photograph by Surabhi Jaiswal
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

Photograph by Rahul Saharan
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

Photograph by Pascal Mannaerts
(Photo reproduced with permission from the photographer)

Photograph by Rahul Saharan
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