

Acid Attack - Representations, Recollections, and Resistance in *Being Reshma* by Reshma Qureshi with Tania Singh

Ega Peter & Sijo Varghese C.

Abstract

The last decade witnessed the publication of numerous books depicting survivors of acid attacks. This study will focus on one of them, a memoir-*Being Reshma* by Reshma Qureshi with Tania Singh, a survivor's narrative following an acid attack. The book vividly describes the agony of the attack, the subsequent hurdles in receiving medical care, the constant financial burdens, and most importantly, the everyday battle of stigma, stereotypes, and scrutiny. This research paper intends to study how survivors refuse to be reduced to victims of overt acid violence, and also the covert patriarchal violence that helps propagate such attacks. 'Bestial' tropes and images that manifest as derogatory and stigmatising identities when attributed to the survivors of acid attacks will be scrutinised to understand how victim-blaming manifests and is used as a tool to control the survivors. Further, the myriad ways of assertion and affirmation of agency over their own lives, and not letting them be restricted to survivor narratives of inspiration will be analysed.

Keywords: Acid attack; Disability; Disfigurement; Resistance; Stigma; Victim-blaming.

The disability inflicted through acid attack is perhaps not as pervasive in the world as it is in South Asian countries. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that the gendered nature of acid attacks and its variegated sexist dimensions are unique to the Indian cultural milieu. An awareness that acid attack is a gender-based violence and a vague reading of Judith Butler's theories is enough to confirm that violence against oppressed groups is normalised to maintain the equilibrium in both gender and power relations. Acid attack, also known as vitriolage or vitriolism (Goswami

and Handa 74), is not a new form of violence. However, its inclusion into the Indian Penal Code came quite late in the day- in the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, to be precise. It was only three years later that the disability caused by acid attack was recognized as 'valid' and made its way into the Rights of People with Disability Act, 2016. This traumatic act of terror has had a drastic proliferation in recent years. A look at any Indian news media cross-referenced with the National Crime Records Bureau will show an alarming increase in cases of acid attack every year- and these are only the figures that get reported. One can only fathom the number of acid attacks that go unreported, and the grave injustice it causes to the victims.

Acid attacks are fairly simple to describe- these are acts of violence using corrosive substances usually thrown over another individual with the intention to "maim, disfigure, torture or kill" (Lewis et al). The reasons for resorting to acid attacks are comprehensible too; As Kuriakose et al state, "The most common motive that drove criminals to use acid as a weapon against women was to instill in her a sense of obedience, restoring the honour of the family, revenge for rejecting marriage proposals or any other long-standing disputes between families or groups" (71). But the mind-sets that underpin these attacks are far more complicated.

I screamed in pain as they threw acid on me. Slithering on the ground I clawed at the melting niqab like a rabid animal. I screamed in anger and I writhed in agony over the loss of my dignity. (*Being Reshma* 76).

Seventeen-year-old Reshma was on her way to give an exam when she was attacked with acid by her brother-in-law and his two relatives. Her sister Gulshan had escaped from her abusive husband Jamaluddin's family, and attacking Reshma with acid was his way of seeking revenge. The attack had left Reshma severely and permanently disfigured. Tellingly, one of the first things she mentions following the attack is how she agonised over "the loss of [her] dignity". Etymologically, the word 'dignity' comes from Latin *dignitas* by way of French *dignité*, which means 'worthiness'. But what is this worthiness that Reshma talks about? Siddika and Baruah in their insightful paper claim that "In patriarchal societies, a woman's appearance is often assumed to be her only asset or resource; this may explain why perpetrators tend to target and disfigure the faces of female victims..." (6). This is a sentiment Reshma herself reiterates: "Jamaluddin probably knew how concerned I was with beauty and realized it would be the ultimate act of revenge to take mine away" (*BR* 131). By taking away

her beauty, Reshma is made unavailable for a marital alliance, which ultimately is what counts as a woman's worthiness in patriarchal societies.

In our community, women are only appreciated twice in their lives: first, when it is time for them to get married, and second, when they give birth to a male heir. (*Being Reshma* 37).

Reshma's family is a microcosm of any typical Indian family which wants white-collar jobs for their sons, and a happy marriage for their daughters. Success is hence differently measured for sons and daughters within the family- if a high salary is the marker of achievement for sons, a quick marriage is the sole criterion that counts as achievement for daughters. Reshma ruminates on how the equation of marriage with success is taught to girls as young as six years of age when she narrates a childhood incident- Reshma had unknowingly bartered her gold anklets for a packet of biscuits. The panic that ensues quickly progresses from the money lost to the prospect of marriage. Her mind quickly associates the gold anklets with a marriage, and she recollects how one of her neighbours had "committed suicide when her wedding was called off because the man she loved was not pleased with the gold he had been given" (*BR* 8). At age six, Reshma was already indoctrinated with the idea that gold was valuable because it was an investment for her marriage in the foreseeable future. Reshma, thus, is representative of almost all young Indian girls who are trained to be meek wives from a young age.

Domestic duties are almost always the terrain of women. When Reshma's mother falls sick, her elder sisters Gulshan and Nargis, both still in their teens, drop out of school to take care of their mother. Her father and elder brothers contributed to the expenditure of medical care. Gender roles are clearly dictated right from childhood. Reshma innocently quotes how things were in her family: "Ammi made sure that we understood the heavy responsibilities our brothers and father had to bear for our well-being... We fight, argue, and love as equals, but things weren't the same while we were growing up. The word 'bhai' in itself laid out a hierarchy within the siblings" (*BR* 2).

As with her mother, the responsibility of bringing in the finances for Reshma's treatment following the attack fell with the males of the family. Her father, Baba, started working double shifts, and her brother Aizaz, started reaching out to anyone who could help. As Reshma herself explains, "We had no money for further surgeries and borrowing was no longer an option... So many of us in India struggle to find help because we don't know

where to look and because of the lack of proper network..." (BR 151). This is the sad reality that awaits these survivors- a lack of financial succour. Even though multiple institutions and NGOs are equipped and ready to help the survivors, the truth is that members of the survivors' families are unaware of the proper channels that could aid them.

Unfortunately, the plight doesn't end there. In fact, it begins right from the time the attack is carried out. Reshma recollects how nobody tried to stop the perpetrators from attacking her; neither did help arrive anytime soon after it. As Reshma lay writhing in pain, Gulshan shouted out for help. But nobody responds, and Reshma tells us why: "I think they were afraid of the system, the unspoken laws of our village. I think they assumed that my attackers were powerful goons, and any attempt to stop them might mean a similar consequence for themselves" (BR 77). This is true of almost all types of urgent events, like accidents, that necessitate immediate medical intervention. Onlookers and witnesses could be well-intentioned but refuse to help owing to the fear of administrative and bureaucratic battles. As Reshma herself explains, ignorance could be a factor too. It was only when she was lying burning in the hospital ward that the doctor mentioned dousing her with water within three seconds of the attack would have salvaged most of her face. But nobody knew or did that, until hours later at the hospital.

After the show was over, they turned their backs on me, the way I imagine they ignore injured stray animals every day. A stray dog, living or dead is of no value to most of us... (*Being Reshma* 78).

Again, Reshma strikes a chord with her choice of words- like a 'stray dog', she was of no 'value'. Given the context, it is unlikely that Reshma is talking about ethical values. Then one can assume that she is talking about economic value here- which is nothing but a measure of benefit that can be gained from something/someone. 'Measure', 'benefit', and 'gain' are all highly commercial words, all pointing to the commodification of the self. Neoliberalism, Kelly Somers and Karen Soldatic argue, reduces the value of life to economic efficiency and disassembles the bodies and minds of workers of all species to increase pace, production, and efficiency (Jenkins et al 2). Bereft of 'worthiness' and 'value', Reshma equates herself with a stray dog.

Interspersed throughout the book are various bestial references. Animal imageries are used to describe a variety of things- the brute strength of her attackers (calling her attackers monsters), Reshma's own agony following

the attack (comparing herself to a rabid dog), and how she was perceived after the attack: "I knew that my face was damaged, but this face in the mirror wasn't mine. It looked like a strange creature that could not have been me" (BR 135). But it quickly escalates from 'strange creature' to the very image she used to describe her attackers: "I couldn't go out in public like this. People would think I was diseased or, worse, a walking curse... No one deserved to be burdened by my monstrosity" (BR 135). Reshma unknowingly stigmatises herself. However, she is probably only repeating what she has observed her entire life. People with visible disabilities are always shunned by the society. Society deems them 'contagious', or 'facing the wrath of God'- both entirely wrong and steeped in ignorant stereotyping. But what troubles Reshma the most is the stereotyping she faces from her own relatives:

He believed that I must have done something wrong to instigate a 'good man like Jamaluddin' to attack me. 'Girls nowadays are really chalu...'. He was, in essence, implying that I was at fault. Perhaps I was having an affair with a man who could taint my family's image and Jamaluddin was simply trying to protect our family's honour. (BR 142)

The key word here is 'honour'. Acid violence is nearly always dubbed as a 'crime of passion'. However, more often than not, it is premeditated and driven by a misconstrued notion of what honour entails. A threat to 'taint' a family's reputation is enough not just to resort to such a gruesome form of violence, but also to justify it. But what is so achingly painful is also how Reshma herself has internalised such patriarchal notions. She says she couldn't comprehend why she was chosen to be attacked: "I went to school, wore the hijab by choice, and had never even had a boyfriend," she says (BR 142). But does that mean dropping out of school, not wearing a hijab by choice, or having a boyfriend warrant being attacked by acid? But she does stumble upon the truth in one of her musings, putting to words the undercurrents of patriarchy that help propagate acid attacks- "A woman's worth in my country, and in so many places around the world, is often judged by her looks and her ability and willingness to be a dutiful wife and mother" (BR 143). Any form of transgression is met with severe backlash from the guardians of patriarchy- in the case of acid attack, this severe backlash, called victim-blaming, is prompted even without any transgression.

Victim-blaming is almost always a given with survivors of acid attacks. This was a sentiment that even the protectors of law and order, the Police,

also shared: "Who knows what she must have done to bring this on herself?" (BR 83), asks one of the policemen. Reshma had been taken to the Police Station because the hospital refused to admit her without an FIR. The law clearly dictates that in the case of trauma victims, an eyewitness account is sufficient to seek admission to the hospital. However, Reshma ends up bearing the brunt of innumerable bureaucratic flaws. Additionally, she was the cynosure of all eyes that humiliated her for her situation—the situation of being a victim of acid attack. She says: "...they insulted my situation by suggesting that no man would carry out such a vicious attack without cause. No man could be that crazy without reason. I didn't know about 'victim-blaming' back then, but I believe that's what was going on" (BR 143). Victim-blaming is a form of social control to maintain the power relations over subordinated groups. Laura Finley implies that, "impunity toward perpetrators, social permissiveness, history of punishment towards women, [and] male-dominated resources" all assist and propagate acid attack (Patel 4).

The media, too, had a debilitating effect on Reshma's mental health. They had sensationalised her attack for readership/viewership. In one of the dailies, "The headline read: '*Kaash Usne Maut Di Hoti*' ('I Wish He Had Granted Me Death')" (BR 152). Why is acid attack considered a fate worse than death? Indeed, the pain and trauma are unbearable, but is that all that stimulates the Thanatos or death-wish for the survivor in readers/viewers? A survivor may wish for death as a result of PTSD, but what drives others to wish for a similar fate for the survivor? The answer can again be found in the deeply ingrained notions of beauty as the only asset a woman possesses dictated by patriarchy. Devoid of her face, a woman is without value or worth. She can only be a burden and is better off dead.

Even at the hospital, Reshma had to face many obstacles: "I wish the embarrassment of being treated like an animal, being pushed to the ground... was all I would have to deal with," (BR 72) she says after a fateful trip to the hospital. The facilities, or the lack of it, were subpar. All the burn victims were couped in a dingy ward, with no screens to separate each other. The floors were dirty, and the bedsheets were smeared with blood and pus. Already traumatised, Reshma couldn't handle staying in the Burns ward and she says: "No matter how many sponge baths they gave me, the entire ward smelt like there was a dead, rotting rodent amongst us" (BR 97). It was not just the infrastructure at the hospital that was troublesome to Reshma, but her doctor too. Although highly accomplished, Dr. Jain was an egotistical man who treated his patients like lab rats and shoved them in other patients' faces to show off his dexterity.

"I realized I had no future. If I did leave the hospital, what exactly would my life be like" (Being Reshma 133).

Alienated and depressed, Reshma had contemplated suicide. The trauma she had undergone was baffling to her friends and family, which only made her condition worse. A study by Mamta Patel showed that "Acid attack victims reported higher levels of anxiety, depression, due to their appearance. Additionally, the women reported lowered self-esteem according to the Rosenberg Scale and increased self-consciousness, both in general and in the social sphere" (2). Reshma was finally taken to a psychiatrist, which turned out to be a blessing for her state of mind- "The doctor...was the first person I had met who saw my behaviour as normal. While my family and friends continued to try and 'normalize' me, they didn't realize my behaviour was already rather 'normal' for someone in my situation" (BR 150). She also finds solace and solidarity in another survivor, Laila, who was presented to her by Dr. Jain as a trophy of his skills as a surgeon. Laila, by being unapologetically herself, instilled in Reshma a belief in a better future. Most of the survivors of acid attacks hide their faces as a way of 'passing'. Erving Goffman defines passing as a strategy for managing the stigma of "spoiled identities"- those identities discredited by law, opinion, or social convention (Siebers 67). Thus, passing is a way to appear 'normal'. Laila, however, refuses to 'pass'. Reshma observes:

It made me sad to realize that so many women had no power over their own lives and that the only succour they had was derived from listening to stories from other women in similar states of misery. It was as if they were finding comfort in their despair, and the more stories they shared, the more courage they found in each other as sisters. (BR 56)

With her newfound courage, Reshma finally decides to turn a fresh leaf and refuse to be labelled as just a 'victim' of a horrific crime. The first thing she does with this courage is take ownership of her own story and to be not reduced to others' stories of her. She asserts: "...I felt I had a right to my own story...my story should be mine to tell" (BR 159). Storytelling, for a survivor of any traumatic experience, is a tremendous way of meaning-making and managing the trauma. As Michael Bérubé elaborates: "... Evocritics, or "literary Darwinists," who argue not merely that we are hardwired for storytelling...but also that our capacity for storytelling has survival value—it is an *adaptation*, an evolutionary contrivance..." (3).

Next, her target was to make her story get heard, loud and clear, to a maximum number of people. She was helped with this target by Ria Sharma, the founder of the NGO, Make Love Not Scars (MLNS). Ria encouraged her to make public appearances and give interviews so that people would listen to her story in her own voice- "I agreed because I now wanted to channel my anger towards making a positive change...All I had was my voice and my newfound convictions" (BR 171). The final goal was to make a positive impact by changing the system. For this, MLNS corroborated with a reputed advertising and public relations agency to circulate hard-hitting messages against the sale of acid. This was done through beauty tutorial videos by Reshma, who simultaneously achieved two victories by her very presence- one, establishing that beauty is only skin deep, and two, sharing the dire reality of acid sale and its effects.

Reshma, overnight, is a roaring success. Her story resonated with millions around the globe. She refused to bow down to the bestial claws of patriarchy that permanently disfigured her once, by asserting her agency through her own voice.

Endnotes

¹The most commonly used substance in acid attacks is sulphuric acid, aka, oil of vitriol; hence, it is called vitriolage.

² Acid Survivors Trust International (ASTI) is one of the organizations whose sole purpose is to work towards the end of acid violence across the world. Recognizing the need for local knowledge and expertise in order to combat acid violence effectively ASTI founded and continues to support the development of six partner organizations in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Pakistan, Nepal, Uganda, and India.

³The Rosenberg Scale is a self-esteem measure used in social science research. It was developed by the sociologist Morris Rosenberg.

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