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## **I look & feel different': A Qualitative Enquiry of Post-Traumatic Growth among Acid Attack Survivors**

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### **Abstract**

Violence against women is a common phenomenon in different parts of the world, leaving them with physical and psychological damage because of the violent acts. In India, acid attack is one such violent crime inflicted on women. The aim of this study is to understand the trauma associated with such a heinous crime and how the acid attack survivors dealt with the trauma of the acid attack. Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with ten acid attack survivors and themes were drawn out based on the factors that helped them in their post-traumatic growth, using thematic analysis. Four major themes emerged which facilitated the post-traumatic growth among the survivors: introspection about life, social relationships, sense of self and spiritual beliefs. Of these main themes, more sub-themes were derived which showed the factors that helped in the post-traumatic growth of the survivors. Post-traumatic growth after acid attack is a perplexing experience, which requires tremendous physical, emotional, social and institutional support. This study highlights the need for more rehabilitative models for helping these survivors grow out of their trauma.

**Key Words:** acid attack, post-traumatic growth, violence against women, trauma.

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## Introduction

Over the years, the position of women has undergone many changes. In the ancient times, women were equivalent partners to men, which changed to being subjected to domination in the medieval years, followed by current status of advancement with equivalent rights (Savita, 2010), in the fields of education, health and technology. However, the influence of the medieval years is still present, with women constantly being torn between being independent and being submissive to the male members. Because of this constant struggle, women are subjected to violent behaviors by the male counter parts who want the women to submit to them. Masculinity of men are more socially expressed when they subject the women to violence and if women challenge the man's masculinity by not fulfilling the ascribed roles, they are then subjected to violent behaviors by men (ICRW, 2014).

The cultural weaving of the Indian society itself encourages violence against women to some extent, as women themselves justify violence faced by them in the hands of their husbands or other males. The concept of violence against women is so deeply woven into the fabric of the Indian society that if they face violence, they blame themselves and indulge in self-blame and self-victimization, leading to feelings of shame (Lutwak, Panish & Ferrari, 2003) and low self-esteem (Clements, Sabourin & Spiby, 2004). This, in itself, sends a message that violence such as rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment and other forms of violence are acceptable and are under victim's own control (Koss, Figuredo & Prince, 2002). The experience of violence is experienced by all women, irrespective of their socio-economical and educational class, power relations, religion and cultural belief system, as there is deeper

idea of masculinity in male dominance (Bitangora, 1999).

Men indulge in more crimes and violence because of their biological beliefs of their divine masculinity and socio-cultural structure (Connell, 1995). There is a belief of patriarchal masculinity in the Indian society, which is deeply entrenched into the internal belief systems, interpersonal interactions, institutions and ideological belief systems. Thus, men's criminality has effects on behavior and attitude on both the victim and the perpetrator, with women and children being primary victims of such crimes (Buvinic, Morrison & Shifter, 1999). In order to show their manhood and sense of entitlement, women are used as sexual objects in various sex practices, leaving them with high risk pregnancies, HIV-risks and many more problems. The impact of this is majorly on the women's self-esteem, with the understanding that their body is only for 'men's use'. Moreover, in India, previous experience of victimization on women is considered as the life course for further deserving violence, as girls subjected to childhood violence experience sexual aggression or intimate partner violence because they think that they 'deserve' it and it is men's rights (Fergusson, Horwood & Lynskey, 1997). In most violence cases, the women fears to call out the men, in fear of further violence against the children, relatives or themselves.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a human rights violation that acts as a barrier to civic, economic and public norms of the societies. There are many forms of gender-based violence but one of the most common yet under-studied forms of gender-based violence is acid attack. In this, acid is most likely to be used as a weapon in order to harm the victim, with goal of disfiguring and torturing the victim rather than killing them. Most damage on the body is done to the face

and the neck, as the attacker targets to make the victim 'ugly' in order to stop them from getting further marriage proposals or suitors for marriage (Patel, 2014). The victims of these attacks have to undergo multiple reconstruction surgeries and prolonged treatment, along with extended psychological, social, cultural and economic difficulties. The recent number of acid attacks in India and its numbers are appalling, with 228, 249 and 182 attacks in the year 2018, 2019 and 2020 (NCRB, 2021).

Acid attack is a traumatizing experience for the victims who undergo psychologically distressful moments. These psychologically distressing moments often leads one to have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but may go undiagnosed in them. However, these aversive circumstances can also lead to personal growth and create greater opportunities for more wisdom (Tennen & Affleck, 2009) that can coexist with the trauma, leading to post-traumatic growth (PTG) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The victims may experience personal transformations, with better understanding and decision-making after their near-death experience of acid attack. Moreover, one of the traits of PTG is that it challenges the core beliefs of the survivors after the near-death experience, also leading to shattering of some of the fundamental assumptions about the world, making these assumptions almost 'invalid' and reexamining some of their core beliefs (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

Any individual going through a trauma experience has high emotional component attached to it, which makes them grow out of their trauma by attaching some meaningful lessons or benefits out of it (Calhoun, Cann & Tedeschi, 2010). This becomes a cognitive work helping in PTG, requiring adjustments to their thoughts and

beliefs about the world, through deliberate rumination, where the survivors think of the event and its aftermath and adjust the emotional distress and develop comprehension about the event and find meaning and draw out a revised narrative of their life (Nelson, 2009). This change in narratives leads them to see their lives in a different light, with some becoming more spiritual or grateful for having a life worth-living. A grateful person after any traumatic experience is more likely to engage in pro-social behavior and have good relationships with others, thereby being more appreciative of their life and others (Wood, Joseph & Maltby, 2008), with more life satisfaction, well-being and social functioning (Emmons, 2007). Moreover, they are likely to see life 'as a gift', thereby decreasing their psychological distress (O'Connor, 2003). Similarly, someone who closely associates oneself to spirituality sees their life as creating or discovering significance and meaning of their traumatic event in emotional and cognitive way (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). Finding meaning of the trauma experience includes two aspects: meaning in occurrence of the event or maintaining a meaningful view of the life, despite the trauma experience (Cox, Resnick & Kilpatrick, 2014).

The profound effects of trauma are long lasting with thoughts such as 'I will never be able to feel normal again,' 'I do not know myself anymore' or 'I have permanently changed for the worse' (Bernstein, & Putman, 1986), along with somatic feelings of 'I feel like my body doesn't belong to me' or 'I feel dead inside' (Neff, 2003). This feeling of bodily sensation is quite important as the acid attack survivors are left with life-long visible scars, which lead them to have emotionally unregulated behaviors. Once the victims are aware about their bodily sensations and their emotions attached to

their physical appearance, they are more likely to be self-accepting towards their flaws. For this, self-compassion is a powerful tool for dealing with trauma and it includes, self-kindness and mindfulness (Whitman, 2007), leading oneself to have more belief and become more aware about oneself. In Indian religious perspective, suffering is not a curse, but a part of unfolding of karma and of past inappropriate actions done in current or previous life (Dutta & Teotia, 2022). This also acts as the way of some trauma survivors to deal with their pain and grow out of them. The current suffering is justified for the debt of the past life experiences and many embrace suffering as a way to progress on the spiritual path (Joseph & Linley, 2005). This acts as a predominant part of the Indian belief system, where the past, present and future is all correlated to each other, helping in post-traumatic growth after a major trauma or suffering such as acid attack, domestic violence or any other abuse.

The current study is an attempt to understand how the acid attack survivors dealt with their trauma and adapted to lead a life that they are leading today. Most often, the psychopathological focus is the only focus of the trauma stories, overlooking the brighter side of their struggles. This investigation is an effort to understand how women subjected to acid attack have adapted out of their incidents and the kind of narratives they have used to change their trauma memories and experiences into opportunities of growth.

While interacting with acid attack survivors for mental health rehabilitation, the first author realized that these women have astonishing stories of resilience and post-traumatic growth, along with their stories of struggle and pain. For fostering these stories of growth, it is important to study the current mental state of these survivors

(Danziger, 2001). Hence, the authors decided to explore more on these stories and help them strengthen their experience to grow out constructively from their trauma.

## Method

### Sample

For this study, interviews of ten acid attack survivors were taken, working in an NGO in India, within the age range of 18-35 years. All the survivors were attacked by people either known to them like family or friend or by strangers. Out of the ten survivors, three of them were married, two were unmarried and five of them were separated or divorced. The victims were attacked in different years, some attacked less than 3 years ago, five of them were attacked between last 3-6 years and two were attacked more than 6 years ago.

### Procedure

This study was done with acid attack survivors working in an NGO in India which provides employment and rehabilitation to these survivors. The purpose of these interviews were explained to each of the participants in group, and then individually, in case of any queries. Informed consent was sought from each of the participant in writing. Ten survivors who agreed to interview were given codes, to maintain their confidentiality. Each of the interviews happened separately, on different days. If the participant was seen distressed at any point of time, they were given the liberty to stop the interview and continue it whenever they want over the next three days. Most of the interviews were for 2-3 sessions, where the first session was spent on explaining the process of the interview, signing of consent letters and rapport formation. Some of the questions asked in the semi-structured

interview were: “How has this acid attack changed your life?”, “What helped you to cope with the difficult times?”, “How has your family helped you?”, “What are your views about life, in general now?” Interviews were recorded with due permission from the participants. Most of the narratives were collected in Hindi, but were later transcribed and translated to English. Thematic analysis was done to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## Results

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Participants**

<b>Characteristics of the Participants</b>		<b>No. of Victims (n=10)</b>
<b>Age</b>	18-25 years	5
	25-35 years	5
<b>Marital Status</b>	Married	3
	Unmarried	2
	Separated/Divorced	5
<b>No. of years from the attack</b>	>3 years	3
	3-6 years	5
	<6 years	2
<b>Attack by</b>	Family Members	4
	Friend(s)/Known	5
	Stranger	1
<b>Legal Status of the Attacker</b>	Convicted	3
	Trial Ongoing	6
	No identification of attacker	1

**Table 2: Themes from the Interview**

<b>Main Theme</b>	<b>Sub-Theme</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Introspection about Life</b>	<b>Meaning-making of Trauma Experience</b>	Developing integrated explanations of the trauma experience.
	<b>Increased Gratefulness</b>	Sense of thankfulness and appreciation towards life.
	<b>Awareness about Death</b>	Close experience with death made them aware about reality of life and death.
	<b>Change in Life Philosophy</b>	Reexamining life and change in perception towards life.
<b>Social Relationships</b>	<b>New Relationships</b>	Formation of new relationships helped them deal with their trauma.
	<b>Empathetic Relationships</b>	Increase in ability to be more empathetic in their relationships.
<b>Sense of Self</b>	<b>Self-Awareness</b>	Knowing oneself better and being more authentic to self.
	<b>Belief in Self</b>	Having faith in self, including one's own strengths and abilities.
<b>Spiritual Beliefs</b>	<b>Sense of Purpose</b>	Finding reason or aim to one's life.
	<b>Shifting of Emotions</b>	Change in emotions due to spiritual practices.

Table 2 shows the four themes emerged that contributed to the post-traumatic growth among the acid attack survivors: Introspection about Life, Social Relationships, Sense of Self and Spiritual Beliefs.

## Introspection about Life

Any trauma experience leads an individual to see life in a different way, as the person may be looking to experience fuller and renewed experiences of life (Tytarenko, 2020). Sub-themes of introspection of life include meaning making of the incident, increased gratefulness, awareness about death and change in life philosophy.

### **Meaning making of Trauma Experience:**

Meaning making constitutes on how the survivors of trauma look at the incident and make sense out of the life event that occurred with them.

*“I realized that my life was supposed to be like this. I think it is because of the attack that people know me today. The attack changed my life but I think there was some meaning behind my attack. I wanted to be an independent woman, which I became right after started working after my recovery.”*

**Increased Gratefulness:** Gratefulness is the feeling of thankfulness one experiences, in spite of the trauma incident.

*“I am thankful I am alive, more than anything. I have a family who supported me throughout my journey of recovery. I am thankful I found an amazing team to work with. There was a point of time I had no hope to do anything. But I got better eventually.”*

**Awareness about Death:** Experiencing acid attack is an intense experience which makes the victim have a close shave with death, making them realize that they may not live through the accident.

*“When I was in the hospital I honestly thought I am living the last few days of my life. I wanted to see my daughter and my mother everyday because I thought there*

*may be no tomorrow for me. So you can imagine I have seen death that closely.”*

**Change in Life Philosophy:** Acid attack changed their perspectives on life, as for them it was a life changing experience that made them experience life in a very different way.

*“I am a very different person after my attack. I have started looking at life in a very different way. I have realized that life never goes as planned. There are always going to ups and downs but we need to go with the flow. I also realized that I have a goal now, to help other survivors like me to live a dignified life.”*

## Social Relationships

Social relationships refer to connections between different people with recurring interactions, adding personal meaning to their experience of life. The two sub-themes of social relationships are: forming new relationships and empathetic relationships.

**Forming New Relationships:** Most studies in cases of Intimate Partner Violence depicts that after any severe trauma, victims are less likely to stay married and cohabitate (Macmillian, 2001), because of their feeling to protect themselves from being vulnerable outside of their marriage (Cherlin, 2004). However, in cases of acid attack survivors, the victims formed significant new relationships to adapt and deal with their trauma experience in personal and professional life spaces.

*“Once I recovered, I was reached out by the NGO team to join them. I was initially hesitant, thinking of what should I do. Later I joined them and I realized that I have taken one of the best decisions of my life. Now I have my closest friends here with whom I bond so much. We have similar stories of attack and I feel belonged here.”*



**Empathetic Relationships:** Empathetic relationships are defined as the ability of a person to connect, understand and respond effectively, which helps greatly in the post-traumatic stress.

*“Right after my attack, when I joined Sheroes I started bonding with different people who have gone through the same pain that I have gone through. I realized these are the people who are going to stay with me forever. Those people stood with me no matter how difficult it became, even when I lost my mother.”*

### **Sense of Self**

Sense of self refers to the perception of collection of characteristics we have for our own selves. It may include our likes and dislikes, personality traits and our belief systems.

**Self-Awareness:** Self-awareness is the ability of an individual to assess their own thoughts, emotions and feelings.

*“After the incident, I feel like a different person now. I feel more connected to myself. I have become more aware about my needs and emotions. I am more aware how I am feeling towards a certain person. I can tell myself if I am angry on someone. I can even tell when I am feeling overwhelmed. I am even more connected to my body I feel.”*

**Belief in Self:** It is belief that one can master the situation or task at hand.

*“I was very disturbed after the incident but after a few days of my incident, I thought to myself, why am I being sad? I am not dead yet. I need to believe in myself that I am going to be good, no matter what. I used to tell it others also. I think that it worked as a magic for me. I started feeling better and I started recovering faster. My journey was not easy from there to here but I think I*

*knew that I can get better that helped me to reach where I am right now.”*

### **Spiritual Beliefs**

Spiritual belief refers to the relationship one shares with a superior being, which has an existential purpose on life, death and nature of reality.

**Sense of Purpose:** It is the belief that one has a particular goal that one needs to accomplish in this world.

*“After 2 years of my incident, I came to know of the organization I am currently working in. Once I met the team, I felt like I have found a goal. I found a purpose.”*

**Shifting of Emotions:** With spiritual awakening, a victim reports to shift in their feelings. It is also through this that they becomes aware of their own judgments and bring their knowledge to their consciousness (Scheidtline, 2003).

*“Right after my attack, my mother used to chant prayers near me. Along with her, I started chanting too. There was some amazing feeling inside of me that arose right after my prayers. I used to feel empowered. I felt there is some meaning to my life and I became more positive towards my life.”*

## Discussion

After a traumatic experience of acid attack, the focus definitely shifts to physical recovery, with very less focus on how these survivors dealt with the psychological trauma. Within literature as well, there are medical researches talking about various emergency procedures and surgeries that are documented, but there are very few literature available with psychosocial correlates of acid attack. The psychological impact of acid attack is immense, but there is a scarcity of post-traumatic psychological rehabilitation reaching the victims, due to the stigma and misogyny. This study aimed at understanding the factors that helped the acid attack survivors to deal and grow out of their trauma. The narratives of 10 acid attack survivors indicated four major themes that helped them in post-traumatic growth, namely introspection about life, social relationship, their sense of self and spiritual beliefs.

Introspection about life includes learning about one's own life by understanding what is ongoing or what we underwent in the past, understanding about our mental states and processes, through self-observation (Ehlers & Clark, 2000). One of the sub-themes of Introspection is meaning-making, which involves restoring the meaning of the situation at hand by developing new and acceptable ways of understanding the situation, by changing one's beliefs and goals. This was found in other researches as well that when an individual creates a more comprehensive and integrated worldview of their trauma, they recover from their trauma better (Park & Boals, 2021; Emmons, 2007) and even see the event as less damaging or perhaps draw positive meaning out of it (Vernon, Dillon & Steiner, 2009). Another way in which the survivors interpret life after the attack is by seeing it as a 'gift' and inspires

and transforms people (Noyes, Fenwick, Holden & Christian, 2009). One of the victims mentioned "I am just thankful I am alive and having such amazing and beautiful things." This indicates that they have a hopeful look forward towards life, despite their suffering. By being grateful, earlier research has found that women have less PTSD symptoms, months and years after the trauma as well (Slade et al, 2009). Some acid attack survivors reported being grateful for a lot of things like having a life, a job, a family and close friends. Moreover, most survivors have 'near-death experience', making them more aware about life and death, greater appreciation of life, interest in knowing self better, focus more on present and have reduced fear of death (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), thereby leading to better post-traumatic growth. Many survivors also reported change in their life philosophy, where they reported feeling relieved knowing their life, finding purpose, focusing more on the present and discovering their own self. This is in line with the research done by Saltzman et al (2018), who worked on people in their mental health recovery. They also reported having a new or renewed sense of life, with the goal that others should not suffer through what they have gone through, giving them a sense of their suffering. This was similar to the acid attack survivors, who are actively involved in campaigning against these attacks and providing rehabilitation to the survivors.

After any significant trauma, it is the social support around the victims that help them in their PTG (Patel, 2014). The possibility of having someone with whom they can share their experience and feelings increases their processing of the trauma and raises the chances of post-traumatic growth (Scheindline, 2003). Thus, having a formal support group mobilizes an individual to have more active coping after the attack. The same is the case with the acid attack

survivors. Being surrounded by victims who had undergone similar experience and trauma, makes them bond better, making them feel more secure and understood. Disclosure of one's trauma story helps in venting out negative emotions resulting in PTG (Khanjani et al, 2017). Similar findings were found with spinal cord injury victims as well (Palmer, Murphy & Spencer-Harper, 2016). However, it is not just the presence of social support, it is the presence of an empathetic group of people who have in-depth knowledge of what they have gone through, which will help maximize the growth (Wilson & Lindy, 2014).

Another significant factor associated with PTG is the sense of self. This stage is also called as the stage of 'integration', where the victim has regained control of something that she had lost due to the trauma experience and seeing the trauma as a part of their 'new self'. Moreover, during this stage, the survivor also regains possession of something that was lost (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). Among the acid attack survivors, it is the loss of their physical appearance and self-esteem, leading them to doubt their abilities. However, during the process of growth through the trauma, one experiences awareness about the new body and one's own strengths and shortcomings. It is the cognitive restructuring of their own self that they are able to move forward and gain insights of their negative experiences (Patel, 2014) and self-kindness towards own self can lead one to become more caring for self than being worried about the judgments (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). One of the survivors mentioned "I always had belief in myself that I can manage to cross the difficult times as well. This hope continued after my attack as well. I suffered, but I knew I can manage to sail through that time as well." This shows that the survivors used her own self-belief to deal with her pain and grow out of that.

Spirituality leads to self-awareness and enhanced consciousness with regard to purpose and emotions (Watson, 1989). Spirituality can shape the journey through the trauma. Decker (1993) argues that spirituality can lead one to believe that there is a meaning to one's existence, leading to spiritual development. After the acid attack, survivors are often left with questions like why the attack happened, who is responsible for it and what meaning it has for one's life. Once the survivor is able to find answers to these questions, there is a sense of purpose that arises for their current state. They also experience a change in their emotions, from being angry and sad to being more content in their life for surviving the attack. Spirituality helps in reconstruction of one's own world views towards self, others and the universe in general. This healing can help an individual to evolve through ontological quest for individuals to utilize strengths for any further trauma.

Acid attack is a horrific crime done on the victims which leaves them with permanent physical scars and affect on their mental health for a long time. Growing out of this kind of trauma is a complex process in itself, which requires substantial grit and resilience. This study indicates the factors that help these survivors to grow out of their pain and suffering, despite lot of struggle. Some of these factors included introspection about one's own life, relationships with others, awareness of self and spiritual beliefs held closely, helped them to cope up with trauma like acid attack. Those survivors who still suffer from the trauma of the past of such accidents, it is time to focus on their well-being by giving them the right rehabilitation and psychological support, along with correct policy interventions.

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