



Acid Attack Survivors ki koi Category nehi thi: Finding Space through Postmodern Feminism and its 'Sequins' in Meghna Gulzar's *Chhapaak* (2020)

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Abstract

Having taken into consideration the postmodern approaches towards gender, it can be postulated that it is no longer about feminism but feminisms. To contextualise such conceptions regarding a constructed and coherent gender identity and to set it out there in 21st century this present research aims at Meghna Gulzar's *Chhapaak* (2020), a politically engaged film on acid attack violence and survivors which not only implicates gender specific violence but also fabricates how the 'deformed' corporeality is in continuous process of undermining the ascribed power structures in terms of legal and social discourses. From these, the film significantly moves on towards Malti's PIL before the law and this is where the researcher of this paper takes the lens from, to look at it as an instance of postmodern resignification and reinscription, taking recourse of Derridian flexibility of the sign in terms of linguistic discursive construction using his "citationality" along with Butlerian "free-floating artifice". (1990, p.6) Also with keeping the Foucauldian ideas in mind of power as existing in everyday relations and multiple practices "where individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application". (1980, p. 98) this paper exemplifies Malti in that context who seems to be "reinscribing it within institutions which are typical of a state apparatus". (Foucault, 1980, p. 1) Along with these, such reinscription or attempts to destabilise or at least to make the intelligible signs flexible also invites Butlerian emancipation through 'sequin' in terms of agency and bestows a strong hold on the performativity-performance nexus by revisiting 'cause and affect' reciprocity evident in *Gender Trouble*. However, this research is on the way to discuss the layers of subjugation be it in workplaces (as shown in the title of this paper) faced by the acid attack victims as part of postmodern intersectional feminism and how they are finding spaces of emancipation even within the dominant social context through a cinematic portrayal of *Chhapaak*. The conception of colour is embedded in traditional Chinese culture, embodied by the correlation between the notion of five colours and the ideal of Five Elements, i.e. *wuxing*. Colour names in the Chinese language has undergone evolution from Classical Chinese to modern Mandarin, reflected by the fact that terminologies appertaining to colour have become more explicit, which is motivated by the Principle of Least Effort as well as a need for efficient memory, comprehension and communication. In classics written in Classical Chinese, expressions indicating colour tend to demonstrate semantic opaqueness, ascribed to historical references, metaphorical representations, literary allusions and etymological derivations.

Keywords

Differences, postmodernity, space, agency, power, gender performativity

If feminists believe that their goal is to abandon power, then they have already lost the game from which they cannot withdraw.

– Quoted in Bianco, 2017

The above words are proposed by feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz to uphold women's relation to power and power structures and thus she opposes the pseudo-feminists cultural discourse around women empowerment of equating power with patriarchy. Despite the fact that power is inherently patriarchal, power is constructed and open to stir since it was never patriarchal in its inception. Grosz argues that in order to succeed feminists need to work within the very system they want to change because power is complex and multiplied, yet in itself is not negative. This reverse attempt towards power structure can also be seen in recent trends such as Me Too movement, resisting things with hashtag that also challenges this pre-conceived notion of power as inevitably patriarchal and authoritative and thus revisits one's source of powerlessness (revisiting to a point where women are supposed to be defined by a lack of power in terms of sexual harassment and exploitation. Such shift of power from the intelligible and authoritative domain to power as existing everywhere is primitive to the understanding of feminism through postmodern lens. The aforementioned statement in the title, translated as 'there was no category reserved for acid attack survivors' is uttered by a job-giving authority when Malti asks for her 'space' before the world and this very quote attempts to work on this coherent identity and implies a sense of diversion, a fall-out from the thought-to-be unified structure, which has not taken place among the 'existing categories' and becomes persuasive here in the context of 21st century feminist perspective.

Having looked through the recent gender approaches it can be postulated that it is no longer about feminism but feminisms. This fragmentation of a stable gender identity based on the essentialist idea that the western metaphysics offers as the subject of feminism has been disrupted by various postmodern and poststructuralists platforms where one ultimate solution or one overarching notion of equality (reflected through the agenda of identity politics) does not refer to several occurrences within feminism varied in accord with caste, culture, race, and ethnicity based on various social and economic contexts. Keeping these conceptions germinated in mind about the universal, and authoritative discourse, such pre-conceived notion regarding feminism fails to include 'categories' or reserve spaces for an acid attack victim into the existing narrative among the chaotic protest of Nirbhaya rape case, shown at the very opening scene of *Chhapaak* (2020), a politically engaged film directed by Meghna Gulzar. Dealing with the real life story of acid attack survivor Laxmi Agarwal, *Chhapaak* not only showcases gender-specific violence under the stamped rubric of feminine beauty but also how the 'deformed' body shape is continuously resisting and contesting with the normative society and undermining the ascribed power structures through questioning the legal and social discourses. The present study intends to introspect into the discrimination acid attack survivors face in workplaces and how they have created space for themselves within the power structure among various intersections of the society. With this inherent discursive practice of cause-affect, power discourse, and gender performativity this research is on the way to contextualise *Chhapaak* amidst the subjugated layers of

postmodern feminism and its emancipatory resignification through finding space amidst differences which is far from being solved by “money and a room of one’s own”. (Woolf, 1929, p. 1)

Although Meghna Gulzar commented in one of the interview while she was promoting *Chhapaak*, “My choices are on the strength of the story, not gender” (2020) one can undoubtedly assert that this sort of violence is gender-specific, aiming to paralyse one psychologically more than physically so as to exclude them from the metaphysics of substance which defines an individual and adds value to a social entity. The film features Malti as the representative of acid attack survivors who undergoes both intense physical and mental stigma for not being able to fit into the normative function of an essentialist society. The intentions behind such violence which are mostly gender-specific have always been to ‘disfigure’ femininity being defined by a standardised term ‘beauty’. The everyday discrimination faced by Malti in the workplaces is something that shapes the viewer’s understanding about the day to day politics faced by Laxmi Agarwal off the camera. In the film Malti faces exclusion not only from the constrained society but also from the professional arena of her life. When Malti opts for a job in a beauty parlour we figure out speeches in the film like “beauty parlour mein beauty na ho toh achha nehi lagti” (Gulzar, 2020, 7:16) which means that it is necessary to have ‘beauty’ in a beauty parlour. The requirement of a desirable representative in a beauty parlour defined by a contoured face, tinted lips is not only regressive but also it widens the gap between those mainstream, exclusive discourses of the society with the marginalised or with the non-recognised aspects of the society and further complicates the idea of what it means to have emancipation or choice in 21st century. Thus the lack and loss of the so-called ‘perfect beauty’, leading towards a disturbed “performativity” (Butler, 1990, p.25), ends up creating a self-abasing identity, coming up with a ‘deformity’ and an inability of not being able to fit into the standards. Here it seems plausible to listen to Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth*:

We are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty myth...as women released themselves from the mystique of domesticity; the beauty myth took over its lost ground, expanding as it wanted to carry on its work of social control. (2002, p.10)

However, apart from these insights undercurrent in the film, what catches a significant attention of the researcher is the “strength” (as emphasised by the director Meghna Gulzar) which reverberates throughout the journey of Malti’s PIL. Her PIL stands to urge before the Supreme Court to regulate on acid sale and along with this she also ran a campaign named ‘Stop Acid Sale’. However, before 2014 there was no specific punishment reserved for those people behind acid attack violence. Section 326 was the only punishment given for such heinous crimes which includes acid attack violence, loosely comprising of 2-7 years of imprisonment and less amount of medical expense. The ‘unconscious’ ignorance of the law towards such violence or more specifically towards the difference between hot water and corrosive substance, ends up denigrating the intensity of such cases when compared to one’s lifelong ‘deformity’ and exclusion. The film undergoes an understanding of how social laws and discourses reside inherently and parallelly with the subject construction of individual. Her PIL thus also pleaded for a

reframing of the law, appealing for an amendment, a proposal to rethink the individual's everyday 'citations' of language, which further forms the discourse to the existing criminal (since this study deals with a particular criminal law) law. Such speech is evident in Malti's lawyer Archana Bajaj's voice (performed by Madhurjeet Sarghi) while discussing with Alka, another persona involved with the case in the film:

Evidence for the case will only establish the crime, not the punishment...if I throw hot tea on you, it would be a crime under IPC Section 326 and if I throw acid on you it'll still be under Section 326...such punishment is minimal when compared to a victim's lifelong trauma. (Gulzar, 2020, 45:22)

On another hand, for a viewer in hindsight it could be analysed from Foucauldian notion of power when Malti voluntarily comes up with her amendment before the law. As we see power and law both as social norm and legal command is there operating throughout the film. The cause and effect factors between social 'truth' and legal 'truth' is also dynamic throughout the film. The legally ascribed conceptions regarding crime, criminality, and punishment is being engineered in the film where each and every character is discursively influenced, occupied. These legal and social assumptions constitute people's mind-set towards such acts, and consequently forming a discursive 'truth' which also comes along with a sense of 'resistance' (Foucault) working on the part of the individuals. Such transformation and reciprocity between power and knowledge shaping crimes, criminal law and defining all other discursive practices is something continuously at play and reflected accordingly in the film. These rigid codes at the same time offer a reverse reading which is one of the main concerns of this research. Hence with keeping the Foucauldian ideas in mind of power as existing in everyday relations and multiple practices "where individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application" (1980, p. 93) this research exemplifies Malti on behalf of acid attack survivors in that context. If power exerts a relationship between social forces (not just between power and its subjects) then it seems reasonable that those exercising this power (the forces of domination) are also affected by its exercise. For Foucault, power forms its own possibility of subversion taking the bottom-up analysis of power into consideration; it does not only control individuals but being controlled by them. Punishment or the required compensation of a crime is in this way functions as the prima-facie of organizing as well as disorganizing people's mindset through various institutional discourses. As Foucault comments:

My hypothesis is not so much that the court is the natural expression of popular justice, but rather that its historical function is to ensnare it, to control it and strangle it, by reinscribing it within institutions which are typical of a state apparatus. (1980, p. 1)

Having read Foucault, feminists would oppose the view that knowledge exists independently of power relation and would showcase the 'micropowers' where the disciplinarian is everyone and no one is at the centre in particular. Thus Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish* (1975) talks about centring the disciplinary power and linking it with the process of crime, judicial, medico-psychiatric power through their implied and constantly changing transformation. The subtle distinction that Foucault made between

subject and its “belated metaphysics” (1990, p.18) through his genealogical history is something worth noticing here. This finds a resonance with the “strength” and the spirit Meghna Gulzar was talking about with regard to *Chhapaak*, the strength which occurs within the power, not outside of power. The film’s analysis through such angles implies that the petition was filed not only to change the law accordingly but to reshape people’s mindset about how gradually individuals become an effect of the authoritative discourses and therefore in need of an urgency to spread awareness and intensity of such heinous crime.

Along with this it is also a responsibility of the researcher to notice that such forms of liberation and resistance is something pre-given by the same authority itself. A question follows then whether can these be subversion at all? Giving the individuals an agency at all? Although PIL is something that can be seen as ‘choice’ given by the government or the law itself, on a deeper level it might high brows many of the intellectuals. This opposition is seemed to have been pointed out by Foucault as well which paves the way for another alternative narrative which consciously summons Butler into this discussion:

If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself. (1990, p.93)

Chhapaak also undergoes several instance of “performativity” as propounded by Judith Butler following J. L. Austin’s *How To Do Things With Words* (1962) and Derrida’s “citationality” in his *Signature Event Context* (1988) - a discussion towards linguistic performativity. The film does not explicitly tries to entirely destabilise performativity but it definitely stands on its resistance through which such stereotypical performances freak out. A tone of frustration, ambiguity proceeds with the story along with an urge to take oneself away of the very terrain of performativity, Malti on behalf of her community of the acid attack survivors creates a space of their own kind – therefore ‘sequin’ (to invite Butler here) evident in the title of this paper. Butler in *Gender Trouble* gave an analogy of wardrobe which represents the society and its ideologies at large and its “costumes” are the representative of the limited social choices we have. Butler puts a special light on the limitation that society offers through its ‘choices’ where paths leading to emancipation are also constructed. How to liberate and find emancipation then? Such is the paradox of postmodernity which is also something Shannon Hoff refers to while talking about Derrida’s conditioned and unconditioned theory of hospitality in *Of Hospitality* (2000):

With every “solution” comes the risk of reinforcing the established terms of a culture that has excluded people from recognizability and the risk of creating new modes of hierarchy and exclusion. Whereas specific judgments are made in answerability to general principles of justice, they can in turn transgress them, undermining rather than realizing these principles. (2015, p. 407)

To Butler, these are the ‘sequins’ which we can add to the given ‘clothes’ or the ‘choices’ or to those discursive practices while enacting performance in the society per se, which continues to reiterate within this film. It always seems to be a way out for Malti as she attempts to create their own space voluntarily and consciously:

All significations take place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; “agency”, then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on the repetition. If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible? (1990 p. 145)

Such resignifications to the idea of beauty as well as of social values are the traits of postmodernity, a constant urge to reinscribe, to put the ‘author’ off the way. These signs or rather the “free-floating artifice” (Butler, 1990, p.6) delineated by Butler are flexible and can be a subject of resignification.

The very chain of ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ as figured out by both Foucault and Butler while talking about sex-gender binary also revisits the film through a theoretical lens. Following Nietzsche’s perspective, that there is no “doer” (Butler, 1990, p. 25) behind the deed, Butler also denies any pre-existing ‘natural’ performer prior “the essential iteration of the sign” therefore performativity. At the same time Butler seems to refute the fact that cause is something being enacted by the performer and coming out of the performance accordingly. The discursive practices that are so long thought to be the ‘effect’ are cinematically challenged through *Chhapaak* where the emphasis is given to the rules, laws that govern the society and construct people’s notion towards particular institution. The fact that awareness and consciousness in people is of utmost importance is reiterated in Malti’s lawyer while talking to the higher authority regarding the amendment:

Section 326 - Grievous injury does not take cognizance of this crime’s severity. The court should amend a law according to the intensity of the crime. (Gulzar, 2020, 1:23:38)

Thus it takes an active inclination towards the discourse, the ‘causes’ that constitute and ‘effect’ the subject and at the same time giving an agency to the subject within the law hence making an possibility of subverting the law against itself. Thus creating a space for one’s attempt to ‘do’ gender in alternative and subversive way:

Construction is not opposed to agency...the critical task for feminism is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities...rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them. (Butler, 1990, p.147)

In *Gender Trouble*, there is a significant reference of Daphne de Maurier’s novel *Rebecca* (1938) where Mrs. Danvers is taken to exemplify authority or power. In preparation for the party, the unnamed narrator, assisted by the malign Mrs. Danvers believes that she is ‘choosing’ her ‘costume’ and thereby creating herself, whereas it turns out that Mrs. Danvers is in fact recreating the narrator as Rebecca. This palimpsests Butler’s wardrobe analogy where the subject is ‘free’ to choose any ‘costume’ which in turn always already determined by and within a regulatory frame. Butler’s point is that one’s gender is performatively constituted in the same way the one’s ‘choice’ of clothes is curtailed.

What we, as ‘performer’ are left to do is to add ‘sequins’ to the existing and given one, appeal for an alternative discourse and to “parody” (Butler, 1990, p. 147) the rigidity of such claims. To talk about the ‘performer’ of this research subject, Malti on behalf of other acid-attack survivors did not want to conform to the norm or be the norm significantly, there ‘deformity’ has been their form of identification, a space of its own kind:

we will spark off a rebellion, we will whip up a furore, our destinies lies in our hands, we are not flowers but firebrands. (Gulzar, 2020, 1:18:40)

Such taking off of performances comes up with an agency on the one hand and on the other hand comes up with the question of further categorisations whereas postmodernism seems to intonate a very ambiguous and undecidable political emancipation. The very idea of identity politics no longer suffices the needs and wants of postmodern intersections. In terms of the space given to selfhood and agency within the emancipatory function postmodernity works in this way on such approaches.

As acid attack violence was continuously proliferating at that time it was important to build up separate amendment for such cases which was channelized through Malti’s PIL, imposing 10 years of imprisonment which in condition may extend to lifetime imprisonment and a reasonable compensation to meet the medical expenses of the victim. What is more important here is not the extension of punishment but one’s resistance and accordingly reinscription of law as for Foucault these stand for the ‘causes’ of subject constitution. The alteration of power historically regarded as “repressive hypothesis” (1990, p. 18) reclaims power here as “positive and productive” (Mills, 2003, 73) aligning it with everyday politics and making it less stable therefore open to challenge, renew and maintain.

As far as Malti’s therefore the acid victims’ agency and subjective identity is concerned, their struggle was never to walk with or getting access to the norm or be the norm. Rather she withdraws such closed identifications and finds out possibilities of resignification by redefining feminine beauty and intelligible power structures as inherently flexible and unstable. Her agency lies in destabilising the very codification and reforming it within its own domain which again invites Judith Butler in the discussion:

The coexistence or convergence of such discursive injunctions produces the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment...there is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very taking up is enabled by the tool lying there. (1990, p.145)

In the film thus Malti overcomes and exceeds her own marginalised entity which was socially tagged on her. Significantly the film does not portray them as unfortunate or as someone to feel pity for because they mark themselves off the norm and positioned their resignified ‘category’. Malti’s emphasis to change the very ‘cause’ therefore the intelligible discourses rather than on its “belated metalepsis” is responsible for blending out the “moral causality” of such acts. The emphasis on performance instead of the performer can be seen here through a Butlerian lens that where the ‘performativity’ ends and subversive agency comes into play. Significantly there was no overarching male or female agent governing and guiding them in their emancipatory journey which successfully avoids their ‘conservative resignification’ and differs it particularly from

other popular women emancipatory films where the outcome is a regressive narrative. The changed order has not failed to somewhat ‘interpellate’ or stir people’s outlook towards such intense and gender- specific crime- hence the cause genealogically channelized the effect, to drag Foucault’s power structure.

However, this paper’s attempt to show the marginalised group of acid attack victims mainly speaks out their “subversive resignification” (Butler, 1990, p. 135). To claim that this violence can be as brutal and intense as a rape case or a sexual assault in workplace, the film foreshadows various shades of feminism from Nirbhaya (shown in the very inception of the film) through Malti to Pinky Rathore whose violence are similar yet not the same. Postmodern feminism largely focuses on a woman’s choices as Naomi Wolf said, “the real problem is our lack of choice” (2002, p. 272). The film throws acid on the prevalent conception of one dimensional resistance with a single unified agenda when in fact history of feminism is a history of different ideas full of splinter diversions – from suffragettes to MeToo and Time’s Up. Today the personal is hashtagged with a politics which is diverse and multiplied and where not only ‘personal is political’ but the very idea of being political is fragmented and narrowed down to individual and personal context. Hence feminisms in 21st century, in an era of ‘slactivism’, exist where whites are in want to work outside the tag of ‘angel in the house’, blacks are yet to get rid of colour discrimination, rape victims are accused of virginity and acid victims are of perfect beauty, the myth – hence the diversities and the differences.

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