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Rebuilding Identities amidst Women Acid Attack Survivors in Nepal

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By

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is my original work. It contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree in any institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published anywhere.

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Tek Bahadur Chhetry

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled "Rebuilding Identities amidst Women Acid Attack Survivors in Nepal" submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Tek Bahadur Chhetry, has been approved by the following members of the research committee.

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Abstract

This study explores the narratives of the women acid victims of Nepal from the pluralist views in light of trauma literature. Although the classic model of trauma claims that truth cannot be attained due to the distortion of the traumatic experience, hence 'unknowable' and 'unspeakable', the revisionist model argues that trauma ruptures the order of life and can also reorient lives, when dealt with, from the standpoint of its variability in literature and society. Acid attacks have devastating psychological effects on survivors, leading to issues such as anxiety, depression, social isolation, and even suicidal ideations. However, the four testimonies of Nepalese acid survivors in this study reveal that psychological trauma is not an individual affliction but a socio-cultural wound, wherein identities are not only shattered but also contested. Drawing upon Cheryl Glenn's 'rhetorical feminism' as a major insight from her work, *Rhetorical Feminism and This Thing Called Hope,* the study analyzes survivors' narratives to address the feminist agency aligning with the revisionist model of Michelle Baelev's 'reorientation of consciousness.' The researcher argues that oppressed gender norms can be challenged through the acknowledgement of traumatic events, rhetorical listening, and spatial rhetoric in rebuilding victims' identities. The survivors fought an ordeal to remake identities in the new normal by ways of developing resilience, rhetorical resistance, activism, and advocacy. It is significant for social workers and policymakers to tailor effective interventions for trauma evacuation and social healing. Further, it is expected to open a discourse on burn violence, a pressing issue for future research in the Nepalese context.

Keywords: *agency, psychological trauma, reorientation of consciousness, rhetorical feminism, spatial rhetoric, rebuilding identities, trauma evacuation*

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Chapter I: Quest for Acid Survivors' Agency and Gendered Violence

Background

An acid attack is considered a heinous crime in which the perpetrator throws sulfuric or nitric acid to disfigure, maim, or torture the victims. South Asian nations like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh face significant risks, with Pakistan and Bangladesh reporting an estimated 200 cases annually (Qazi et al. 31) and more than 1000 in India. Although an average of 40 cases has been identified in a decade (BVS-Nepal), Nepal's National Penal Code Act, 2017 (193) criminalizing acid attacks has brought about a significant decrease since 2020, with the potential effectiveness of legal interventions. Despite the gender norms that silenced the victims, in the context of Nepal, Bindabasini, Muskan, Sangita, and Basanti have successfully challenged the gender norms and reinvented their identities.

Although the theoretical underpinnings of the classical theory of trauma by Cathy Caruth assert that traumatic experiences distort reality and remain 'unknowable' and 'unspeakable'(8), the revisionist model by Michelle Balaev claims, "Trauma causes disruption and reorientation of consciousness" (4). Thus, the truth of trauma is knowable and accessible from the standpoint of its variability in literature and society. She believes feminist agency is the overarching concept in storytelling for the reclamation of identities, resisting gender roles through activism and advocacy. In Nepal, the existing information stems from media apparatus, NGOs, and social media platforms, which often underrepresent or misrepresent the victims, failing to capture the real survivors' voices. Though the victims of Nepal have catalyzed legal reviews through their resistance and activism against the violence, the ordeal of their intricate journey of psychosomatic trauma and their exploration of the rhetorical sites for agency have been under-researched. Thus, there is a big gap in knowing how the

survivors' narratives play a transformative role in psychological healing, empowerment, and healing in the face of adversity. Documenting success stories and amplifying voices to navigate the coping mechanisms provides data and insights for future research and informs better practices for addressing the needs of lost survivors.

The study employs Cheryl Glenn's 'rhetorical feminism', drawn from the second and third wave feminism, as an evolving agency to analyze Michelle Balaev's revisionist model of 'reorientation of consciousness', which counters essentialist views of androcentrism through the narratives. The four cases of life histories have been purposively chosen and thematically analyzed following recursiveness and reflexivity. Structurally, the narratives unfold through psychological trauma, rhetorical listening, rhetorical sites, social engagement, and activist storytelling that help the survivors express their trauma and seek their agency for the reintegration of their identities.

The testimonies of Nepal's acid attack survivors reveal that psychological trauma is not an individual affliction but a sociocultural wound, wherein identity, body, and agency are shattered and contested. However, the healing of trauma is possible among the victims through resistance, advocacy, and activism. The study is significant for social workers and policymakers to tailor effective interventions for trauma evacuation and social healing, adhering to the support systems. Further, it is expected to open a discourse on burn violence, a pressing issue for future research in the Nepalese context.

Statement of the Problem

Acid attack is considered a heinous crime and one of the worst manifestations of gender-based violence. The aftermath of the attack poses unprecedented challenges when they fight back to rebuild their identities amidst the traumatic experiences. The

researcher assumes oppressive social norms and rooted patriarchal practices silence victims and normalize violence, making it a seemingly acceptable part of life. In the context of Nepal, survivors- Sangita Magar, Muskan Khatun, Bindabasini Kansakar, and Basanti Pariyar have turned activists who fought to lay the foundation of laws against acid violence, and thereby the cases have almost ceased to exist, bringing laws into effect recently. Nevertheless, academic research in this field has been limited in the context of Nepal. There is not much archived knowledge in the existing scholarship in this specific field. The information only comes to the fore through limited sources- newspapers, television, magazines, NGOs, YouTube, etc. Therefore, the study aims to approach the unheard and untold stories of survivors' lives that the media failed to represent.

The life reviews of each successful story of the survivors, who reinvented their life and made reintegration into social structures, are expected to be beacons of hope and inspiration to the other victims who are still fighting the ordeal in society. Exploring the intricate process of identity reconstruction of the survivors, the study necessitates apparent complexities of their lived experiences, the enduring impact of psychological trauma, rooted gender norms, and the interwoven social and cultural context. The interviews reveal how community attitudes, media representation, and evolving perceptions of gender roles of the body and its aesthetics shape their journeys. The burden of societal stigma further complicates the healing process, demanding an exploration of coping strategies and resilience utilized by survivors. Ultimately, such in-depth exploration aims not only to illuminate the challenges of trauma repair and empowerment but also to celebrate the survivor's agency and their ability to navigate the deeper path of remaking their identities within the broader sociocultural landscape.

Research Questions

This research aims to explore the psychological impact of trauma endured by acid attack survivors in Nepal, focusing on the intersectionality of trauma and its impact within the context of gender-based violence. It specifically addresses the following research questions:

a. How do survivors' life reviews reveal the complexities of the psychological impact of trauma and how this, in turn, features to their stigmatization and marginalization through their rhetorical reflections?
b. How do victims seek agency through rhetorical listening? What are the sites of the victims' agency to identify the support systems, resources, and coping mechanisms that have ensured the reintegration of their identities?

Delimitation

The research has focused on the success stories of women survivors, regardless of geography and the cultural context of Nepal. The survivors' data have been collected by developing the research instrument, a semi-structured questionnaire, to ensure the relevance and timelessness of the research. The four victims were purposively selected to be triangulated with member checking to validate the data. Similarly, the binary individuals, only women, were chosen for their in-depth interviews for their life stories in their native language, which were recorded, transcribed, and translated into standard English. Only qualitative interviews were conducted for the thematic analysis.

Significance of the Study

The overarching concept of the revisionist model is the concept of agency, which helps survivors to build resilience and empowerment to regain control over their lives and identities. It debunks the notion of the classic model of trauma as

'unknowable' and claims that trauma not only causes disruption but also the 'reorientation of consciousness.' In the context of Nepal, while the violence of acid attacks specific to women has been under-researched, the present study will not only contribute to new knowledge in the existing scholarship but also develop critical insights into the social, psychological, and emotional well-being. Further, this knowledge could be designed to tailor effective interventions, analyzing survivors' socio-economic and cultural needs, adhering to the support systems for trauma evacuation and social healing. Similarly, the life history narratives could be equally useful in how to counter stigmatization and social exclusion. Hence, the analysis on life reviews of the survivors is expected to foster the findings that can inform about the complexities of the psychological impact, coping mechanisms, reconciliation, healing, designing policies, and advocacy against acid violence in Nepal. Uniquely, it is expected to open up an empathetic discourse on burn violence, a pressing issue for further research in the Nepalese context.

Methodology

The study has employed insights from Cheryl Glenn's *Rhetorical Feminism and This Thing Called Hope,* specifically built upon second and third-wave feminism as a methodology to address the survivors' narratives in light of pluralist views of trauma in rebuilding their traumatic identities. The study examines how feminine agency was sought through the storytelling of the victims, which in turn has communicated and persuaded them to resist gendered power dynamics. The research used variables such as broader cultural aspects, survivors' experiences, psychosomatic experiences, reconstruction of women's identity, representation, and coping mechanisms, which have had the potential to transform pain into power within the survivors.

As primary texts, four life reviews of the survivors were purposively chosen for the in-depth interviews. Research subjects were selected from different provinces in Nepal, considering the variability in their socio-demographic characteristics. Similarly, semi-structured questionnaires were developed for the in-depth interview of the canonical narratives. Recursiveness and reflexivity were carried out to co-construct the meaning. The data collection process would integrate and involve the key components: empathy and respect, reflexivity, ethical considerations, collaboration, member checking, and contextualization grounded in feminist epistemologies. The collected data was analyzed with six steps of the thematic analysis such as "data familiarization, generating initial codes, searching themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report" (Braun and Clarke 78-101) within the data to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences and perspectives of the respondents approaching an inductive led thematic analysis. The study relies on insights from Penny Summerfield's "Oral History as a Research Method" as a method to set up in-depth interviews for life reviews as primary texts of Nepalese women survivors, to collect the life reviews, specifically focusing on the challenges they faced to remake their identities in society. He calls an oral history interview "a life review and the composure of the subject" (48), where meaning is negotiated in the narrative form used by the interviewee. Missing histories play a crucial role in life history research. The researcher seeks ethical consent to carry out this research from the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, informed consent sheets, and a victim interview release agreement for each case.

Against the feminist epistemological backdrop, the trauma theories were operationalized to address pluralist views and analyze the life reviews as primary texts. During analysis, pluralist views of Michelle Baelev and trauma repair notions of

Ronald Eyerman and Judith Herman's cultural trauma theories were operationalized by drawing upon broader sociocultural and historical contexts to attend to the truth in survivors' traumatic narratives. Creswell writes, "Social constructivists believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" (7). However, the agency and activism of the survivors persistently question the essential worldview practices imbued in androcentrism.

Chapter II: Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations: Trauma, Rhetorical Feminism and Revisionist Views

Conceptual Review

Vitriolage is a violent assault where a corrosive substance, like sulfuric or nitric acid, is thrown on a person to cause lifelong disfigurement. Various studies demonstrate the alarming prevalence of acid attacks against women as a distinct form of gender-based violence, which is weaponized to coerce women to accept their subordination. The males are found to have thrown acid who reject the romances, marriage proposals, resist domestic abuse, or challenge the traditional gender norms. As Mittal et al. found that the perpetrators do this as acts of "revenge" by men whose "egos got hurt" by rejection, reflecting a yoke of patriarchy to take control over women's bodies and their choices they make (3). In Pakistan, this act is done to "teach a lesson" to women who resist male power, where the primary intention is to "maim or disfigure them for life" rather than kill to force them to undergo long-term psychological suffering (Yousaf and Purkayastha 14). Often, societies normalize such violence, advocating on behalf of males to preserve family honor through cultural justifications. In India, burning the bride persists as a "premeditated, deliberate, and solely profitable act" often aligned with dowry system disputes (Kaur and Byard 2). All these show that acid violence is not simply interpersonal but rooted in reinforcing the gendered hierarchies.

The victims remain vulnerable due to inequalities, legal inertia, and dependency of their lives on males. The majority of the victims of low-income regions cannot even access medical attention and legal recourse because of their poverty and institutional neglect. Yousaf and Purkayastha argue that Rabia, a survivor in Pakistan, endures her intricate journey of this suffering in isolation, as her family

could not afford her treatment and covers her face in shame for years (16). Although Pakistan's 2011 laws mandate life imprisonment, the survivors suffer a delay in justice, often facing lengthy investigations and witness intimidation, resulting in conviction rates below 35% (Kaur and Byard 2; Yousaf and Purkayastha 17). The victims take it as a miscarriage of justice that epitomizes the systematic betrayal. Likewise, in India, the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961) has not become effective as expected, as "26% of husbands and in-laws are not satisfied with dowry amounts, which perpetuates the violence (Kaur and Byard 3). The structural barriers consistently deceive the survivors, leaving them disfigured and disempowered. The social ramifications of acid attacks are profound at the psychological level, as the survivors suffer identity loss and become subject to societal stigmatization. Mittal et al. assert that the erosion of selfhood becomes a root cause of disfigurement as survivors lament for their former selves (4). The permanent disfigurement lowers the self-esteem and morale of the victims, pushing them to experience psychological trauma.

Social exclusion is even more traumatic when the communities ostracize the victims for their ugly appearances, reducing them to half a human being (Mittal et al. 2). The foundations like Depilex Smileagain Foundation and Cameroon's RENATA in Pakistan provide support for treatment and vocational training, but it remains at the individualistic level of rehabilitation but not than dismantling the yoke of patriarchy. Thus, this brutal violence calls for an exigency to review legal policies, economic empowerment, and cultural transformation to combat this radicalism.

The tendency for victims to blame themselves, intensifying their distress, and foreground that survivors often struggle with low self-esteem, fear of further attacks, and chronic anger, while Khoshnami et al. noted lasting psychological disturbances

and familial blame (238). These experiences contribute to feelings of hopelessness and high levels of psychological distress, with social isolation further exacerbating the survivors' challenges and even leading to suicidal ideations, which are precursors to an ultimate suicide attempt. Acid attacks wreak a devastating toll on Nepalese women, not only leaving them with enduring physical scars like deep burns and disfigurement but also profound emotional trauma that digs deep within their psychological space. India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, China, Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, and Ethiopia have a high prevalence of acid crimes. Qazi et al. argue that nations like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh are the countries at stake, with Pakistan and Bangladesh reporting an estimated 200 cases annually (31) and more than 1000 in India, while underreporting is suspected to be over 60%. Although an average of 40 cases has been identified in a decade (BVS-Nepal), the National Penal Code Act (193) in 2017 and its amendment in 2020 have plummeted the cases. The perpetrator attacks target victims with the insidious intention of inflicting permanent physical and psychological disfigurement in all these nations. Perpetrators often target relatives, neighbors, or people of acquaintances to execute their plans to maximize impact. The researcher assumes that deeply rooted patriarchal social norms and harmful practices lead to social stigma, contributing to violence.

The stringent laws put into effect through survivors' activism have marked a significant decrease in acid attacks in Nepal. The National Penal Code-2017 in Nepal, about the criminalization of acid violence, witnesses its discrepancies, which were further amended in 2020, can be the site for the rhetorical agency of survivors. While Penal Code 193 in 2017 recognized the attacks as grievous offenses that prescribed about five to eight years of imprisonment and one hundred thousand to five hundred thousand rupees with 20-year life imprisonment, it was not clear in its version about

the nature of harm, intention, and acid sales. However, the 2020 amendment introduced life imprisonment for 20-30 years, stringent laws for chemical sales, and mandated free emergency medical treatment. As a result, the cases have sharply declined in Nepal. Bindabasini, Sangita, and Muskan, the survivors, contributed a lot through their activism in Nepal's legal reforms. It shows the transition from retributive to rehabilitative justice in the reconstruction of social order (2020 amendment). Thus, it is not merely an outcome of the parliamentary procedures of reviewing laws, but an exigency to resilience and empowerment for social healing.

Language and Gender in Media

Gender representation in the media has always been widely debated across cultures around the globe. Media sources and their portrayal of gender in newspapers, digital platforms, and magazines have a significant role in shaping perceptions of gender, especially through language. While works of literature have demonstrated widely that women are often represented across cultures as reinforcing gender stereotypes, gender norms, and practices, digital platforms- Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, Blogs, YouTube, e-blogs, etc.- comparatively foster a more empowering trend than the mainstream media. Media refers to the medium of communication- newspapers, magazines, televisions, social sites, and digital platforms through which the messages are transmitted and distributed among the people. It consists of traditional media and digital media platforms. They are a strong means to depict gender and its representation through linguistic and visual projections to mold public opinion. Similarly, gender representation implies how the expectations, roles, and behaviors of men, women, and others are shown across media portals. Media portrayals, according to Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet in their work *Language and Gender,* play a vital role in perpetuating gender stereotypes and

consumer-driven gender roles, aligning “women as materialistic and vacuous yet crafty” (59). The representations often get influenced by power, sex, race, culture, practices, and so on. Robin Lakoff states that the evaluative adjectives- “lovely”, “adorable”, “charming”, etc.- used for women often reflect beauty, delicacy, and passivity, emphasizing gender stereotypes and societal expectations of femininity (51). Identity construction refers to forming an identity under the influence of media, while empowerment is a sense of agency and control one gains from the media. One way to resist and create “possible selves” (49) through media for Eckert and McConnell-Ginet is through stylistic choices such as fashion, speech, and behavior (248). Digital media, an embodiment of pop culture, has been increasingly influential in expressing women’s voices, resilience, and agency for the inclusive and diverse narratives of women.

While the mainstream media discourse focuses on the reinforcement of gender stereotypes and conventional roles of gender roles, the digital platform proves as a transformative trend to reshape identities. Melania Mendrofa found, “Females often express their perspectives on women's oppression through social media posts, advocating for women's well-being” (240). In doing so, they find solace, inspiration, and empowerment. The feminist authors use digital platforms to reclaim the stigmatized narratives of women, emphasizing the sense of agency, resilience, and capacity. Technology and online communities provide a conducive environment to challenge patriarchal structures collectively (243). Similarly, Dede Fatinova et al. felt liberated when driving policy for women was reviewed in their favor in Saudi Arabia with the immense help of media coverage. The media not only added attributes to women, showing them as “responsible”, “capable”, “competent”, etc., but also used “reform”, “progress”, and “empowerment” to show how they have shown resistance

to traditional roles. She adds, “Women have the right to lead a normal life just like men” (1848). The social media coverage to review the policy has been central to molding politicians’ perceptions. This is taken as an important step toward a sense of agency. Likewise, Umi Zakiyah and Ribut Wahyudi investigated that Theresa May’s tweet with the use of collective pronouns “we” and “our” and metaphors - “take the UK forward” resembled the construction of collective identity as well as responsibility. As a national political leader, her frequency of words in announcement tweets- “Brexit”, “deal”, “deliver”, “referendum”, “help”, “meet” and the like (354) matches her personality characteristics in her message such as “supportive”, “leader”, “women/female”, “hardworking” (355), etc. reflects the natural relation between her political and personal identity. This not only helped her authority to steer in politics but also aided her to be resilient in contesting the traditional gender norms in a male-dominated society. Digital space, thus, has been a transformative trend for women’s voices to shape their identities.

Although Muskan lost her confidence in fear of revictimization and underwent psychological pain, she had a strong conviction to punish the culprit. She met the then PM to lobby stringent laws against acid sale and acid attacks, under duress of threats and the strong social stigma associated with acid attack victims. Hence, she foregrounded herself as a strong activist to bring new laws to the country. With the intensive support and care of her family and the social worker, Mr. Ujjwal Bikram Thapa, sporty Muskan refused to become defined by her pain. If not the traditional media, she could at least articulate her narratives through her social media. She also declared her resilience for her aspiring future in the national program of Nepal TV-*Sangharsha*: I don't want to hide this scar, and I don't fear it, but of course, the perpetrator will; he might have thought I would live within the four walls of the

house, but I don't because I have a dream to accomplish it" (Khatun and Thapa 3:30-4:00). Muskan's use of language here can be analyzed as a strong commitment to resilience and resistance for the reclamation of her agency. She uses the first-person pronoun "I" five times to assert her construction of self-image. She uses the negative "I don't" thrice to hide "to fear" and" to live within four walls," only to reject them all. The phrase "not hiding this scar" signifies not only her acknowledgment of the traumatic event but also her resilience and defiance against gender norms. "But the perpetrator will" means she wouldn't rest unless he was punished." By refusing to 'live within four walls," challenges domestic and household chores, often associated with women, and subverts the lopsided relation between male and female, reclaiming her new identity. The passionate, self-driven persona full of aspirations within Muskan is visible to accomplish her dream in the future. She seems not to be a dreamer but a doer of deeds. Overall, her linguistic choice, in a complex sentence, not only debunks the culprit's intent but also disrupts the deep-rooted patriarchal structures that consistently perpetuate shame and silence around the acid survivors. While the mainstream media representations fail to reflect the reality of survivors' voices, either by underrepresenting or misrepresenting the cases under the influence of patriarchal norms, language has been instrumental in digital spaces to seek feminine agency and to express the victims' narratives to contest the yoke of stereotypes, gender roles, patriarchal norms for social justice.

Muskan's Facebook posts 2024, for instance, emphasize her family, declarative statements, moral imperatives, appeal for collective advocacy, proactive collaboration with different organizations, participatory strategies, and her spiritual integrity, which make her stand alone as an active user of her profile. In addition to this, her new normal life reflects her passion for traveling and studying, and her

interest in expressing gratitude, sports, news, meeting with influential people, and above all being religious, make her a common girl. Muskan's choice of using digital narratives about the untold story has been a significant transformation in her life. The digital space has kicked off new avenues for women's voices, reshaping their identities to ensure resilience and empowerment, contesting the gender roles and practices represented in the mainstream newspapers and magazines. While the reviews of the literature have demonstrated widely that women often across cultures are represented as reinforcing gender stereotypes, gender norms, and practices, interestingly, the use of language in her Facebook posts for Muskan, the acid survivor has been instrumental for a transformative potential to seek an agency and safe place to advocate her resilience, resistance, and advocacy for maintaining her public identity among her 83K followers. Meanwhile, Khatun's appeal for the exigency of action reaches out from local narratives to global human rights to advocate for stringent laws against violence. Being engaged in digital discourses, Muskan resisted silence and submission and became a leader in the fight for social justice.

While policymakers can design effective interventions to raise women's voices through digital space, academic scholars can explore gender, language, and rhetoric within the intersection of identity and technology to make the subject further visible. Similarly, social activists and media practitioners can craft campaigns strategically with the success story of Muskan for a collective call to action. The new study could be made more rigorous if the digital posts could be triangulated with interactive comments, complementing it with discourse analysis.

Theoretical Review

The study employs Cherryl Glenn's insights from *Rhetorical Feminism and This Thing Called Hope,* drawn on the second and third-wave feminism as the

stalwart of evolving feminine agency for identity reintegration and activism, to analyze the survivors' narratives aligning with the pluralist views of 'reorientation of consciousness' by Michelle Baelev, which challenges the essentialist views of the androcentric worldview through their storytelling narratives. The study analyzes and evaluates how language and communication used by survivors in various contexts counter the gender norms and power structures to seek feminine agency. In the past, women were treated as mere appendages. Glenn's rhetorical feminism puts "feminist concepts as openness, authentic dialogue and deliberation, interrogation of the status quo, collaboration, respect, and progress—and vice versa" (1). She buys into Krista Ratcliffe's theory of 'rhetorical listening' as a stance of "openness to know how messages are articulated" (43), with which they identify themselves from others. These feminist nuggets counter women's epistemologies imbued in the androcentric worldviews and assert new identities for systemic change. Glenn claims, "Anchored in hope, rhetorical feminism offers ways to disidentify with hegemonic rhetoric, with the dominant rhetorical histories, theories, and practices articulated in Western culture" (4). The agency is not a destination but a dynamic relational process of remaking consciousness, which aligns with the reorientation of consciousness of the women acid victims in Nepal, questioning the structures of the gender binaries, ideologies, and hegemonic culture of male supremacy. In closing her book, she writes, "I am hopeful, but I am not naive. I am a rhetorical feminist" (212). Glenn's rhetorical feminism advocates collective empowerment for mass liberation and social justice, offering an agentive response in feminist epistemologies through reflective positionality. Despite the challenges, the common goal is to envision a better future with hope, blending imagination with action as the master skill of a feminist rhetorician.

In her introduction, *Rhetorical Feminism and This Thing Called Hope,* Glenn envisions a transformative form of agency through the intersection of rhetoric and feminism, aiming to counter gendered rhetorical traditions. Her work explores how 'feminist rhetoric' and 'rhetorical feminism' can work meaningfully for the reclamation of disenfranchised communities. Interestingly, 'rhetorical feminism', unlike feminist rhetoric, is more of a tactic or a strategy that serves effectively to inform how the agentic force is achieved for the voiceless. Simply put, feminist rhetoric is a way in which the epistemic injustice is critiqued through gender equality, countering the essentialist views on gender.

Glenn marks feminist rhetoric as the exigency of the late twentieth century and as a reaction to the excluding praxis of rhetoric since antiquity, which has historically relied on either a phallocentric or Eurocentric lens. She defies the way the classical rhetoric scholarship played a role in Kenneth Burke's 'terministic screen' (45), privileging male-centered voices over women, colored people and other underserved communities. In other words, 'feminist rhetoric' pragmatically incorporates the values such as inclusiveness, collaboration, and regendering power structures through rhetorical canons such as invention, organization, memory, delivery, and style, and rhetorical strategies of the appeal as well as rhetorical situation. However, Glenn's 'rhetorical feminism' is treated as a theoretical stance aimed at dismantling hegemonic rhetorical norms. It rather reconfigures rhetoric in a dialogic form through openness and social interactions, offering alternative delivery, as a feminine agentive force such as silence, listening, resilience, activism, resistance, and advocacy for the future hope to settle peace and order in the society.

'Feminist rhetoric' and 'rhetorical feminism' both assert the feminist lens of gender parity. However, the scope and methodological stance differ from each other.

While the former adopts a practice that applies principles to rhetoric, the latter claims a tactical stance to counter the dominant rhetoric. Similarly, feminist rhetoric focuses on the recovery of the voiceless community using rhetorical frameworks such as ethos, pathos, and logos to achieve feminist goals, while 'rhetorical feminism' reconceptualizes rhetoric itself, challenging rhetorical norms, valuing silence as a rhetorical form through openness and dialogic logos. Unlike 'feminist rhetoric' that persistently interrogates the male-centered hegemony for inclusiveness, 'rhetorical feminism' anticipates emancipation through transformative praxis with its critical tenets- disidentification with androcentrism, dialogic communication, reconceptualization of ethos, pathos, and logos, alternative deliveries, and hope as the key principle for social change and justice.

In Octalog II and III, Cheryl Glenn and Jessica Enoch offer critical interventions that frame pluralist views, reconceptualizing the epistemological, spatial, and embodied foundations of feminism, respectively. Glenn's project, "Regendering the Rhetorical Tradition," is an explicit argument for rewriting the rhetorical history from the lens of plural and socially situated women's experiences. In other words, it is precisely reorientation. Women's voices are always structural, and rewriting history is a performative act of feminist consciousness that comprises speaking, testifying, protesting, and mentoring others. Glenn concludes, "Gender studies is vital to our work, but it is the 'regendering' that "unsettles stable gender categories and enacts a promise that rhetorical history will be a continuous process of investigating the works of women and men rather than a final product that can be finally or universally represented" (29). Glenn's views on 'regendering' challenge fixed gender roles and redraw histories as an ongoing process to make it inclusive and

plural rather than labeling the agenda as a universal phenomenon, which is not unlike countering a universal pathological symptom of trauma with revisionist views.

Jessica Enoch's "Finding New Spaces for Feminist Research" extends Glenn's historiographic intervention and adds spatial rhetorics that, devoid of neutrality, invite women to challenge invading the spaces where they were structurally excluded and stigmatized by gendered behavior (116). Not being neutral spaces, the victims' presence in courts, streets, job sites, digital platforms, and media discourses challenges these gendered expectations with renewed rhetorical discourse.

The third wave of agency stems from the contradictory and complex negotiations of past, present, and future, which aligns with the notion of reimagining the past traumatic event to repair the present for the prospective future. Renegar and Sowards claim, "Contradictions are useful rhetorical tools for negotiating complex lives in a complicated world" (3). This notion navigates the complexities of being socially excluded and fighting an ordeal while striving to live a purposeful life. The paradoxical positions involve disfigured and resilient, silenced and amplified, and scary and sacred positions for the reclamation of agency. The third wave asserts that the body in the patriarchy becomes the contested space for survivors. Their visibility at courts, protests, and media platforms subvert normative perceptions and engage in third-wave counter imagination. As Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische assert, "Counter imagination is a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities" (qtd. in Renegar and Sowards 4). This greater imagination eventually helps the victims not only to speak back to conventional gender norms but also to advocate for activism, demanding stringent laws in the country.

Sandra Harding, in her work "Is There a Feminist Method?" takes a progressive position about feminist research and debunks the notion that the grand

narratives constructed “women” as universal subjects that classify problems within a frame of class, race, gender, and sexuality. Reimagining the researcher’s position in the same critical plane as the women intended to be researched (8), she challenges the foundational feminist methodologies, which merely served as “adding women” as research subjects. Seconding Harding's arguments, Kirsch and Ritchie reject the notion of “add women and stir” research and place women in a marginalized political space (9). While Western frameworks advocate for individual agency, the Nepalese survivors undergo empowerment and healing through community support, spirituality, or silence. Thus, she urges feminist researchers to examine the positionality and ethical implications in knowledge production amidst the intersections of race, gender, and class. Only then can we make transformative research, an epistemic justice for women subjects.

Jay Dolmage's claim of “rhetoric of extraordinary bodies” (5) as the subject intervenes in the yoke of rhetorical theory, reexamining the Western rhetorical tradition, which excludes the female and the disabled body, through “Metis” as a figure of embodied representation being swallowed by Zeus in Greek mythology. The disfigured acid victims resemble “Medusa’s snake-like head” (14), who have presumably been excluded due to social stigma about the notion of beauty. However, the resistance and resilience they show and the agency with which they seek to empower themselves is the paradigm shift of viewing bodies as opposed to voyeurism. The researcher assumes bodies suffer under the influence of the neoliberal environment of the workplace as they walk into the job market.

Liz Lane, in her work, “Feminist Rhetorical Strategies and Networked Activist Movements: #SayHerName as Circulatory Activist Discourse,” argues, “Feminist activist movements in networked spaces employ affective discourse and borrow from

historical rhetorical tactics to amplify their message in a crowded digital sphere" (133). Digital spaces can be safe places for women to dismantle power structures as they turn language into action as an interactive and performative tool for solidarity. Similarly, Bethany Mannon asserts the bridge as a shared experience as well as participatory interaction influence the message (234) albeit one's duty to speak out merely does not label feminist unless the efforts are committed to "justice, equality, empowerment, and the critiques of systems of oppression. . . only align with feminist thought and activism" (238). This shared space of Burke's "identification," as cited by William Duffy, illustrates "how relationships get formed to create the conditions necessary for communication" (143). The discursive and reflexive interactions in the common platforms for the women call for exigency and prepare for the rally against the gender norms. Krista Ratcliffe argues that rhetorical listening is a productive tool because it helps to identify oneself with the commonalities and differences of others for the well-being and to analyze the claims and contexts (27-33). The researcher assumes that the acid victims turn to digital spaces and awareness campaigns as a shared space to raise their voices against violence.

Agency in Feminism from Lorna Finlayson

The Second Wave of feminism, which emerged primarily in the 1960s and 1970s, was a characteristic expansion of feminist concern beyond the earlier struggle for political rights, and particularly suffrage, that had characterized the First Wave. Grounded in a context of postwar social reconstruction and spurred on by civil rights activism, Second Wave feminists reconceptualized oppression as a pervasive, systemic feature of everyday life, challenging both public and private patriarchal institutions. As Finlayson in her work *Introduction to Feminism* explains, Second Wave theorists understood that "power was exercised not only by governments and

corporations but was embedded in cultural norms, language, family structures, and everyday interactions" (5). This widened awareness of oppression led feminists to stress that "the personal is political" (6), demonstrating how domestic and intimate spheres were saturated with public ideologies of domination.

Second Wave feminist agency was theorized more as collective empowerment and resistance than as individual one, based on the shared experiences of gendered oppression. It was espoused by the perception that not the laws, but the consciousness has to be transformed to challenge the conventional norms of gender. Consciousness-raising groups, direct action, and cultural intervention were central feminist practices whereby "speech acts were not so much descriptive of the world as transformative of it" (6). Agency, in this sense, was figured as being created through collective, iterative action—a position Cheryl Glenn later expands on in her demands for collaboration and dialogic rhetoric in feminist action. Emerging from, as well as being critical of, the foundation laid by the Second Wave, the Third Wave of feminism emerged in the 1990s. Finlayson remarks that the Third Wave was fueled by a searing critique of the Second Wave's failure to adequately consider differences of race, class, sexuality, and global location, arguing instead that "experiences of oppression are not homogenous but deeply intersectional" (8). Rather than assuming a universal subject of "woman," Third Wave feminists stressed the contingent, unstable nature of identity itself. Finlayson clarifies: "Third Wave theorists tended to problematize the category of 'woman' and to try to open up feminist discourse to include multiple, intersecting axes of oppression" (9). This rethinking of feminist agency emphasized openness—a stance Glenn also supports—as a necessary mode of ethical engagement across difference.

Agency, in this Third Wave context, was no longer presented as simply entering or claiming political spaces, but negotiating, subverting, and reforming unstable power relations from multiple, shifting locations. Finlayson explains this approach by stating: "Agency becomes an ongoing process of negotiation rather than a fixed status to be achieved" (10). Intersectionality, as Kimberlé Crenshaw theorized it, was needed to describe how agency would be differently formed by race, gender, class, and sexuality all at the same time. Feminist rhetorical theorists like Glenn extended this ethos by proposing that feminist activism must be rooted not in identities but in coalitional practices of listening, solidarity, and hope.

During the Second and Third Waves, agency moved from a demand for simple inclusion in male-dominated institutions to a revolutionary restructuring of the terms of political involvement altogether. Finlayson asserts, Feminism realized that it was not enough to get hold of established sites of power; the spaces had to be "reconstituted on new feminist values and principles" (10). Rather than merely confronting obvious structures, Third Wave feminists understood oppression to be diffuse, cultural, and systemic, requiring equally diffuse and strategic forms of resistance. Simply put, feminist activism does not depend on "merely cerebral wisdom," but it persists as "a practical commitment to change" (15). In other words, transformative praxis is given more emphasis than the idealized thoughts about feminist activism. Thus, across the two waves, feminist agency is theorized as emergent: constructed through iterative struggle, shifting solidarities, embodied practice, and repeated re-vision of dominant scripts. It is in this theorization that this emphasis remains crucial, why rhetorical feminism today, as envisioned by Glenn, continues to prioritize openness, collaboration, vernacular narrative, and coalition as fundamental strategies for bringing feminist futures into being.

Pluralist Views on Trauma Literature

Although the classic model of trauma theory claims that it is impossible to locate the truth of traumatic experience, the pluralist's perspective, yielding its theoretical underpinnings, rejects the idea that trauma is unknowable and unspeakable. The revisionist model believes trauma not only causes disruption but also evokes 'reorientation of consciousness' (4). Michelle Balaev asserts that though it is hard to locate the truth, it is not impossible to attain it. The revisionist view, reshaping trauma studies, expands the theoretical underpinnings and prospects of the field through innovative examinations of trauma in literature and culture. While trauma creates disruption, the significance attributed to this experience is shaped by various individual and cultural influences over time. Trauma can sometimes permanently silence an individual, but it can also, at times, reorient consciousness in an adaptive manner that avoids pathological universal symptoms. Balaev asserts:

> The revisionists, however, are not simply forging ahead along the path laid out by the early trauma theorists. Instead, revisionist critics either move away from Freud and Lacan altogether or take up certain Freudian or Lacanian theories while hewing a new theoretical paradigm in analyses that achieve a starkly different destination. (4)

Owing to the classic model, Balaev rejects the notion of pathological universalism, particularly adhering to social and cultural components of the traumatic event. The revisionist model counters the classic model from a standpoint that the traumatic event can be experienced and represented in diverse ways in literature and society. While considering the larger social, political, and cultural aspects, the trauma's meaning is locatable, not permanently lost. Revisionists believe in the determinant

value of the truth, with diverse as they lay the psychological foundation of traumatic experience.

Seconding the pioneering psychoanalytic and poststructuralist approach, Cathy Caruth, in her work *Trauma, Exploration and Memory,* asserts that trauma is an unclaimed experience as it is not fully assimilated in the victim's mind (5); therefore, it is not locatable. The classic model, introduced by Caruth, was explicated with Freudian psychoanalysis and the Lacanian post-structural approach to assert it as an unsolvable problem and an unrepresentable event of the 'unconscious' that illuminates the inherent contradictions of extreme experience and language. "Trauma is the insistent return against the will of the survivor" (Freud 84). He named the event an 'incubation' or 'latency' to denote the time elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms. Buying into an idea of Freudian *'drive'*, Lacan adds that "it is a *montage*" (169) that highlights the non-linear and fragmented nature of the unconscious, emphasizing the role of language, symbolism, and the unconscious in shaping human subjectivity. It limits linguistic expression to refer to the traumatic event. Claude Lanzmann, as cited by Caruth in her work *Trauma: Exploration in Memory* (1995), agrees with "the temporality of the film, which disrupts chronology, disrupts a certain kind of linear temporality, even though it deals with history" (202). The visceral transformation of trauma over narrativization opens the room for complexities of understanding the traumatic subject with the prolongation of truth.

Caruth writes in *Unclaimed Experience* that "trauma is never simply one's own" (24) and focuses on the dissociative nature of trauma and further writes that one's trauma is tied up with the trauma of another. This solidifies her version that traumatic experiences are often connected to the hardships and pain of others, especially within the larger contexts. However, the responses are not exclusive; she

opens the room for social trauma for discussion. Andreas Hamburger states, “Social trauma as shadowing the original trauma on long-term social processes, be it on family, group or inter-group level” (3). Thus, not only does the individual suffer, but the family and others also suffer and soon become culturally specific to the groups. Alexander et al. claim, “cultural trauma as socially mediated attribution” (8). This indicates that the meaning of the traumatic event is drawn from the different interpretations of the societal groups involved, be it the media apparatus or social and political ideologies. Jeffrey Alexander writes, “cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group’s consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identities in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (1). Hence, the event captures the essence of cultural trauma, highlighting its lasting impact on communities and individual identities.

Trauma evacuation is the most integral part of scholarly reading on trauma literature, while remaking the lost identities caused by the traumatic event. Hamburger, in his research with Shoah survivors, writes on transmitting the experience, which occurs through acknowledgement and witnessing for narrative annihilation instead of interpretation of the event. Further, he adds the three “frames of transmission”- identification, ethics, and empathy in healing trauma (10). Very like Hamburger, Eyerman writes “…cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that have achieved some degree of cohesion” (4). Trauma affects entire communities, influencing their connections and mutual comprehension. He asserts, “Individual and collective traumas both issue from shock, and in each instance, the wounds that incur are collective and social as much as they are individual” (91). While the metaphor ‘tear’

represents the breaking of social ties, trust, and unity, Eyerman believes that trauma can be repaired by the aesthetics of high art while rebuilding the identities of persons or communities without having to name and blame any parties. Although the traumatic event is the primary source, it becomes cultural when the suffering is shared. Eyerman believes that trauma can be repaired by constructing new narratives and by collective memory that not only brings about social and political changes to the individual and group, healing the traumatic impact, but also cope and heal from such traumatic experiences. Healing of trauma is a systematic process. Judith Lewis Herman asserts that although the traumatic event shatters an individual's sense of self and the world, the survivor can reclaim oneself from the perpetrator and re-weave a "sense of self" (44). For this, it requires witnesses who would believe the survivor's narrative and acknowledge the reality of the trauma. Thus, recovery can only take place within the context of social relationships; it cannot occur in isolation.

While the intersectionality of gender violence and the rhetoric of trauma inform the acid victims' intricate journey of psychosomatic suffering, social exclusion, and misrepresentation through the canonical life review narratives, the rhetorical feminism relentlessly questions the status quo of the androcentric worldviews of the past to seek feminine agency for the reclamation of identity construction, true representation advocacy and activism for the transformative research of women subjects. The study is expected to urge the exigency to act upon preventive measures, treatment policies, and stringent legal policies against acid violence. Only then can we harness social harmony in a fight against radicalism around the globe.

Chapter III: From Trauma to Transformation

The lived experiences of Bindabasini Kansakar, Sangita Magar, Muskan Khatun, and Basanti Pariyar come from different ethnic minorities of social, cultural, and geographic sites across Nepal, yet are tragically linked by the shared experience of gendered violence in acid attacks. They belong to a lower-middle-class family who struggled with the mounting pressures of education, family duties, and precarious employment. They were attacked while engaged in their mundane everyday activities- purchasing vegetables, working in a store, walking to school, and taking tuitions- how the normalized spaces became the spaces for terror. The attackers were familiar to them: neighbors, rejected suitors, or men with grievance claims based on patriarchal entitlement. These assaults were not random but purposeful acts of punishment for observed transgressions such as rejecting advances, exercising autonomy, or simply being publicly feminine in public space. Despite differences in age, caste, religion, and location, all the survivors had to deal with not only extreme physical suffering but also structural shortcomings in legal recourse, medical attention, and reintroduction into society. These assaults turned their bodies into war zones of misogynistic control, setting the stage for an advanced psychological process of trauma, resistance, and recovery of identity.

Bindabasini Kansakar has reportedly been the first sensational case of acid attack in Nepal. The incident took place in Hetauda on April 22, 2013, when she refused the marriage proposal of the stalker who followed her mostly in her shop. She unveils the traumatic experiences she faced socially and economically during her treatment process, as there was no dedicated hospital then. Her journey from Nepal to Madurai, India, back and forth, not only added stress financially but also took a toll on her business and physical fatigue. Her experiences speak volumes about discrepancies

in administrative tasks in Nepal, and institutional unawareness of the hospital that misdiagnosed the burn medication. She endured medicine-induced weakness and victim-blaming from her relatives as if it were her fault. To reintegrate, she tried to listen to motivational speeches, made handicrafts out of collected newspapers, learned embroidery and stitching skills, joined Public Service Commission preparation classes, and the like, but it did not help due to her eye strain. She dropped the idea of working at the radio station as she had to design a program with the victims, which could retraumatize her. What propelled to campaign against acid violence in the public sphere was the attack on Sangita Magar at Basantapur, Kathmandu. Besides her family, she acknowledges Antardristi Nepal, an NGO, for the financial aid and Mr. Ujjwal Thapa, for helping her find a job in Kumari Bank, in the Kathmandu Valley, eventually connecting her to politics. As an elected member of parliament, Bindabasini Kanskar today is a political activist who raises her voice against burn violence. The plea for social justice, once heard on the streets, now echoes in the rostrum of the parliament.

Sangita Magar, a schoolgirl of ethnic minority from a low-income family, became the brutal reality of gender-based violence on February 22, 2015, at Basantapur, Kathmandu. She and her friend were attacked while they were taking tuition classes for the School Leaving Certificate examination that was supposed to take place in just over 25 days. The physical suffering not only left her with disfigurement, compelling her to extensive medical care, but also translated their pain into deep psychological scars, marked by fear, loss of confidence, misrepresentation, social isolation, and even suicidal ideations. Strangely, the perpetrator did not have a sense of shame and guilt, and his attitudes reflect the ingrained structures and practices of gender roles. The girl feared revictimization from the same. Nevertheless,

she resorted to becoming resilient, which fueled her activism in fighting against acid violence by changing policies in the country. She came to the public space, breaking barriers of isolation for more than three years through silence and listening. She is specifically known as a prominent activist who played a crucial role in bringing stringent laws against acid violence in Nepal that restricted the acid sales as preventive measures. Happily married, Sangita Magar assists her husband in running a small business in Kathmandu for their living.

Muskan Khatun, at 14, became the victim of an acid attack on September 6, 2019, when she refused the romantic advances of a barber boy. The incident occurred in Birgunj, Nepal, while she was going to her school. This heinous assault caused severe burns to her face, chest, and hands. Undertaking the intricate journey of psychosomatic trauma, she faced several challenges in society, coming from an ethnic minority, such as backlash in the intersectionality of gender, caste, and religion. She was even misrepresented by the mainstream media, romanticizing her news, giving a color of love-hate relation, while the opposite was her claim. However, her Facebook with a fan following of 83K gave her ample space for expressing her resilience, resistance, and empowerment, which ultimately became instrumental for her fight advocating for stringent laws as a strong social activist until they were formulated against the acid violence in Nepal. In recognition of her perseverance, she was awarded the International Women of Courage Award in 2021 by the U.S. Department. As a beacon of hope and inspiration, today she is a social activist, motivational speaker, and public figure to raise awareness for all kinds of violence against women in society. Positive and vibrant about life, Muskan aims to be a lawyer to fight against violence in Nepal.

Basanti Pariyar, with her two children represents the underserved community and she was assaulted with acid in her late 20s, by her neighbor on September 24, 2021, at Danda, Kawasoti. The event occurred while she was returning home from the market, buying vegetable seeds. The assailant not only threw acid at her but also stabbed her multiple times, making it the most complicated case of vitriolage of Nepal. Despite the injuries in her intestines and facial disfigurement, she never had suicidal ideations. Instead, she always thought that she would come back to new normal, and she did. The assault she linked was to her intervention in the perpetrator's servant's domestic abuse. Basanti seeks hope for life from her husband and the community in defense of her character, which strengthens her sense of security for life. Her self-reflexivity disidentifies with the verdict of the perpetrator of a love affair. She sometimes becomes emotional and evaluates why he sounded so protective and coercive in the past, while they both were married and had children. Finding the culprit in prison, she acknowledges her trauma and feels proud to be a government employee of Nepal Oil Corporation, Bhairahawa, leaving the impression that one should not give up hope in the face of adversity. She is indebted to Ms. Khusbu Pradhan for saving her from her near-death experience and Mr. Ujjwal Bikram Thapa, a savior of acid victims, for finding her employment.

Survivors' Narratives and Psychological Trauma

The word 'trauma' comes from the Greek origin, meaning 'wound,' which is extreme physical or emotional distress that overwhelms an individual's capacity to cope. Although the somatic trauma is subject to the medical definition that centers on bodily harm, psychological trauma is an emotional wound or shock that produces serious psychological damage in the human psyche. Besides trauma, being the external character of an event, it is also the internal survivor experience. Traumatic

responses may include flashbacks, anxiety, dissociation, and drug use. Trauma that occurs in childhood is particularly likely to disrupt attachment relationships and adult behavioral and emotional instability. Lacan refers to trauma as confronting "the essential object which isn't an object any longer… the object of anxiety par excellence" (164). Psychologically, trauma not only engenders fear and helplessness but also identity crises as well.

Traumatized individuals feel emotional numbing, disorientation, and alienation. Ultimately, trauma healing requires validation, safety, and typically therapeutic processing. Trauma distorts the inherent sense of safety and self, but through education and support, survivors can assert control. Although trauma is treated as a new ignorance, diverse disciplines come together to solve the problem. Judith Herman, in her work *Trauma and Recovery,* argues, “Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force . . . events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning” (33). Psychological trauma rests on the capacity when the victims go without any sense of control as they face overwhelming power. The traumatic events shatter the normal structures of care that generally provide individuals with a feeling of belonging, meaning, and control. Jeffrey Alexander cites Erikson 1976 in his book *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, and asserts:

> By individual trauma I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively. By collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damage the bonds attaching people and impair the prevailing sense of communality. (4)

Individual trauma refers to a violent and sudden blow to an individual's psyche that overwhelms the psychological defenses and makes them unable to respond effectively. Social trauma, however, assaults the very basic social institutions that erode the feeling of relating to one another and disrupt shared community. While an individual's well-being is shattered by the horrendous event, psychological trauma occurs, interacting with human nature. "Human beings need security, order, love, and connection. If something happens that sharply undermines these needs, it hardly seems surprising, according to the lay theory, that people will be traumatized as a result" (Alexander 3). Human beings rely on stability, security, love, and meaningful relationships. When these basic needs are suddenly disrupted or under threat, it makes sense, even at a basic level, that such a situation can lead to psychological trauma. Trauma exceeds personal catastrophe to become a linguistic, social, and cultural crisis.

The life histories of four Nepali survivors of acid attack, Sangita Magar, Muskan Khatun, Bindabasini Kansakar, and Basanti Pariyar, bear witness to the complex interplay between psychic discontinuity and social rejection. This study analyzes psychological trauma and illustrates how trauma interferes with memory, identity, justice, and recovery. Cathy Caruth asserts, "The impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located. Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival" (8). The belatedness of a confused and fuzzy world as a mystery has been further directed to dissociation and disembodiment. These expressions of the selected acid attack survivors echo Caruth's idea of belatedness:

> "I could not realize who it was. It was the festival time of Holi, and so initially I thought someone threw hot water, but then slowly my body went numb due

to unbearable pain.” Sangita

“I didn’t realize it was acid—I felt the flames burn alive. I rubbed my face and saw the flesh falling.” Muskan

“I was shocked and puzzled. I didn’t realize what it was.” Bindabasini

“I thought someone threw hot oil or tea. I shouted- Water! water!” Basanti

The instant reactions of survivors reflect Caruth's argument that trauma lies precisely in its belatedness (8) and an experience that is not fully owned at the time of occurrence, marked by a delayed cognitive and emotional grasp of the event. Muskan's somatic memory, “I rubbed my face and saw the flesh falling," and Sangita's dissociative account, "my body went numb due to unbearable pain," illustrate what Caruth determines as the inability to fully grasp the incident within the instant. In both instances, trauma slips beyond knowing and is available to delay, finally erupting in feeling and memory.

In contrast, Judith Herman, in the introduction of her work *Trauma and Recovery,* emphasizes the body’s sensory confusion during trauma, leading to fragmented recollections: “The dialectic of trauma gives rise to complicated, sometimes uncanny alterations of consciousness” (1). In other words, the distortion of reality occurs during the traumatic memory. Bindabasini and Basanti’s accounts echo this as they report disbelief and misrecognition of the burning substance, misattributing it to tea or oil. Both agree that trauma defies coherent registration, but while Caruth foregrounds the temporal disjunction, Herman claims it a dissociation as a defensive reflex. Herman tells us that dissociation works to protect the psyche by banishing or numbing or overwhelming sensations to the sphere of unconsciousness. Caruth characterizes these episodes as interruptions in narrative memory, the unspeakable becoming "a voice that cries out from the wound" (3) while Hamburger

claims the testimony of the witnessing that fails to assimilate experience into psychic representation and structure (6). Bodily pain cannot be put into language and therefore leads to a numbing coldness or freezing of narrative. In both cases, trauma is not so much memory but an unsettling absence of speech and thought.

Herman writes, “The traumatic event destroys the victim’s fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world . . . thus, traumatic events produce profound and lasting psychological harm” (51). The dissociation and disembodiment slowly lead to depression, often culminating in suicidal attempts due to their emotional numbness while losing their self-esteem and confidence in life. Mirror becomes a powerful tool to form for the loss of identity.

> “I used to see my photos from the past and compare them with the present. I lost my identity. I even tried to commit suicide.” Sangita
>
> “As I saw the mirror, I was scared, and I fell down.” Muskan
>
> “My daughter was scared… this was the most painful moment; I tried to forget the physical pain, but the psychological pain was everlasting.” Basanti
>
> “Even my father kept off the mirror. I never used my father’s mobile camera to see my face.” Bindabasini

The mirror becomes a powerful symbol of identity loss. Muskan collapses after seeing her mirror reflection: “I fell down.” Bindabasini avoids mirrors for a long time and does not even use her father’s mobile to see herself. For Herman, trauma damages the survivor’s sense of self (77), while Eyerman’s theory of cultural trauma explains how injury to the body becomes injury to social identity, being cultural trauma as a rupture in the collective identity (158). While Herman locates trauma in the individualistic domain, Eyerman brings it to the domain of culture and emphasizes how collective stories and stigmas reinforce the effects of trauma. Sangita, for instance, is shunned

by her fellow students' testimony that trauma is sustained and reproduced by public action and social silence.

The survivors express their scorn and frustration with the existing legal system that perpetuates systemic violence and injustice through the ineffectiveness of law enforcement.

> "The culprit said in his statement that going to prison is like going to school for him, So, crime itself is tempting. I still fear that he will be released soon, and he has not realized yet what he has done to me. I believe in stringent laws for protection matters." Sangita
>
> "I used to be angry with that person and also with the police, looking at their helplessness. They couldn't arrest him." Bindabasini
>
> "Although the government promised jobs, sadly, it couldn't offer to the victims due to the lengthy process and full of hassles; the law is still not effective." Muskan

While Sangita's quotes show how loopholes and lenient punishments embolden perpetrators, her fear of the perpetrator's return threatens the rehabilitative justice, indicating retraumatization of the victims. Similarly, Bindabasini's statements reflect what Herman describes as betrayal by the institution when the very systems meant to protect citizens instead perpetuate trauma by failing to act and thus give birth to the activists in the community (244). Muskan points to a disconnection between symbolic legislative victories and the practical failures of implementation of government jobs, an issue echoed in feminist critiques of performative justice systems.

The survivors' testimonies also illustrate the skeptical views of legal systems. These point out the failure of the holding environment and how society is complicit in the continuation of trauma. The assertive voice of activism, for instance, Muskan's

voice, about stringent laws through victims' participation, aligns with Eyerman's conviction that trauma creates "meaning struggles "in cultural narratives (200). Survivors are not merely subjugated to the universal understanding of trauma with pathology but also creators of new legal and moral codes, pushing against top-down meanings of justice. While all four survivors exhibit resilience, their paths vary. Basanti returns to work, Sangita's rediscovery is in marriage and doing a small business, and Muskan and Bindabasini continue to become activists. This variation is a testament to Herman's contention that healing from trauma involves "establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring connection" (3). Hamburger's relational theory still argues that recovery is never solitary; it requires mutual witnessing and social acknowledgment (10). These women show us that, through transmuting suffering into public activism, individual healing, and shared education. The accounts of Sangita, Muskan, Bindabasini, and Basanti bear out the complexities that trauma is not linear and individual. It breaks in bursts of belated horror, festers in social solitude, and transforms into acts of resistance. Common to these voices and texts is that they all insist on trauma, while catastrophic, being also a call for recognition, justice, and recovery of meaning in a shattered world.

Rhetorical Listening and Feminine Agency

Trauma theory and feminist rhetorical practice come together to argue that violence does not destroy subjectivity but opens ruptures along which new consciousness and agency develop. Michelle Balaev's theory of pluralistic trauma underpins the fact that trauma causes both disruption and reorientation of consciousness, but the values attached to this experience are influenced by a variety of individual and cultural factors that change over time.

Cheryl Glenn's rhetorical feminism completes this vision by proposing rhetorical listening as a deliberate, ethical, and transformative practice that turns suffering into dialogue, reflection, and community agency. Basanti Pariyar, Bindabasini Kansakar, Muskan Khatun, and Sangita Magar's narratives illuminate how feminist ethics-informed rhetorical listening makes possible the realignment of consciousness after intense trauma. Their narratives are a living archive of resilience that speaks to how feminist agency breaks forth through internalization, negotiation, and re-telling of traumatic experience. Glenn's openness, internalization, reflection, acceptance, action, and most critically, hope, where agency becomes immersive. These survivor accounts reveal rhetorical listening not as listening passively but as an active feminist practice. The survivors critically and actively engaged in listening inwardly to trauma, internalized external narratives through silence and listening, reflected them, and ultimately responded with activism, legislation, coalition, and public testimony. She seconds Ratcliffe's idea of 'rhetorical listening' as a rhetorical innovation, a rhetorical strategy that comprises four main functions: "understanding of self and others", operationalizing the ethical stance for each other's well-being, locating "identifications across commonalities and differences", and critically assessing them with underlying cultural assumptions (80). All these tenets create space for the enactment of the feminine agency. Similarly, she imagines rhetorical listening is listening deeply and with intention, even when it is painful. She adds, "We rhetorical feminists must strive toward ethical, safe, and yet sometimes painful dialogue, from the margins to the center, from margin to margin, if ever rhetorical feminists are to come together in their advocacy of human rights and social justice" (46). Thus, silence is not an absence in this case but a pregnant pause: survivors take in, reflect, and reorient towards new, budding selves for their rights and justice. In this feminist listening, the survivors resist erasure by creating space for their nascent selves:

> “It was a blackout, full of agitation. It was so painful, and I can’t express it. I thought I wouldn’t die so easily. I would come back to take revenge.” Basanti
>
> “I was shocked and puzzled. I didn’t realize what it was. I never heard of acid. Initially, I thought it was tea or hot water. Along with the pain, my mind spoke what it was and why it was so painful, why splashed.” Bindabasini
>
> “From the bed itself, I had the conviction that I should get justice from the government.” Muskan

In the immediate aftermath of violence, survivors like Basanti Pariyar ("I thought that I would not die so easily. I would come back to take revenge") and Bindabaini’s (“I was shocked and puzzled. I didn’t realize what it was”) begin their rhetorical listening process from the body's numbed silence. Rhetorical listening begins in receptivity to what is hard to hear, the painful acknowledgment of violence before it can even be named. This internalization of silence, as shock, is the body's first rhetorical act: not spoken speech, but hearing radical interruption, a basis upon which agency will later be built. Trauma forces a reorganization of perception, precisely the listening Glenn calls "an ethical stance” (102) an openness to the other, and here, the other is their own traumatized self. The transition of the survivors into silent internalization is a sign of the second stage of rhetorical listening. Muskan Khatun's initial resolution, "From the bed itself I had the conviction that I should get justice," is an instance of inward listening by the survivors, gradually realizing the magnitude of their disruption.

Rhetorical listening enables survivors to critically react against misrepresentation without internalizing it. They hear the distortions and not their authority, demonstrating what Glenn terms ‘feminist rhetorical resistance’ (80) through speaking and writing delivery to recognize the

injustice of misrepresentation and reclaim identities in the contested spaces. Their rhetorical gestures not only survive media distortion but contest it overtly, asserting the ethical, feminist right of self-definition.

> “They come and take interviews and go. Most of them wrote the truth. But a couple of media outlets misrepresented me as a beloved victim, which was not true. I don’t even fear my husband, I was strong enough to fight alone in my life.” Basanti
>
> “The media misrepresented my speech when I was asked about my marriage, which was not true.” Bindabasini
>
> “Media romanticized my love, but I didn’t know what that was at the age of 14.” Muskan
>
> “The Police harassed and blamed me, and even the media romanticized my love with someone whom I didn’t even know. They blamed me for giving my brother’s sketch, so it was torturous to my family.” Sangita

In these narratives, survivors identify a structured process: media outlets selectively report trauma in patriarchal, sensationalistic stories, usually idealizing violence, victim-blaming, or distorting agency. Glenn's rhetorical listening theory provides a critical feminist framework for making sense of this process and contends that rhetorical listening entails an ethical requirement to listen to meaning without any prejudice to someone else's speech. Media misrepresentation, however, is a failure of rhetorical listening: it substitutes hegemonic fantasies for survivors' lived realities. Rather than truly hearing the survivors' complex experiences of pain, resilience, and hope, the media simplify them into simplistic, often romanticized accounts. For example, when Muskan's trauma at age 14 is recounted as a "love affair," it

infantilizes her suffering and erases the structural elements of gendered violence. Sangita's fear that the media had accused her of "giving the sketch of my brother" shows the way rhetorical erasure becomes wrapped up with communal and familial shame, which accumulates into the initial hurt. This continues that rhetorical listening creates spaces where others can be visible on their terms, not simply reinscribed into dominant ideologies. Thus, listening rhetorically helps the survivors identify themselves from others and the oppressive patterns.

Moreover, the survivors' responses to misrepresentation demonstrate feminist rhetorical agency. Basanti's statement, "I don't even fear my husband, I was strong enough to fight alone in my life," pushes back against the victim-blaming script of the media, asserting her independence and rhetorical presence. Bindabasini's realization that her voice was manipulated serves as the foundation for her later political activism, demonstrating what Glenn calls “in a commitment to hope and possibility” (102) listening for minorities and remapping power structures. Thus, the testimonies of the survivors fit as an invitation to listen into deep, resist master narratives, and remake communal memory through hope and coalition". In witnessing trauma against the misrepresentations of the media, Basanti, Bindabasini, Muskan, and Sangita practice rhetorical listening not only to themselves but to broader feminist futures, requiring their traumas, voices, and their agencies to be heard on their terms.

Survivors' engagement with external social narratives constitutes a stark exercise in rhetorically listening to hostile publics.

> “People don’t approach me like before; even best friends come and ask indirectly if I would like to go with them. Basanti
>
> My kith and kin used to be there, but many times they blamed me that it was my weakness and fault that I gave him the space.” Bindabasini
>
> “If I post a photo on a social site, people feel jealous and say that I only got an opportunity as an activist. They never see the side of my pain and struggle.” Muskan

Bindabasini remembers that her relatives used to blame her, that it was her fault, whereas Muskan recounts people’s jealousy for the opportunities she grabbed as an activist. Glenn argues that rhetorical listening entails not simply comprehension, but "a willingness to acknowledge that meaning is contingent, and sometimes contradictory" (16). Survivors listened to both sympathy and blame, internalizing the contradictions without being silenced. They practiced resistant listening: listening to discourse not to accept it, but to devise strategic rebuttals. This echoes Glenn's reading, “People never have complete control of their agency, and for women, the situation is often more complicated” (81). Thus, rhetorical feminism involves engaging with contradictions, discomforts, and difficulties as opportunities for transformation, as it never has complete control over agency.

Survivors transitioned from passive reception to active rhetorical response, responding to injustice through marginalized individuals. Though it appears to be individual in the beginning, it soon becomes a collective action.

> “I was inwardly very strong and never gave up.” Basanti
>
> “I decided to enter politics to advocate for the burn victims.” Bindabasini

> “I started motivational classes and awareness campaigns right from my school. I wrote a letter to the PM that I wanted to make law, so I joined the law stream.” Muskan
>
> “We decided to go to Chitwan to see the victim, Basanti. Then we made a campaign to raise funds for the victims. Then I started speaking in public.” Sangita

Muskan's political letter-writing to the PM KP Oli to urge for new laws and Sangita's activism for raising funds through public speaking for Basanti demonstrate the transition of rhetorical listening into dialogic agency. For Glenn, “rhetorical feminism is a conceptual action". (4) where listening leverages the speaking rhetorically to make speaking more deliberate, more thoughtful, and thus more productive. They act first by thinking before they speak, and survivors become agents not merely as survivors but as rhetorical intentional change, renarrating stories, advocating for policies, and reappearing in public spaces. Survivors like Basanti, who was inwardly strong, and Bindabasini’s decision to enter into politics to advocate for burn violence victims illustrate rhetorical listening's highest feminist purpose: reconstruction of identity based on hope. Glenn identifies that rhetorical feminism is energized by "a leap-of-faith” (46) and a kind of hope, a commitment that transformation is possible through collective efforts and action. Survivors' intentional choice to hear hope, despite structural collapse and individual anguish, makes this truth a reality. Their lives and bodies are rhetorical fields of change, avoiding victimization and reasserting presence through feminist alliance and activism.

In the course of these stages, the acid attack survivors practice rhetorical listening not as passive hearing but as a strategic feminist practice. They do justice to Cheryl Glenn's belief that rhetorical listening has the potential to produce new

meanings, new understandings, and thus new forms of agency. Their journey from numbness to reflection, from absorption to articulation, demonstrates how feminist rhetorical listening creates spaces for healing, resistance, and radical hope. These survivors do not merely survive trauma; they listen deeply to themselves and others, and then speak back to the world, constructing feminist futures grounded in resilience, solidarity, and transformative action. As we map the lives of acid attack survivors, we can see that feminist rhetorical listening provides the ethical, affective, and political space from which trauma is redirected into agency. Basanti, Bindabasini, Muskan, and Sangita perform a feminist practice of listening that absorbs not only violence but redirects it into collective, optimistic action. Their narratives affirm Glenn's contention that rhetorical listening produces "new meanings, new understandings, and new alliances" (12), fulfilling Balaev's pluralistic notion of reorientation of consciousness through listening, speaking, and resisting (4). Consciousness reorientation, therefore, arrives not as a personal epiphany but as a shared, feminist achievement- a revolutionary hope that endures wound and transforms pain into power.

Reorienting Identities: Moral Working Through and Spatial Resistance

Family is the first rhetorical space, a site of immediate survival, reassurance, and hope. Basanti recalls her father's determination to save her life, which illustrates the grounding of rhetorical hope in intimate relationships. For Glenn, hope is an active and not a passive state, and "listening is often dismissed as feminine or passive" (60), but "a leap of faith" (46) that brings silence into action. In this case, family support serves as a first rhetorical state of emotional survivability, offering what Balaev terms a 'reorientation of consciousness' that moves a person from fragmentation to recasting self-belief. Similarly, Muskan recalls that it was her

family's effort that persuaded her to acknowledge her trauma, while for Sangita, every family member turned supportive, but she emphasizes that it's because of her mother that she is there. Likewise, Bindabasini firmly asserts that her father's shadow helped her gain strength and hope for life. It is a poignant staging of Glenn's definition of relational, corporeal knowledge, where touch as a rhetorical gesture means the affirmation of survival. In the new historiography, "the gendering of rhetorical spaces is just the beginning. Its inquiry extends to other sites critical to the personal, professional, and political welfare of women and men, such as the schoolhouse, university, and home (Octalog III 16). Hence, family rhetoric, survivors have a home base, a site to launch the reconstitution of shattered selves.

Institutions and NGOs emerge as secondary sites of rhetoric to extend spatial solidarity where survivors transcend their inner hope to public healing.

> "Khusbu Pradhan is like a god for me who helped me financially during my tough time to run my life, Ujjwal sir helped me to get a job." Basanti
>
> "I remember Antardristi NGO, where I was asked to teach children and used to be with them. Then the Municipality supported my awareness programs." Bindabasini
>
> "I am with BVS Nepal. It is good. We have new projects where burn violence is the issue." Muskan
>
> "I thank people from Raksha Nepal. Likewise, I remember uncle, Mr. Ujjwal Thapa, who supported my education." Sangita

Basanti confesses: "Khusbu Pradhan is like a god for me to run the life, Ujjwal sir helped me to get a job". This crossover embodies Glenn's ideal of collaboration, not hierarchical charity but rhetorical coalition, promoting the victim's agency into operational spheres. Muskan thanks being with BVS Nepal, while Bindabasini thanks

Antardristi NGO in Nepal. Similarly, Sangita recalls, "I thank people from Raksha Nepal. Likewise, I remember runcle, Mr. Ujjwal Thpa, who sponsored my education." Such organizations and agents become rhetorical backers of survivors, legitimizing what Hamburger's "relational theory" (10) outlines as the pluralistic model of trauma viz., one finding healing as networked, cultural occurrence and not individualized adversity. Thus, it goes beyond the personal level and becomes a social trauma. Digital media is a rhetorical transition from being the subject of pity to becoming advocates. Bindabasini's claim of her classmates' approach to her after being open about her narratives in Facebook and Muskan's digital narratives being followed by 83K followers reveal that digital spaces are safe sites for feminine advocacy and activism. Likewise, Sangita was collectively involved in raising awareness and fundraising in the digital spaces after Basanti was attacked. This boosted her confidence to face the public slowly. Jessica Enoch's rhetorical spaces theory focuses on the fact that such online performances are not neutral; they are "practiced places" that reflect and remake power relations (Octalog III, 116). These survivors reappropriated virtual spaces not as spaces of shame but as spaces of rearticulated identity, under Glenn's hope-based feminism. "In addition to successfully executing disidentification, rhetorical feminism works to revise and reinvigorate rhetorical principles, reestablishing the rhetorical appeals and reforming the rhetorical canons of invention and delivery, as the following sections will demonstrate (64). It tries to revive the agency by shifting private pain into public action.

Work is a critical performance of rhetorical reclaiming of visibility and economic agency. As Basanti states, "Now I work at Nepal Oil Corporation, though insecure, I could make my new identity by my work," and Sangita states, "Now I am running a business with my family." Their economic activism is an enactment of

Rhetorical persuasion that relies on the principle of rhetorical embodiment, where action, rather than speech alone, is rhetorical persuasion. These survivors do not merely speak of recovery; they enact it in public spaces where labor becomes a rearticulation of their right, and thereby subvert the traditional silencing processes traditionally visited upon acid survivors.

Activism becomes the highest level of rhetorical reclamation. Muskan's rebellious testimony"-I wrote a letter to PM KP Oli and demanded stringent laws" and Bindabasini's claim, "I dedicated myself in a political activism to work for burn violence legal framework representing Rastriya Swatantra Party." reflects Glenn's performative feminism that transforms "the status quo into social change are realized by feminist rhetors, writers, teachers, and administrators, many of whom employ the tactic of rhetorical feminism to deliberately disidentify with traditional rhetorical practices" (174). In other words, it underpins the social change through rhetorical acts ripping off the dominant epistemologies". Jessica Enoch's emphasis on going back to "spatial rhetorics" (Octalog III 116) comes into play as activism relocates legislative spaces, parliament, media, and streets into feminist rhetorical spaces that subvert male power arrangements and create new histories of women's agency. The activism by all these victims eventually introduced Penal Code 193, which, Sangita asserts, her activism and public campaign brought the law into effect.

Recent life narratives are the ongoing, pluralist transformation of trauma, indicating the coda of their lives. Basanti completes, "Though inwardly strong, physically weak. I never gave up. Now I am supporting my family life working at Oil Corporation to educate my children" Likewise, Muskan informs, "Studying law, taking motivational classes, conducting awareness campaigns after receiving the International Brave Woman Award." While Bindabasini is currently working as a

Member of Parliament to repeal of violent laws and survivors' rights, Sangita has happily been married and running a small business. These redefinitions of selfhood fall into Balaev's trauma model, where identity is not consolidated by victimization but remade by action, speech, and acts of hope. Glenn's argues that hope is not naive; it is a revolutionary rhetorical act (212) is exemplified in the survivors' continued struggles to survive with scars both visible and invisible. The accounts of acid attack survivors demonstrate that survival is not passive recovery but an active rhetorical struggle of hope, space-making, and self-reconstruction. Glenn's feminist methodology illustrates how survivors employ rhetorical hope, utilizing family, NGOs, online media, work, and activism as sites of empowerment and identity reclamation. Jessica Enoch's spatial rhetoric theory demonstrates how survivors occupy new locations to write alternative, resistant subjectivities. Balaev's pluralist model of trauma sets up a theory, showing the way, trauma is not a conclusion but a realignment in a state of new consciousness.

Trauma Healing and Empowerment

The psychological experience of trauma calls for collective healing and hence through reorientation in identities, resistance to structures, and the reclamation of agency. The prominent scholars- Cheryl Glenn, Jessica Enoch, Judith Herman, Michelle Balaev, Ron Eyerman, and Jeffrey Alexander offer significant frameworks that process trauma evacuation, empowerment, and social change.

Cheryl Glenn's *Rhetorical Feminism and This Thing Called Hope* emphasizes openness, cooperation, and optimism as a rhetorical stance that allows minorities to reframe their experiences. Glenn claims, "feminist rhetorical practices emphasize "openness, authentic dialogue and deliberation, interrogation of the status quo, collaboration, respect, and progress-and vice versa" (1). Survivors of trauma become

empowered through speaking and writing out their suffering, a dwelling place in language. Likewise, Jessica Enoch expands on this model by theorizing rhetorical spaces in which marginalized identities can remap the concept of agency through spatial practices that disrupt patriarchal constraints (116). Activism, community action, and legislative reform by survivors create rhetorical spaces in which identity is not restored but reclaimed. Both scholars are firm in their belief that empowerment comes not merely from inner strength but from the mere act of dwelling— residing in public, social, and symbolic spaces previously forbidden. Activism, community action, and legislative reform by survivors create rhetorical spaces in which identity is not restored but reclaimed.

Sociologically, Ron Eyerman and Jeffrey Alexander locate trauma not just within the individual but also within collective and cultural identities. Alexander defines cultural trauma as when "members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group's consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identities" (1). Eyerman takes this further by asserting that trauma is a "meaning struggles" which "reconfigures collective memory and reshapes group identities" (200). Healing is, therefore, not a return to an earlier wholeness but the creation of a new collective identity through collective narration, solidarity, and activism. For acid attack survivors, their narratives do not merely speak of pain; they are performances of re-signification that insert their battered bodies into social memory and demand structural recognition. Likewise, Judith Herman offers a psychological roadmap for healing from trauma, with emphasis on three critical stages: safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection. Central to her theory is the assumption: “The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others.

Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections" (133). Particularly, Herman argues that any intervention that takes power away from the survivor can foster her recovery in new relationships. In assuming roles as agents of legislative reform and social change, the acid survivors embody feminist models of healing based on agency, rather than victimhood.

Michelle Balaev's revisionist theory of trauma offers equally vital theoretical groundwork. Challenging the view of trauma as a uniformly pathological space, Balaev states that trauma could instead become "an incentive to creativity, connectivity, and moral and political action" (127). Trauma alters one's consciousness, true enough, but survivors are not inextricably trapped in victim traps. Instead, they can redeem themselves through meaning-making and activism. The coping mechanisms of the survivors in Nepal, either family network, work, activism, or occupying public spaces, function as processes of redemptive reclamation against victimhood discourse.

Synthesizing these models, healing and empowerment are not linear recovery but dynamic reconfiguration. As Alexander and Breese maintain, trauma narratives are "symbolic renderings" that allow communities to reimagine their wounds (xxvii). Similarly, Enoch's theory of spatial rhetorics suggests that "spaces are not neutral backdrops but are themselves produced through rhetorical action" (116). Survivors affirmatively re-signify their bodies, their space, and their voice. In doing so, they counter hegemonic structures that relegated them to the silos of speech. Glenn's argument about 'hope' as "a leap of faith" (46) belongs here; hope is a rhetorical, corporeal practice of imagining oneself as somebody who can intervene, change, and belong. Thus, healing for the survivors of acid attacks is an act of cathartic, ethical

working through, a feminist, collective praxis of challenging trauma's grasp over memory, identity, and potential futures.

Chapter IV: Feminist Hope and Future of Trauma Healing

The testimonies of Nepal's acid attack survivors reveal that psychological trauma is not an individual affliction but a sociocultural harm, in which identity, body, and agency are fractured and contested. Their narratives show shock, silent internalizing, and gradual surfacing into activism, capturing a moral recovery, where healing begins by recovering shattered meanings through collective witnessing and political participation. Here, rhetorical feminism, as theorized by Cheryl Glenn, offers a strong model: it places agency in high relief through embodied openness, transformational listening, and coalition-building outside androcentric discourse. Drawing on Glenn's and Jessica Enoch's conceptualizations of rhetorical spaces as sites of critical reclamation, the survivors turn the stigmatized spaces into schools, media, and courtrooms into spaces of empowerment. Besides, their activism is under Michelle Balaev's revisionist model of trauma, where memory is not merely reenacting trauma but enables a shift of consciousness and self-construction beyond victimhood. Indeed, trauma can reorient life.

This trajectory of voice and space recovery discredits the structural inequalities inherent in Nepalese society. Legal betrayals when procedures took an eternity, punishments did not work, and cynicism reigned in the system, exacerbated their trauma, substantiating the argument that collective trauma must be legitimized by society before healing and reintegrative strategies. Survivors such as Bindabasini Kansakar, Sangita Magar, Muskan Khatun, and Basanti Pariyar, through rallying for tighter acid law and institutional change, are prototypes of rhetorical feminism's ‘hope,’ a futurist politics grounded in hopefulness for possibility in the face of hopelessness. Their actions of speaking out, coalition-building, occupying digital sites, and invoking public sympathy show how feminist rhetorical agency works not

through confrontation per se but by reconfiguring narratives of belonging, dignity, and moral justice. The survivors of acid attacks, therefore, illustrate that healing from trauma is not a one-off therapeutic activity but an ongoing rhetorical-political act of recovering visibility and humanity.

In light of these findings, Nepalese legal and social institutions must embrace a trauma-informed, feminist-informed approach to justice. Legal reforms must expedite acid violence cases, offer robust reparative care as opposed to punitive action, and institutionalize consultation with survivors to democratize legal processes. Concurrently with judicial reforms, rhetorical listening and critical empathy-grounded public education initiatives should be launched to dismantle social stigma around bodily disfigurement and feminine virtue. Most importantly, policymakers need to recognize survivors not only as victims who require help but as actors who have already reinvented the social terms of contact. While Penal Code 193 was enacted in 2017 and amended in 2020, the cases have plummeted in Nepal, substantially promoting rehabilitative concerns rather than retributive ones. These canonical narratives of the success stories will be the beacon of hope and inspiration for all kinds of systemic violence against women around the globe. Further, it is expected to open a burn discourse, which is the pressing issue of Nepal. The country can begin to place its justice system on a path consistent with the emancipatory spirit embodied by ‘rhetorical feminism’, the belief that marginalized voices, heard in substantive terms, possess the capacity to recast the collective moral and democratic fabric.

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Appendices

Appendix-I

Informed Consent Sheet

Dear Respondent,

I am conducting research entitled "Rebuilding Identities amidst Women Acid Attack Survivors in Nepal." As a research scholar, this project is being carried out for the partial fulfillment of the Master of Philosophy in English at the Central Department of English. For that purpose, I have chosen you as a sample respondent to request you to help me by providing your valuable opinion. I assure you that responding to these questions will not take more than 60 minutes of your time, and your private information will be held strictly confidential. The researcher intends to use your quotes, photographs, and documents while writing the report. Please feel free to ask queries to me, the Principal Investigator: Tek Bahadur Chhetry, Contact: +977 9845065934, Email: tek.mps2021@gmail.com

The information will be used exclusively for this study. Your participation is voluntary, and you can leave this project at any time without hesitation.

Code No.: A

_____ _____

Signature of the participant Signature of the Researcher

Name of Participant (Optional): Researcher: Tek Bahadur Chhetry

Date: Date:

Appendix-II

Interview Questions

Dear Respondent,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview as a respondent on acid violence in Nepal. My name is Tek Bahadur Chhetry, and a research study entitled *Rebuilding Identities amidst Women Acid Attack Survivors in Nepal* is being carried out for the partial fulfillment of the Master of Philosophy in English at the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University. The research aims to understand the survivors' stories, particularly focusing on the psychological impact of the traumatic experience, coping mechanisms, identity reconstruction, and social reintegration as part of healing trauma. Your participation will be invaluable in enriching our understanding of this topic.

Please note that there are no right or wrong answers. The data will be held confidential and will be used only for academic purposes. We value your insights and perspectives based on your experience and knowledge. The researcher assumes you will reveal your lost story during the interview session, which may not last more than 60 minutes.

With your consent, I would like to record it for scholarly purposes.

Semi-structured Questionnaire

Part-1 (General introduction)

How would you like to introduce yourself, your profession, and your family background?

How do you spend your time these days?

How do you want to remember the day when you were attacked with acid? And how do you feel today?

Part- II (Key Area)

1. Could you please explain the incident that happened on that day?
2. What were your spontaneous responses then about your life? Briefly explain the psychological disposition of your feelings.
3. Did you experience any clinical or psychological symptoms after the event? If yes, what are they?
4. How do you personally interpret and understand physical and psychological pain?
5. Could you please share the challenges you faced? (physical and psychological pain, society and self-perception on subjectivity, body aesthetics, representation, memory, self and identity, and social pain- social exclusion, stigmatization, and marginalization).
6. Was your case limited to you and your family, or reached out to others culturally?
7. How did your family, friends, and organizations react to your case?
8. What resources were aided for your case- medical care, psychological counseling, legal aid, social services, financial support, advocacy and coping mechanisms?
9. Do you have any contribution to this act against this violence in your context? Explain if any.
10. What would you like to recommend for policy, practice, and advocacy to act against the acid violence in Nepal?

Part-III

Thank you for your quality time and immense contribution to the academic report. It was my honor to talk to you for a long time. Would you like to add anything?

Appendix-III

Photographs

Figure 1: During the Interview with Ms. Sangita Magar

Figure 2: During Interview with Ms. Muskan Khatun

Figure 3: During the interview with Ms. Basanti Pariyar

Figure 4: After the Interview with MP Ms. Bindabasini Kansakar and Mr. Ujjwal Bikram Thapa

Figure 5: After the Interview with MP Ms. Bindabasini Kansakar and Mr. Ujjwal Bikram Thapa, Social Worker

Figure 6: Discussion with Mr. Ujjwal Bikram Thapa, Social Worker