



**REDEFINING FEMINISM THROUGH SURVIVAL: THE FEMINIST  
DISCOURSE IN *CHHAPAAK***

*Dr. Tabassum M. Inamdar*  
Associate Professor and Head,  
Department of English,  
JBSP Mandal's Arts, Science & Commerce College, Shivajinagar (Gadhi),  
Tq. Georai Dist. Beed, MS, India

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**I. Introduction:**

**Overview of *Chhapaak* as a Biographical Drama Film:**

*Chhapaak* (2020), directed by Meghna Gulzar and starring Deepika Padukone, is a poignant biographical drama based on the life of Laxmi Agarwal, an acid attack survivor and activist. The film chronicles the physical, emotional, and social challenges faced by Malti, the protagonist, after the attack, while emphasizing her resilience and journey toward justice. Beyond its narrative, the movie serves as a critique of societal structures that perpetuate gender-based violence and a call to action for legal reform and societal awareness.

**Brief Introduction to the Protagonist, Malti:**

Malti, a young and ambitious girl, becomes a victim of a heinous acid attack carried out by a man whose advances she rejected. The attack leaves her with severe facial disfigurement, forcing her to navigate not only the physical trauma but also the stigmatization and marginalization imposed by society. Despite these challenges, Malti emerges as a determined activist advocating for justice and reforms in laws governing acid sales, symbolizing strength and resilience.

**The Significance of Exploring Feminist Themes in the Movie:**

*Chhapaak* offers a lens through which feminist ideologies are explored, particularly focusing on themes like resilience, agency, and breaking stereotypes of victimhood. By shifting the narrative focus from Malti's victimization to her empowerment, the film redefines feminism as an inclusive and intersectional movement advocating for systemic change and survivor-centric narratives. The movie addresses critical issues like the objectification of women, the cultural obsession with beauty, and the inadequacies of societal and legal systems in protecting women from violence.

**II. Analysis of Feminist Themes in *Chhapaak*:**

**Challenging Patriarchal Beauty Standards:**

**Cultural Obsession with Beauty:**

In patriarchal societies, beauty is often seen as a defining attribute of a woman's value. The idealization of flawless physical appearance reinforces gendered power dynamics and objectification. *Chhapaak* boldly challenges this norm by spotlighting acid attack survivors—women who are deliberately disfigured as a form of punishment, with the implicit aim of erasing their societal worth.



### **Visibility of Survivors:**

*Chhapaak* places acid attack survivors at the forefront, emphasizing their individuality beyond their scars. Malti's face, marked by trauma but brimming with resilience, becomes a visual narrative of defiance against societal beauty standards.

This portrayal moves away from pity-driven narratives, focusing instead on survivors' agency and strength. The movie normalizes their presence, challenging audiences to confront their biases and perceptions of beauty.

### **Redefining Beauty:**

Malti's scars symbolize her survival and strength, presenting beauty not as physical perfection but as a testament to courage and perseverance. By humanizing Malti and depicting her as a multifaceted individual with hopes, dreams, and activism, *Chhapaak* critiques the superficiality of beauty standards.

### **Malti's Journey of Self-Acceptance and Societal Confrontation:**

#### **From Trauma to Resilience:**

Malti's journey begins with the trauma of the acid attack and the devastating realization of her changed physical appearance. The initial scenes capture her struggle with self-acceptance as she confronts the loss of her former identity and the societal rejection she faces. The psychological toll of such violence is profound, as survivors are often stigmatized, reduced to their scars, and excluded from societal norms of desirability and acceptance.

#### **Empowerment Through Advocacy:**

As Malti navigates her recovery, she transforms her pain into purpose by becoming an advocate for acid attack survivors. Her involvement in activism helps her reclaim her agency and redefine her identity beyond the scars. Her legal battle not only seeks justice for herself but also strives to bring systemic change, highlighting her shift from victimhood to empowerment.

#### **Societal Confrontation:**

Malti directly challenges societal attitudes toward disfigurement. By stepping into the public eye and refusing to hide, she forces society to reevaluate its prejudices and biases. A pivotal scene where she looks at herself in the mirror and smiles is emblematic of her self-acceptance and her rejection of societal standards that equate beauty with worth.

#### **Support Systems and Solidarity:**

Malti's interactions with other survivors and her legal team highlight the importance of solidarity and support in overcoming societal stigma. These relationships serve as a counter-narrative to the isolation imposed by patriarchal norms, showcasing how collective empowerment can challenge societal structures.

### **Malti's Transformation: From Victim to a Symbol of Strength and Resilience:**

#### **Initial Vulnerability:**

The acid attack leaves Malti physically scarred and emotionally devastated, forcing her to grapple with a profound sense of loss—her identity, aspirations, and societal acceptance. The film captures her initial phase of isolation and despair, reflecting the helplessness often experienced by survivors of gendered violence. Society compounds her victimization by stigmatizing her appearance and limiting her opportunities.



### **Reclaiming Her Voice:**

Malti's decision to file a case against her attacker is a pivotal moment in her journey. It signals a shift from passive victimhood to active agency, as she seeks justice not just for herself but for all acid attack survivors. This step reflects a broader feminist principle: the reclaiming of personal narratives and the refusal to let perpetrators define a survivor's identity. Through her fight, Malti becomes a public figure, challenging societal norms and confronting deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes toward women and their bodies.

### **Symbol of Strength and Resilience:**

As the story progresses, Malti evolves into a symbol of strength and resilience, embodying the feminist ethos of resistance and empowerment. Her scars, initially seen as a mark of victimhood, become a testament to her survival and courage, reframing her identity from one of pity to one of power. Malti's transformation inspires others, showing that agency is not only reclaimed through personal growth but also by becoming a voice for systemic change.

### **Activism in Reclaiming Agency:**

Malti's activism is central to her reclaiming agency. She moves beyond her personal struggle to address systemic issues, becoming a key advocate for regulating acid sales and ensuring justice for survivors. Her involvement in activism shifts the narrative from individual victimhood to collective empowerment, embodying the feminist principle of solidarity. For instance, her participation in public protests and her interactions with the media bring visibility to the plight of acid attack survivors, challenging societal indifference. Activism also enables Malti to redefine her identity. She is no longer merely an acid attack survivor but a leader and change-maker, influencing policy and public opinion.

### **Broader Implications of Malti's Journey:**

#### **Empowerment through Action:**

Malti's story illustrates that empowerment is a dynamic process involving active participation in one's own recovery and the fight for justice. Her transformation challenges traditional narratives of victimhood, showing that survivors can become powerful agents of change.

#### **Intersection of Personal and Political:**

Malti's journey underscores the feminist belief that the personal is political. Her fight against acid attacks is not just about her individual case but also about addressing broader societal and systemic issues. By bridging the gap between her personal experience and activism, Malti highlights how individual empowerment contributes to collective progress.

#### **Inspiring Resilience and Agency in Others:**

Malti's story serves as a source of inspiration for other survivors, demonstrating that reclaiming agency is possible despite immense challenges. Her transformation into a public advocate reflects the power of role models in feminist discourse, encouraging others to challenge societal norms and fight for justice.

Malti's journey in *Chhapaak* is a profound exploration of agency and empowerment, illustrating how education, employment, and activism can help individuals reclaim their lives and challenge systemic injustices. By portraying Malti as a symbol of strength and resilience, the film



redefines the narrative around survivors of gender-based violence, offering a powerful commentary on the transformative potential of feminism.

### **Examination of the Judicial Process in the Movie and Its Feminist Undertones:**

#### **Highlighting the Judicial Challenges Faced by Survivors:**

The film portrays the slow and arduous process of seeking justice within India's legal framework. Malti's journey through the judicial system reflects the systemic inefficiencies, including lengthy trials, lack of resources, and societal indifference. The judicial proceedings in *Chhapaak* serve as a microcosm of the broader struggle faced by survivors of gender-based violence, highlighting the need for reforms to make justice more accessible and survivor-centred.

#### **Feminist Undertones in the Legal Battle:**

Malti's case goes beyond seeking justice for her personal tragedy. Her fight becomes emblematic of the feminist principle that individual battles against oppression can drive societal change. By pursuing legal accountability for her attacker, Malti challenges patriarchal norms that often shield perpetrators of gendered violence.

#### **Visibility and Representation in the Courtroom:**

The film portrays the courtroom not as a place of victimhood but as a platform for empowerment. Malti's persistence in the face of procedural delays and societal prejudice demonstrates resilience and agency. The feminist undertone lies in the shift of focus from her scars to her advocacy, ensuring that her identity is not reduced to her trauma but expanded to include her strength and determination.

#### **The Role of the Legal System in Structural Change:**

The court's eventual decision to regulate the sale of acid is a critical outcome of Malti's case. It underscores the potential of the legal system to address systemic issues when survivors and advocates persist in holding it accountable. However, the movie also critiques the limitations of the law, emphasizing the importance of continuous advocacy to ensure that legal victories translate into societal change.

#### **Raising Awareness Through Activism:**

##### **Role of Public Campaigns:**

Malti's participation in protests and media campaigns amplifies the voices of acid attack survivors, challenging societal apathy and demanding accountability. These campaigns serve as a call to action for stricter enforcement of laws and greater public awareness of the issue.

#### **Collective Advocacy for Policy Reforms:**

The establishment of organizations and networks for survivors, as depicted in the film, reflects the power of collective advocacy in driving policy changes and providing support. Malti's role in these movements demonstrates how individual stories can fuel larger social justice initiatives, aligning with feminist ideals of solidarity and collective action.

#### **Feminist Implications of Societal and Legal Advocacy in *Chhapaak*:**

##### **Challenging Patriarchal Structures:**

The movie critiques the societal norms and systemic failures that enable acid attacks, demanding accountability from both individuals and institutions. By framing Malti's fight as one for structural



change rather than individual revenge, *Chhapaak* advances a feminist agenda that seeks to dismantle the root causes of gendered violence.

### **Empowering Survivors Through Justice:**

The film portrays justice not as an endpoint but as a process of empowerment, wherein survivors reclaim their agency by challenging their oppressors and advocating for systemic reform. The feminist perspective here lies in prioritizing the survivor's voice and agency throughout the legal and societal advocacy process. Inspiring Broader Cultural Change: Beyond legal reforms, *Chhapaak* seeks to shift societal attitudes toward acid attack survivors, challenging the stigma and marginalization they face. The movie's advocacy for stricter laws and support systems is intertwined with its call for greater empathy and inclusion, reflecting a holistic feminist vision of social justice.

### **III. Breaking the Stereotype of Victimhood in *Chhapaak*:**

#### **Challenging the Traditional Victim Narrative:**

In many cultural narratives, women affected by violence are often depicted as passive victims who succumb to despair or depend on others for survival. *Chhapaak* disrupts this stereotype by presenting Malti not as a helpless figure but as an active participant in her own recovery and fight for justice. From the outset, Malti refuses to be defined solely by her scars or the violence inflicted on her. Her journey is not about erasing the trauma but about finding strength in her survival and reclaiming her agency.

#### **Reclaiming Identity Through Action:**

Malti's decision to file a case against her attacker is a crucial act of defiance. By taking legal action, she transitions from being a recipient of violence to an agent of change, asserting her right to justice. Her involvement with an NGO working for acid attack survivors further exemplifies her shift from victimhood to advocacy. Through her work, she not only supports others but also rebuilds her sense of purpose and identity.

#### **Portrayal of Resilience and Determination:**

The film underscores Malti's resilience through her willingness to confront societal biases and reclaim public spaces. Scenes where she faces the media, attends protests, or walks into courtrooms with unwavering determination highlight her inner strength and refusal to be silenced or marginalized. Malti's narrative reinforces the idea that survival itself is an act of resistance, one that defies the expectations of passivity and dependence often imposed on women affected by violence.

### **Subverting Cultural Perceptions of Women Affected by Violence in *Chhapaak*:**

#### **From Pity to Empowerment:**

*Chhapaak* transforms the narrative around survivors, focusing on Malti's resilience, courage, and activism rather than reducing her to an object of pity. The film portrays survivors as individuals with agency, challenging societal norms that confine them to their trauma.

#### **Resisting Silence:**

Malti's vocal advocacy and demand for accountability defy the "silent sufferer" trope, showcasing the importance of confronting oppression and actively engaging in public discourse to drive change.



### **Solidarity Over Isolation:**

The film highlights the strength of community, portraying survivors uniting for collective empowerment. This shift from individual victimhood to mutual resilience underscores the transformative power of solidarity in challenging systemic violence.

### **Feminist Redefinition of Victimhood:**

*Chhapaak* redefines strength as thriving amidst adversity, celebrates survivors as agents of change, and critiques patriarchal narratives that diminish them. By presenting survivors as multidimensional and inspiring, the film fosters empathy, challenges biases, and advocates for an empowering cultural shift.

### **IV. Closing Thoughts:**

#### **The Enduring Message of Hope, Strength, and Social Change in *Chhapaak*:**

As *Chhapaak* concludes, its impact resonates far beyond the screen, leaving an indelible mark on audiences and challenging societal norms surrounding beauty, victimhood, and justice. The film, through its powerful portrayal of Malti's journey from survivor to activist, encapsulates a message of profound hope, strength, and the transformative potential of social change. By focusing on resilience and empowerment in the face of gender-based violence, *Chhapaak* offers a narrative that is both deeply personal and universally relevant, urging viewers to reconsider their perspectives on acid attack survivors and the societal structures that perpetuate violence.

#### **1. Hope: The Power of Resilience and Survival:**

At its core, *Chhapaak* is a story of survival—a story that emphasizes the capacity of women to endure immense suffering, reclaim their agency, and rebuild their lives. The film's portrayal of Malti's journey challenges the traditional narrative of victimhood, offering instead a powerful message of hope.

#### **Malti's Transformation:**

Malti, as an acid attack survivor, embodies the resilience that is central to the feminist ethos of empowerment. Her transformation is not just physical but also emotional and psychological, as she rises from the depths of despair to become an advocate for herself and others. Despite the immense trauma she faces, Malti's unwavering spirit reflects the broader narrative of women who, despite societal rejection and victimization, emerge as symbols of strength and survival.

#### **A Hopeful Future:**

Through Malti's character, *Chhapaak* speaks to the possibility of healing and rebuilding after violence. While it acknowledges the deep scars left by acid attacks, the film conveys a message of hope—that recovery is possible, and with resilience, individuals can transcend the pain of their past and contribute to meaningful change.

#### **2. Strength: Empowerment in the Face of Adversity:**

In *Chhapaak*, strength is not simply a physical attribute, but an internal force that propels Malti and others like her to reclaim their lives. The strength displayed by Malti and other survivors is an essential component of the feminist message the film conveys, focusing on empowerment as a process of resistance against patriarchal violence and societal discrimination.

#### **Inner Strength:**



Malti's inner strength is portrayed as her greatest weapon against the violence she faces. Her journey of self-acceptance and her decision to fight back against the injustice done to her illustrate that empowerment often emerges from within. Despite the external hardships—her disfigurement, societal rejection, and the physical pain she endures—Malti draws on her internal fortitude to rebuild her life and challenge the systems that perpetuate violence.

### **Strength in Advocacy:**

Malti's strength extends beyond personal recovery into the realm of activism. As a public figure, she uses her voice to challenge the systemic issues related to acid attacks, emphasizing the need for stricter laws, better rehabilitation, and greater support for survivors. Through her efforts, Malti demonstrates that strength can be a catalyst for change—not only in one's personal life but in the lives of others.

### **3. Social Change: Rewriting the Narrative of Victimhood:**

Beyond individual survival and strength, *Chhapaak* also carries an enduring message of social change. The film positions Malti's activism as a call for broader societal transformation, particularly in the context of addressing gender-based violence and changing cultural perceptions of women. The film advocates for a shift in both legal and cultural attitudes towards acid attack survivors and women in general.

### **Legal Reform and Justice:**

One of the film's central themes is the need for systemic legal reform to protect women from acid attacks and ensure that perpetrators are held accountable. Through Malti's legal struggle, *Chhapaak* highlights the flaws in the justice system, advocating for stricter laws and greater support for survivors. The film's call for justice is a call for a society that values women's rights and provides them with avenues for recourse when they are victims of violence.

### **Challenging Cultural Norms:**

*Chhapaak* challenges the societal norms that often view women who have experienced violence as broken or less-than. The film critiques the narrow definitions of beauty and femininity that are prevalent in mainstream culture, presenting a more inclusive, compassionate vision of womanhood. Malti's story is a defiance against the societal tendency to marginalize women based on their physical appearance or perceived worth. By focusing on Malti's strength, resilience, and advocacy, *Chhapaak* subverts the stereotypical narrative of victimhood, encouraging a shift toward a more empathetic and just cultural understanding of women who have survived violence.

### **Conclusion: A Call for Transformation:**

To conclude, *Chhapaak* carries an enduring message that resonates with its audience long after the credits roll. Through its portrayal of hope, strength, and social change, the film not only redefines the concept of survival but also calls for a broader societal reckoning. It urges viewers to challenge cultural norms, fight for legal reforms, and offer support to those who have been marginalized and victimized. Ultimately, *Chhapaak* serves as a reminder that survival is an act of defiance, that strength can fuel systemic change, and that the fight for justice and equality is a collective endeavour that requires unwavering commitment and solidarity. By amplifying the voices of acid attack survivors and presenting their stories with dignity and respect, *Chhapaak* contributes to a cultural shift toward greater empathy, justice, and empowerment for all women.



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