

Case Study

Exploring the Psychological Impact of Acid Violence: A Case Study Using the Thematic Apperception Test

Ankita Ranjan^{1*}, Nandini Sharma²

ABSTRACT

Acid attacks represent one of the most brutal forms of violence, leaving survivors to tackle lifelong physical scars, psychological trauma, and social isolation. This study follows the case of a 28-year-old female acid attack survivor from Uttar Pradesh, India, using the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) to understand the psychological impact of her ordeal. Through her story, we see how the attack affected not just her face but her relationships, her place in society, and her sense of self. The study aimed to understand how survivors psychologically process such violence. The TAT, with its picture-based storytelling approach, helped uncover her unspoken emotions, how she saw herself and others, and how she coped when words failed her. Unlike standard questionnaires, this method captured the nuances of her experience—the shame, the resilience, the silent battles. What emerges is more than just data; it's a human story that exposes the gaps in our support systems. Her case makes clear that survivors need more than medical treatment—they need mental health care that recognizes their unique trauma, and a society willing to look beyond their scars. The TAT's value here goes beyond diagnosis—it gave voice to experiences that might otherwise stay hidden, showing why we need psychological tools that honour the complexity of human suffering.

Keywords: *Acid Attack, Acid Violence, Thematic Apperception Test, Psychological Assessment, Survivors, Trauma*

Acid violence is a brutal form of gender-based violence predominantly targeting women, leaving survivors with lifelong physical disfigurement and profound psychological scars. According to NCRB reports, women constitute most acid attack victims, accounting for nearly 80-90% of cases, with men being far less frequently targeted. This gendered nature of acid violence is deeply rooted in patriarchal structures, where such attacks are often used as a weapon of revenge, control, or punishment against women who reject marriage proposals, domestic demands, or assert independence. In contrast, male victims are typically attacked due to property disputes, business rivalries, or personal enmities, indicating a divergence in motives based on gender. Survivors of acid attacks face lifelong challenges, including chronic pain, blindness, scarring, and profound psychological distress, such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Previous

¹Clinical Psychologist

²Clinical Psychologist, Assistant professor

*Corresponding Author

Received: August 19, 2025; Revision Received: September 22, 2025; Accepted: September 26, 2025

Exploring the Psychological Impact of Acid Violence: A Case Study Using the Thematic Apperception Test

studies suggest that female survivors face greater societal stigma, economic hardship, and psychological trauma due to entrenched gender norms that equate physical appearance with a woman's "value," whereas male survivors often receive comparatively better familial and social support. In India, acid attacks are often motivated by revenge, rejection, or dowry disputes, exacerbating the survivor's trauma through societal stigma and systemic neglect. Physically, victims suffer from severe burns, tissue damage, and often require multiple surgeries (Mannan et al., 2007). Many survivors lose their eyesight, hearing, or facial features, leading to long-term disabilities (Welsh et al., 2013). Psychologically, survivors experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and suicidal ideation due to the trauma and societal rejection. Socially, victims face ostracization, unemployment, and marital abandonment, as disfigurement is often stigmatized in patriarchal societies. In India, despite free medical treatment mandates under the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, many survivors struggle to access quality healthcare and financial compensation. While physical rehabilitation is frequently addressed, the psychological aftermath remains understudied. This case study explores the psychological impact on a 28-year-old female acid attack survivor from Uttar Pradesh, India, using the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) to uncover latent emotional conflicts, coping mechanisms, and interpersonal dynamics. The TAT, adapted by Uma Chowdhary and analyzed using Dr. L.P. Mehrotra's manual, provides a nuanced understanding of the survivor's inner world, revealing themes that may not surface in structured interviews.

METHODOLOGY

Participant

The participant, "Priya" (pseudonym), is a 28-year-old woman from Uttar Pradesh who survived an acid attack at age 25. The perpetrator was a rejected suitor. Priya is an Educated, middle-class, urban Indian woman. Priya underwent a few corrective surgeries.

Measures

- **Thematic Apperception Test (TAT):** Administered using Indian adaptation by Uma Chowdhary. 10 cards were selected for the purpose of the study.
- **Case History:** Detailed interviews covered pre- and post-attack life, familial support, societal reactions, and coping strategies.

Procedure

The psychological evaluation process was carefully structured to create a safe and supportive environment for Priya (name changed), a 28-year-old acid attack survivor from Uttar Pradesh, India. The procedure began with three dedicated rapport-building sessions, which were crucial given her history of distress and societal rejection. These initial meetings focused on establishing trust through active listening and validating her experiences, while being mindful of potential triggers related to her attack.

For the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), Priya was seated in a quiet, well-lit, and ventilated therapy room to minimize distractions and anxiety. The analysis followed L.P. Mehrotra's manual with culture-specific adaptations for the Indian population. Special accommodations were made, including allowing Priya to cover her scars during initial sessions and using Hindi-language prompts to ensure cultural congruence.

RESULTS

TAT Analysis

The TAT analysis reveals deep psychological struggles shaped by shock, societal stigma, and resilience. Her narratives reflect a complex interaction of unmet emotional needs, environmental pressures, defense mechanisms, and intense emotional fluctuations.

Dominant Needs

1. Succourance (Need for Emotional Support) – Priya's stories frequently depicted characters seeking comfort and protection, mirroring her own unmet need for emotional support. Statements like *"The girl in the picture just wants someone to hold her, but no one comes"* highlight her isolation, exacerbated by societal rejection and familial withdrawal post-attack.
2. Counteraction (Desire for Agency) – Despite her trauma, Priya exhibited a strong urge to reclaim control. In one story, she projected defiance: *"The woman in the picture will fight back; she won't let others control her."* This aligns with research showing that survivors with an internal locus of control engage in active resistance against victimization.
3. Affiliation (Yearning for Belonging) – Her narratives often revolved around themes of acceptance, yet were tinged with fear of pity or rejection. For example, she described a character *"wanting to join the group but hesitating because they might pretend to be nice out of guilt."* This reflects the internal conflict faced by many survivors who desire social reintegration but anticipate stigma.

Press (Environmental Stressors)

1. Aggression (Societal Hostility) – Priya explicitly referenced societal cruelty, describing characters being *"stared at like monsters"* or *"whispered about in public."* This mirrors real-life experiences where survivors face dehumanizing scrutiny.
2. Loss (Grief Over Former Identity) – Many of her stories contained themes of irreversible change, such as *"She looks in the mirror but doesn't recognize herself anymore."* This signifies the profound identity disruption caused by disfigurement, a common psychological challenge among survivors.

Defense Mechanisms

- Repression – Priya avoided elaborating on certain trauma-related images, redirecting stories to less distressing themes, indicating subconscious suppression of painful memories.
- Rationalization – She employed cognitive reframing, stating, *"This happened to make me stronger,"* a coping strategy to mitigate helplessness.

Emotions

- Shame – Manifested in narratives where characters hid their faces or withdrew from social settings.
- Anger – Emerged in descriptions of injustice (e.g., *"The villain never gets punished"*), reflecting her unresolved trauma.
- Fleeting Hope – Occasionally, her stories ended with cautious optimism (e.g., *"Maybe one day things will be different"*), suggesting resilience despite despair.

Exploring the Psychological Impact of Acid Violence: A Case Study Using the Thematic Apperception Test

Conflicts

1. Shame vs. Anger
 - Shame manifested in narratives where characters hid their faces or withdrew socially.
 - Anger emerged in themes of injustice (e.g., *"The villain never gets punished"*).
 - Conflict: The interplay between self-directed shame and outward anger at societal/perpetrator injustice.

2. Hope vs. Despair
 - Fleeting optimism appeared in cautious endings (e.g., *"Maybe one day things will be different"*).
 - Conflict: The fragility of hope amid pervasive despair and systemic neglect.

3. Repression vs. Emotional Expression
 - Priya avoided trauma-related images (repression) but occasionally reframed her ordeal (rationalization).
 - Example: *"This happened to make me stronger."*
 - Conflict: The defense mechanisms protect her from overwhelming distress but hinder long-term emotional processing.

4. Resilience vs. Helplessness
 - Her counteraction themes suggest resilience, while external LOC attributions reflect helplessness.
 - Conflict: The struggle to reconcile active resistance with the uncontrollable realities of her trauma and societal barriers.

Table 1. Thematic Apperception Test Analysis of Acid Attack Survivor

Category	Findings	Psychological Interpretation
Dominant Needs	Succourance, Counteraction, Affiliation	Desire for support, agency, and conflicted need for belonging
Press (Stressors)	Aggression, Loss	Societal hostility and identity disruption
Defense Mechanisms	Repression, Rationalization	Avoidance of trauma, coping through reframing
Emotions	Shame, Anger, Fleeting Hope	Shame from stigma, anger at injustice, traces of resilience
Conflicts	Shame vs Anger, Hope vs Despair, Repression vs Expression, Resilience vs Helplessness	Internal and external struggle between emotional states and coping

Case History Insight

The case history reveals the complex interplay of familial, societal, and psychological factors shaping Priya's recovery. Initially, her family offered emotional and financial support, but this declined over time due to the overwhelming costs of repeated medical treatments and surgeries.

Societal reactions compounded her distress. Visible disfigurement led to ostracization—neighbours, community members, and even friends avoided interaction or subjected her to pitying stares and exclusion. This pervasive stigma, rooted in patriarchal norms that tie

Exploring the Psychological Impact of Acid Violence: A Case Study Using the Thematic Apperception Test

women's worth to physical appearance, pushed her into self-imposed isolation, deepening feelings of shame and hopelessness.

Her coping mechanisms were limited by scarce resources. Without access to professional mental health care—due to financial constraints and societal stigma surrounding therapy—she relied solely on religious practices like prayer and temple visits. The lack of structured psychological support left her unequipped to process her trauma effectively.

DISCUSSION

The TAT analysis of Priya provides critical insights into the complex interplay of trauma, societal stigma, and psychological adaptation. The findings align with existing literature on gender-based violence survivors while highlighting culture-specific manifestations of distress and resilience.

Her narratives often follow an unstructured or fragmented progression, mirroring the disruption in her life post-attack, where coherence is lost, and themes of distress emerge abruptly. The power of her plot lies in its raw, real, and incomplete nature—stories frequently lack resolution, echoing her unresolved trauma and the ongoing struggle with societal rejection. Some tales are bizarre, featuring exaggerated hostility or surreal abandonment, which may symbolize her internalized fear and alienation. The length of her stories varies; shorter responses often coincide with repressed emotions or avoidance, while longer elaborations reveal moments of defiance or fleeting hope. Her language oscillates between passive despair ("no one comes to help her") and active resistance ("she will fight back"), reflecting the conflict between helplessness and resilience. For Priya, storytelling becomes a subconscious outlet—where societal aggression is externalized, unmet needs are voiced, and defense mechanisms like repression or rationalization surface. The TAT's ambiguity allows her to project unspoken fears and desires, making the form itself a diagnostic tool. Her behavior during the test—hesitation, emotional withdrawal, or sudden intensity—further validates the themes, revealing how trauma distorts narrative coherence and how storytelling serves as both a mirror and a coping mechanism for her shattered sense of self.

This discussion synthesizes key themes, connects them to broader theoretical frameworks, and proposes targeted interventions.

Unmet Emotional Needs and the Crisis of Belonging

Priya's pronounced **succourance need**—her desire for emotional support—reflects a pervasive issue among acid attack survivors, who often experience **social withdrawal** from both self-imposed isolation and societal rejection (Garg et al., 2020). In collectivist cultures like India, where familial and community ties are central to identity, the erosion of these bonds post-attack exacerbates psychological distress (Dave et al., 2019). Her narratives' recurring themes of abandonment (e.g., "*no one comes to help her*") mirror qualitative findings where survivors describe being "**doubly victimized**"—first by the attack, then by societal neglect (Mannan et al., 2007). This underscores the need for **community reintegration programs** that address both survivors' internalized shame and societal attitudes.

Exploring the Psychological Impact of Acid Violence: A Case Study Using the Thematic Apperception Test

Counteraction and Locus of Control: A Double-Edged Sword

Priya's **counteraction narratives** (e.g., "*she will fight back*") reveal an adaptive urge for agency, consistent with Rotter's (1966) theory that an **internal locus of control (LOC)** correlates with resilience. However, her simultaneous **external LOC** attributions (e.g., "*God decided my fate*") reflect a tension observed in trauma survivors: while defiance aids survival, systemic oppression (e.g., gender norms, inadequate legal justice) can reinforce helplessness (Vora et al., 2020). Interventions must therefore balance **empowerment** (e.g., vocational training) with **acceptance-based strategies** to reconcile uncontrollable realities (Hayes et al., 2012).

Affiliation Conflicts and the Stigma Paradox

The **affiliation need** in Priya's stories—wanting connection yet fearing pity—illustrates the **stigma paradox**: the simultaneous craving for and dread of social interaction (Major & O'Brien, 2005). In India, where disfigurement disrupts marriageability and social roles (Patel & Kumar, 2021), survivors often face "**compounded othering**"—rejection not just for scars but for failing gendered expectations. Anti-stigma campaigns, like the "**Stop Acid Attacks**" movement, have shown promise in reshaping narratives from victimhood to survivorship (Sheikh, 2018).

Press and Cultural Stressors: Aggression and Loss

The **environmental presses** of aggression (societal hostility) and loss (identity grief) align with Goffman's (1963) concept of "**spoiled identity**." Priya's description of being "**stared at like a monster**" echoes studies where survivors report **objectification**—being reduced to their scars (Rumsey & Harcourt, 2005). The **loss of her pre-attack identity** further parallels research on "**biographical disruption**" in chronic illness (Bury, 1982), suggesting that therapies like **narrative exposure therapy (NET)** could help reconstruct a cohesive self-narrative (Neuner et al., 2008).

Defense Mechanisms: Adaptive or Limiting?

Priya's use of **repression** and **rationalization** reflects common trauma responses. While these defenses initially protect against overwhelming distress, long-term reliance can hinder emotional processing (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). ACT's **cognitive defusion techniques** (e.g., "*I am having the thought that I am broken*") could help her observe these defenses without fusion, reducing their maladaptive grip (Hayes et al., 2012).

Emotional Turbulence: From Shame to Fragile Hope

The **shame-anger-hopelessness triad** in Priya's emotions mirrors the **internalized stigma model** (Corrigan & Watson, 2002), where societal prejudice becomes self-directed. However, her "**fleeting hope**" narratives suggest **post-traumatic growth (PTG)** potential (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Cultivating this through **values-guided action** (e.g., mentoring other survivors) could anchor recovery in purpose.

Recommendations

To advance research and clinical interventions for acid attack survivors, several key directions should be prioritized. First, longitudinal studies are needed to track survivors' psychological trajectories over time, particularly examining how variables like locus of control (LOC) and perceived stigma interact with long-term coping strategies. Second, culturally adapted interventions, such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) tailored to South Asian contexts, should be developed and tested for efficacy. For

Exploring the Psychological Impact of Acid Violence: A Case Study Using the Thematic Apperception Test

instance, integrating mindfulness practices with local spiritual traditions could enhance engagement. Third, community-based participatory research (CBPR) involving survivors in intervention design could ensure cultural relevance and empowerment. Finally, intersectional research should explore how socioeconomic status, caste, and rural-urban disparities compound survivors' vulnerabilities.

Limitations

This study's findings must be interpreted in light of several limitations. The single-case design of Priya's TAT analysis limits generalizability, as individual experiences of acid violence vary widely based on factors like attack severity and pre-trauma resilience. The reliance on self-report narratives may introduce biases, such as social desirability or repression of traumatic memories. Furthermore, the lack of quantitative data (e.g., standardized psychometric tools and scales) restricts the ability to correlate TAT themes with clinical symptom severity. The study also omits male survivors, who face unique stigma dynamics but are underrepresented in research. Lastly, the cross-sectional nature of the TAT analysis precludes causal inferences about how needs, presses, and defenses evolve over time.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the profound psychological toll of acid attacks, as exemplified by Priya's TAT narratives, which reveal unmet needs for support, struggles with stigma, and fragile resilience. The analysis underscores the importance of culturally sensitive care that addresses both individual distress and systemic barriers. While therapeutic approaches like ACT show promise in fostering psychological flexibility, their success hinges on parallel efforts to combat societal stigma. Future work may adopt intersectional, longitudinal, and participatory methodologies to capture the full spectrum of survivors' experiences and translate findings into actionable policies. Acid violence is not merely a criminal act but a sociopolitical crisis demanding coordinated responses from clinicians, researchers, and policymakers alike. By centering survivors' voices and prioritizing holistic rehabilitation, society can move closer to restoring not just their faces but their futures.

Abbreviations

- **ACT:** Acceptance and Commitment Therapy
- **CBPR:** Community-Based Participatory Research
- **DSM-5:** Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition
- **LOC:** Locus of Control
- **PTG:** Post-Traumatic Growth
- **PTSD:** Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- **TAT:** Thematic Apperception Test

REFERENCES

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. W.H. Freeman.
- Benight, C. C., & Bandura, A. (2004). Social cognitive theory of posttraumatic recovery: The role of perceived self-efficacy. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 42(10), 1129-1148. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2003.08.008>

Exploring the Psychological Impact of Acid Violence: A Case Study Using the Thematic Apperception Test

- Dave, S., Das, S., & Bakhshi, A. (2019). Psychosocial impact of acid attacks: A study from India. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma, 28*(6), 704-719. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2018.1496203>
- Fenech, E., & Scerri, J. (2018). The lived experience of burn survivors with facial disfigurement: A phenomenological study. *Disability and Rehabilitation, 40*(12), 1419-1427. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2017.1299763>
- García, F. E., Duque, A., & Cova, F. (2016). The four faces of self-stigma: Integrating outcomes across contexts. *Frontiers in Psychology, 7*, Article 1833. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01833>
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall.
- Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K. D., & Wilson, K. G. (2012). *Acceptance and commitment therapy: The process and practice of mindful change* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Kabeer, N. (2005). Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of the third millennium development goal. *Gender & Development, 13*(1), 13-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552070512331332273>
- Mannan, A., Ghani, S., Clarke, A., & Butler, P. E. (2007). Psychosocial outcomes derived from an acid burn model in Bangladesh. *British Journal of Plastic Surgery, 60*(2), 156-161. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bjps.2006.04.008>
- National Crime Records Bureau. (2021). *Crime in India 2020*. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.
- Patel, R., & Kumar, S. (2021). Gendered violence and mental health in India: A qualitative study of acid attack survivors. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 36*(9-10), NP5042-NP5064. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260518792248>
- Vora, M., Malathesh, B. C., Das, S., & Chatterjee, S. S. (2020). Acid attack related stigma and help-seeking behavior in India: A qualitative study. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry, 66*(8), 793-800. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764020939987>
- Welch, S. (2018). Surviving acid attacks: A medico-legal and psychosocial perspective. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence, 2*(2), 289-304. <https://doi.org/10.1332/239868018X15266375439301>

Acknowledgment

The author expresses sincere gratitude to the concerned institute for their support and guidance. Appreciation is also extended to the co-authors for their valuable contributions throughout the study.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Ranjan, A. & Sharma, N. (2025). Exploring the Psychological Impact of Acid Violence: A Case Study Using the Thematic Apperception Test. *International Journal of Indian Psychology, 13*(3), 4054-4062. DIP:18.01.370.20251303, DOI:10.25215/1303.370

Exploring the Psychological Impact of Acid Violence: A Case Study Using the Thematic Apperception Test

TABLE

Table 1. Thematic Apperception Test Analysis of Acid Attack Survivor

Category	Findings	Psychological Interpretation
Dominant Needs	Succourance, Counteraction, Affiliation	Desire for support, agency, and conflicted need for belonging
Press (Stressors)	Aggression, Loss	Societal hostility and identity disruption
Defense Mechanisms	Repression, Rationalization	Avoidance of trauma, coping through reframing
Emotions	Shame, Anger, Fleeting Hope	Shame from stigma, anger at injustice, traces of resilience
Conflicts	Shame vs Anger, Hope vs Despair, Repression vs Expression, Resilience vs Helplessness	Internal and external struggle between emotional states and coping