

Intertext

Volume 28 | Issue 1

Article 8

5-1-2020

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Recommended Citation

Majumdar, Tanushri (2020) "Scar," *Intertext*. Vol. 28 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/intertext/vol28/iss1/8>

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SCAR

Tanushri Majumdar

I was six. It was a sweltering summer day in Delhi (as it always is). We had thrown open the windows and balcony door in a feeble attempt to let some wind in. The leaves were rustling outside in the warm gusts, and you could feel the lull of the afternoon—quiet and meditative. Everything had taken on a sepia tone with the warm sun and dried-up grass in the park outside my house. Children had returned from school, lunch was done, and my parents had retired to their room for a quiet afternoon nap. I sat cross-legged across from my sister and my caretaker, who tried to make me laugh. We had spent the entire afternoon just lazing around the living room, trying to entertain ourselves since it was too hot to play outside.

Suddenly, a giant teddy bear flew in through the balcony door. It was a blur of brown fur and squeals. It looked at me, and I looked back in fascination. It touched my hair and face

gently, almost tentatively. Then, I grabbed the scruff under its head and pulled it towards me, positively delighted. It pulled its lips back in a snarl and bared its sharp teeth. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my playmates turn white, all their blood drained from their faces in horror. I wondered to myself, *Why do they look so afraid?* And only when I felt the hot, sticky blood drip down my face did I realize that the teddy bear was a monkey, that it had scratched me, and that I now had a scar carved into my face.

About a minute into the ordeal, my sister found her voice and shrieked, alerting my parents. Both my mother and father raced out to see what was wrong. By now, the monkey had leapt off my lap and was terrorizing my sister and father, snarling and squawking in anger, prancing about the living room restlessly. My mother had started crying quietly and gently

the monkey off. My parents collected their things, and my father picked me up to walk to my pediatrician's office, which was nearby. By then, my nerves had calmed, and I slowly came out of my stupor. All sensation came flooding back, and I was suddenly hyperaware of the gash across my nose, the tightening of skin around it, and the stinging pain from the hot wind that whipped my short hair about.

When we reached the office, the doctor quickly rushed us in. After slowly wiping the wound with antiseptic wipes, she held my chin to gently dress it. She talked to my parents for what seemed like hours and eventually handed them a prescription for my medication and informed them that I needed fourteen injections, two a day. I laid down prostrate, and they jabbed a needle into my right buttock as I clutched my mother's fingers in fear and pain.

Finally, we returned home. I trudged over

"I am not my scar."

grabbed my shoulders and guided me to the kitchen sink. She boosted me onto the granite slab and ran to get a first aid kit. In that moment, I couldn't comprehend what was going on; the adrenaline had kicked in. I couldn't feel pain and didn't quite understand why my mother looked so worried.

A few moments later she returned. Cradling my face, she slowly started wiping away the rivulets of blood that were flowing down the bridge of my nose, past my lips, pooling above my collarbone, and soaking into my pale, yellow, summer frock. The blood had already started drying, and it took many swipes with the wet cotton pads to wipe it away. My father walked into the kitchen and said he had scared

to the bathroom and set down the little stool I used to reach the sink to wash my face and climbed up on it. My face came into focus in the mirror above the sink. My nose was covered with bandages, with frayed edges of gauze poking out from under the doctor's tape that held it in place. The yellow ointment was slowly seeping into the top layer of the bandage, giving it a dirty yellow tinge. I looked at myself in the mirror and a large, dirty, yellow bandage was all I could see.

The next few weeks were spent explaining to people why I had a giant bandage across my nose. I walked into my first-grade classroom and immediately became the focus of attention. The other students asked if it hurt

and what had happened. They asked to look at my scar. They kept asking. Six-year-olds aren't the kindest demographic and going into detail about my monkey ordeal drew a lot of barbs and taunts. They asked me if I was now Monkey Man—Spider-Man, but for monkeys. Slowly, as more people found out about my injury, they said "bandariya," a female monkey.

Once the bandages came off, I finally gathered up the courage to look at myself in the mirror again. There was a deep gash across the right side of my nose. It was slowly starting to scab, but there was still a red, angry, open wound. The skin around it was slowly tightening, and it hurt to twitch my nose or even sneeze or cough. When I looked at myself, all I saw was a scar. All I seemed to be was a scar.

Children can be the cruelest, but it seems that adults hadn't learned tact either. "Oh, you poor child!" "It's okay." "It doesn't look that bad." I remember going to a friend's birthday party and her mother telling me, "There is a cream for that. It'll fade away so fast." Everyone had their own two cents to put in. All the neighborhood aunts came bringing their home remedies in stride—turmeric, milk soaks, soybean pastes, neem juice, lime juice, a whole assortment of juice in fact. Even my mother came home one day with a tiny tube of cream in hand. We spent fifteen minutes every night dotting the scar with this cream and smearing it gently over the contours of my nose. I convinced myself, *This will make it better.* We really tried it all, and with every new remedy, it was reaffirmed that something was wrong with me—that I needed to be fixed.

My life became a game of how many people I could avoid while still being a functioning member of society. In the morning, I went to school, trying not to make eye contact with

anyone. But I could still feel eyes peering onto my body, people trying to look while not looking. I spent my lunch breaks in class eating by myself. I stopped playing football and participating in extracurricular activities at school. I did everything in my power to hide my imperfect self.

It took years. Three years till I stopped trying to fix the scar. Five years till I could look someone in the eyes without thinking about what they thought of it. Seven years till I started playing football again. Eight years till I finally started public speaking and oration. And fourteen years and beyond till the scar became a funny story that I tell people in college. Time. People say time heals all wounds. But explaining that to a six-year-old who hates the way she looks is futile. As a little girl, I had already internalized a socially-imposed beauty standard. I wanted to look like the other girls. I wanted a symmetrical face, not marred by a scar. I wanted to be perfect.

Today I live in the land of semi-acceptance. I doubt there is anyone who wouldn't change a thing about themselves. We are so highly critical and demanding and obsessed with physicality—all while touting self-acceptance. We dwell on the little details that no one except us seems to notice. We look at people who have what we want but not at people who want what we have. For me, there was no "ah-ha" moment, there was no big revelation, just quiet acceptance and growth. My journey didn't have a dramatic story arc nor an earth-shattering climax, but I am happier now. I know that I am lucky to be here and to have what I have. I have learned that who I am is so much greater than what I am. I am a dancer, an artist, a writer, a student, a sister, and a daughter.

I am not my scar.