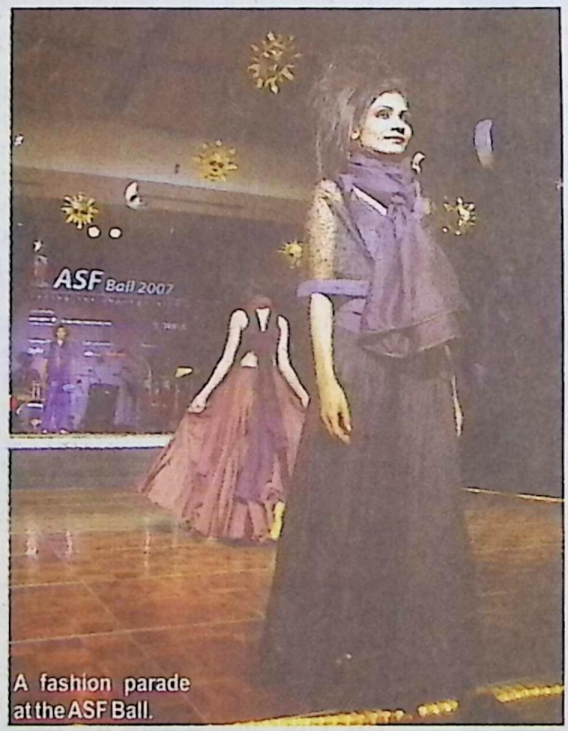
Beyond the Looking Glass

APARUPA CHAKRAVARTI

The Acid Survivors Foundation's (ASF) charity masquerade ball, which was held on August 30, at the Radisson Water Garden Hotel Dhaka, was likely to be a potential source of controversy. Why hold a masquerade ball as a fundraiser for acid survivors? Would not the use of masks for an event related to acid survivors be construed as an insult of sorts, undermining the empowerment of the people for whom this occasion was being held? Obviously, this was one possible way of perceiving the situation. However, Alfred Jarry, a 19th century French writer, once wrote, "The theatre, bringing impersonal masks to life, is only for those who are virile enough to create new life..." Implicit in this quote is the idea that masks are not necessarily shields behind which we hide ourselves from a critical world. Rather, they are powerful tools of expression and creativity that can be wielded only by those who are strong enough to free themselves from the constraints of the material world. Thus the message behind the masquerade theme for the ASF ball was that acid survivors are in no way inhibited by their imposed physical limitations. The masks, which were created by the acid survivors themselves, was a symbol of their ability to transcend the merely physical and material and look beyond the horrors and tribulations of their past.



A fashion parade at the ASF Ball.

Historically, masquerade balls were highly elaborate dances, popular amongst members of the upper class in 15th century Italy during the Renaissance, to which guests were required to dress up in costumes and masks. Traditionally masquerade balls were simply grand parties, which have, over the years, become simpler and less elitist. ASF's masquerade ball was not so frivolous or shallow in nature. Along with being a means of raising money for the organisation, it was also a statement for both the acid survivors and even, to an extent, the people who contributed to their cause by attending this ball. In this case, the mask was not just a source of amusement for guests at a costume party. Quite often, hosting a masquerade ball as a fundraising event is a form of disguised charity, allowing philanthropists to remain anonymous if they choose to do so. Furthermore, it is not an insinuation that people who are disfigured by acid violence need to hide their scars from the world. The inherent quality of masks to be worn and discarded with ease and without consequence illustrates the superficiality of outward appearances. Moreover, every individual wearing a mask represents unity and harmony. Wearing of masks uphold the importance of individuality, unique identity and not necessarily, physical presence. Through making of the mask people express their inner creativity and sometimes the way they perceive themselves.

The mask also challenges the superficiality of society. For the acid survivors, who were the artists responsible for designing the pretty masks that were used at the charity ball it was a way to express their hidden creativity beauty.

The ASF Ball 2007 was an event that startled the guests with its flamboyant masks and attendance of well known faces such as the British High Commisioner Anwar Chowdhury, fashion designer Bibi Russell and legendary expatriate artist Shahbuddin Ahmed. Starting with a pre dinner drink and chill out session by the DJ, the event kicked off with ShowKet Hossain, the ASF Chairperson addressing everyone and a fashion show by Bibi Russell.

This event aimed at raising funds for ASF, featured an auction of various cricket memorabilia such as a bat signed by the Bangladesh National Cricket Team that won the first ever test for Bangladesh against Zimbabwe, a rickshaw and paintings by artists Jamal Ahmed and Shahabuddin Ahmed. There were also a silent bid section where the bidders vied for interesting items such as a dinner to be hosted by the British High Commisioner at his own residence and a dinner to be prepared by celebrity chef Tommy Miah. After dinner and the auctions the band Pentagon took the centre stage as they performed and then DJ Prince took over the baton as he supplied music for the dancers on the dance floor.

All the guests who contributed and participated in the ASF masquerade ball, before putting on their mask took a moment to reflect on all that they could possibly represent for the acid survivors who made them. That brief instance of thought was perhaps one more meaningful way for them to connect with the recipients of their charity. ■