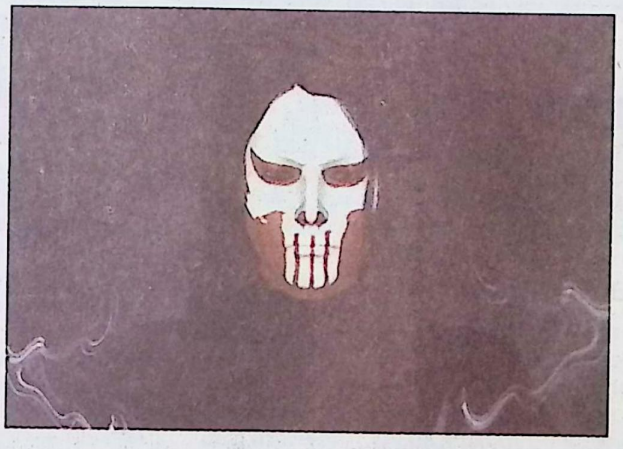
War Paint

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As I am applying pressed powder on my nose to hide the black heads and strange line across (thanks to a bizarre sun-glass accident) my precocious 11 year-old nephew says sweetly: "You don't need make-up, you're already beautiful." I don't know where he picked up this line from, maybe a movie or a soap on TV but I do know that if he keeps up this level of charming behaviour he will never be in dearth of female company.

Later, after completing my daily applications before work - under-eye concealer - eyeliner-lipstick - you know, the essentials of quick fixes before work, and long after my nephew has run off to greener pastures, I ask myself the inevitable: Why? Why this daily ritual before stepping out of the house, before facing the big bad world? Would it kill me if I just bared my face, warts and all, for just one day and showed 'them' what I really look like? I cannot help but cringe at the thought of such exposure. It's like going out naked.

Now I admit that there are a few members of my gender who have no problem at all just washing their faces with good old soap or face wash and just braving the world without a flinch. Look at all those women out on the fields, at construction sites or working endless hours at homes, do they even think of putting anything on their faces before coming to work? Vanity of course, is a luxury of only a handful in our society.

Leaving aside these women there are others who do not wear make up out of choice. They are either unjustly endowed with oodles of natural beauty (perfect skin, perfect eyebrows, perfect lips etc) or just brave hearts who do not give two hoots what people think of their appearance. I have to admit I do not belong to this sophisticated company. I belong to the tribe that believes in masking themselves before the fight, the fight to go into the jungle and face whatever challenges that await. Beauticians call it make-up. We call it war paint.

Since the beginning of time members of a particular tribe would paint their faces to create fearful masks to intimidate their opponents and also to establish their identity, much like gangs or sports teams with their particular logo on jackets or T shirts. So is it to intimidate people that we wear make-up or is it to establish our identities as women? The general view is that women paint their faces to look more attractive to the opposite sex, to make their potential suitors believe that indeed they do have flawless skin and doe eyes with humungous eyelashes, sparkling under glimmering blue-shaded eyelids, that their lips are ruby red or shimmering mauve and their cheeks blush with shades of peachiness. That may be true at earlier stages of womanhood when it is natural to want to attract as much male attention as possible. Even at later stages there maybe a subconscious desire to do so.

But the real reason many of us 'put on the face' as a very witty relative of mine once described it, is because it is the mask that we need to show the outside world. It is the need to conceal the dark circles of insomnia, the sallow complexions of self-neglect and the grim lines of disappointment that makes us dab our brushes into the paint to create the calm serene, rosy-cheeked faces that everyone likes to see. Trust me it's true. Once in a while when I am in an extreme hurry and the traffic is miraculously moving which makes it hard to put on liquid eye-liner (which I have done by the way, in extreme circumstances) and I turn up at office without part of my mask, almost everyone, even the canteen staff who brings me tea will ask whether I am severely ill? I have to say yes, I can't possibly tell him that it's because I couldn't find my eyeliner and didn't have time to dab on some under-eye concealer so that I don't look like a walking zombie.

It's true that sometimes it is easy to get carried away with the war paint and the mask unintentionally does look more and more like the ones of the most fearsome tribe in the jungle resulting in repelling even one's closest friends because they just can't recognise you. But in all fairness, most of the time we put just enough to ward off undue attention regarding our health or mental state. It is our war paint that gives us the confidence to face the cruel, unforgiving, overly critical world out there. After all, not every male we encounter is as generous as my 11 year-old nephew. ■