

DANGEROUS SILENCES: SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN AND THE THREAT OF
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

A Paper
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the
North Dakota State University
of Agriculture and Applied Science

By
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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major Department:
English

November 2021

Fargo, North Dakota

North Dakota State University
Graduate School

Title

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MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

Immigrant women coming from South Asian countries to countries like the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada are often shocked when they become victims of domestic violence at the hands of their sole companions in a foreign country. Because of their unfamiliarity with the new country, victimized women are often forced to endure violence for long periods of time in silence.

Scholars have identified the reasons behind this silence. William A. Stacey explains that victim women do not want to speak of violence because they are thinking of their children and hoping for an end of violence one day (55). Loise I Gerdes agrees and adds that remaining silent about domestic violence is a cultural practice in some countries (118). While discussing the reasons for silence within this community of women, I will argue that silence does not end violence, rather intensifies it.

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INTRODUCTION

Immigrant women coming from South Asian countries often suffer silently due to their unfamiliarity with their new surroundings. They may struggle to assimilate into this new culture and environment. The silence surrounding the issue of domestic violence passed down from generation to generation has led to social taboos of shame, fear, anxiety, and embarrassment. Scholars have contributed much to our awareness of the post-traumatic healing process for immigrant women victimized by violence. Yet, it must be acknowledged that the solution to this violence also lies with proactive actions women themselves must take, including breaking their own silence. The silence that surrounds the domestic abuse of immigrant women is evident in the literature and media that reflect these women's specific experiences. Increasing awareness of these related issues will draw the attention of sociologists and feminists and bring changes in policy making that better supports victimized women and affect positive social change. Using Sejal Badani's *Trail of Broken Wings* (2015) and Uma Parameswaran's *The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk-Wet Bodice* (2001) as the primary texts in this study, I argue that there is a culture of silence among the central female characters of these two novels that prevents them from leaving their abusive situations or seeking help from their families. My focus is on the term silence. In both real life and fictional texts, the existing culture of silence accelerates violence rather than mitigates it.

While focusing on these two novels, I introduce some socio-cultural contexts that make it difficult for South Asian immigrant women to speak up about domestic abuse. The cultural elements include South Asian perceptions of women, wedding culture, and the power dynamics of the domestic arena rooted in the South Asian countries, where treating women as dependents is common. In both lived experiences and fictions, the author has to be careful in documenting and explaining the cultural issues such as dowry rooted to the rise of domestic violence (in most cases)

among the South Asian immigrant women. Cultural gaps and language barriers have been identified as reasons that immigrant women are not getting help from the community, or authorities, or from the legal system in the United States (Abraham 69) and might also explain why immigrant women do not frequently record their experiences using memoir. Because of the dearth of personal accounts of domestic abuse suffered by immigrant women from South Asian Countries, I focus on fiction, and in particular Badani's *Trail of Broken Wings* and Parameswaran's *The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk-Wet Bodice*, both of which dare to tackle this topic in fiction.

SEJAL BADANI: BIOGRAPHY AND PUBLISHING CHALLENGES

Sejal Badani left law to pursue her passion for writing, a decision proved right as she got the Best Seller's Award for her two novels titled, *The Storyteller's Secret* and *Trail of Broken Wings*. *Trail of Broken Wings* was also a finalist for the prestigious Goodreads Best Fiction Award in 2015. Her novels have been published in over twenty languages, demonstrating her wide acceptance and popularity.

In an interview with Veena Rao in 2015 from *NRI Pulse* (an Atlanta-based newspaper), Badani shares how her relationship with her mom and two sisters served as a foundation for *Trail of Broken Wings*. The novel is about a woman named Raneer, a wife and mother of three daughters, Marin, Trisha, and Sonya. Each individual female character narrates their fragmented experiences of being beaten and tortured by their father/husband in flashbacks. The haunting memories of being beaten and growing up watching their mother be beaten remain with the daughters for the rest of their lives. Badani notes that the character Sonya is modeled after herself and her responses towards the violence that she experienced herself while growing up. In response to a question regarding her partially autobiographical depiction in *Trail of Broken Wings*, Badani replied, "Unfortunately I was raised in a home with domestic violence so some of the emotions and struggles that the characters faced were very real to me. I am one of three sisters also and our mom is really our hero" (Badani Rao *Interview*).

The strength and heroism that Badani identified in her mother are important for South Asian immigrant women who fall victim to domestic violence and who are often identified and addressed by others in the South Asian immigrant community as victims. From this perspective, survivors of domestic abuse are powerless and weak, and their struggle and survival are rarely

identified as heroic. Yet women who speak out about their abuse instead of remaining silent because of the shame, embarrassment, and stigma may motivate other victims to step forward.

The hurdles Badani overcame to publish her novel demonstrate the many challenges of writing and publishing about the topic of domestic violence. Because of concerns about safety, privacy, and unease, many victims do not want to publish their real names or come to the forefront. In some cases, women are concerned about their family honor or prestige and so step back from the public eye. Silence and social taboos on domestic violence and abuse reflect this hesitancy to publish authentic memoirs. For example, when (2015) asked by Rao about the manuscript's rejection from agents and publisher, Badani's reply was, "Absolutely and let me tell you it is really no fun! I joke that I could wallpaper my house five times over with all the rejection letters I've received over the years" (Badani Rao *Interview*). Badani's experience of rejection clarifies a familiar scenario occurring with many female writers—the difficulty of publishing about domestic violence.

Indeed, not only is it difficult to publish material that focuses on domestic violence, once it is published it can be mischaracterized as "melodramatic" or "unrealistic." In fact, Badani responded to the claim that *Trail of Broken Wings* was melodrama inspired by the popular Bollywood movies, where real-life situations are presented in highly exaggerated ways:

Unfortunately overcoming abuse is something that is heart-wrenching and can be a never-ending struggle against memories and self-doubt. In my research for the book, I read hundreds of real-life accounts of both women and men who fight every day just to live a normal life that others take for granted. Countless number of readers who are abuse survivors have commented that the sisters in the book remind them of their own past and of their own path to healing. It's truly heart breaking to

realize the long-term effects of abuse on its victims. I absolutely love Bollywood and grew up watching Bollywood movies. I'm especially heartened to see that within the movies and popular culture of India, there is increased discussion of a topic that for so long has remained taboo. (Badani Rao *Interview*)

Badani's reply clarifies how abuse and violence are normalized by patriarchal society. Many South Asian women, thinking it is their destiny, have lost the sense of recognizing their rights and the necessity to stand against the patriarchal society. In Badani's view, media representations of domestic violence are exaggerated, but in reality, it is the opposite. In most cases, women are blamed for bringing torture on themselves. Furthermore, most women hide their abusive lives in such a way that when the truth is revealed, it is hard to believe. Badani was herself also a victim of domestic abuse. Her experience is one example of the challenges faced by women in making their voices heard in both the domestic and intellectual sphere.

Silence is not only seen in the widespread refusal to talk about the issue of domestic violence but, as will be shown below, in publishing. There is also a resistance to discussing domestic violence in printed material. Print, media, and publication reflect patriarchal authority and consequently are reluctant to publish texts written on the issue of domestic violence, even in the West. This kind of publication will unsettle and unmask the dark, brutal face of patriarchy.

A story of deprivation and resistance, Adrienne Rich's *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* focuses on the problems of the Women's Movement and the years of passivity imposed on women by men. Rich identifies how women have struggled to have their contributions in print and media recognized and validated by males in the industry. Rich repeatedly uses the phrase "a culture of manipulated passivity" (Rich 12). Her introduction enables the reader to see how the culture of passivity has been forced on women despite their activism in the domestic and political sphere. It

also shows the lack of connections and literacy about the early feminist writers and revolutionists among the emerging feminists of the late 1970s. Rich argues this is a result of women's writing being neglected and poorly promoted throughout history.

She also mentions some of the specific feminist writers, activists, and revolutionists whose names, histories, and works have been erased, their voices represented as personal outburst rather than evaluated from a justified angle or acknowledged as contributions on the way to women's emancipation. Rich summarizes:

The entire history of women's struggle for self-determination has been muffled in silence over and over again. One serious cultural obstacle encountered by any feminist writer is that each feminist work has tended to be received as if it emerged from nowhere; as if each of us had lived, thought, and worked without any historical past or contextual present. This is one of the ways in which women's work and thinking has been made to seem sporadic, errant, orphaned of any tradition of its own. (Rich 11)

Thus, historically, women's works or writings, where her own voice or stories are shared, encountered this hindrance. Badani's struggle to publish a novel about domestic violence is no exception to this long tradition of silencing women's voices. Rich also shows how women's works or contributions are perceived differently:

Women's culture, on the other hand, is active: women have been the truly active people in all cultures, without whom human society would long ago have perished, though our activity has most often been on behalf of men and children. Today women are talking to each other, recovering an oral culture, telling out life-stories, reading aloud to one another the books that have moved and healed us, analyzing

the language that has lied about us, reading our own words aloud to each other. But to name and found a culture of our own means a real break from the passivity of the twentieth-century Western mind. It is the deadly “radical passivity of men” (Daly’s phrase) that has given us an essentially passive-voiced dominant culture, whose artifacts are the kind that lead to a deepening passivity and submission: “Pop” art; television; pornography. (Rich 13)

Though Rich talks about cultural passivity regarding feminist movements, it is connected to the root of female silence and passivity and that is how the male community wants both society and women to perceive their works. Rich points out that this process of imposing male perception on women happens in a very subtle way, which slowly empowers patriarchy and leads to extreme violence. Cultural passivity, Rich argues, has a great impact on women’s domestic and intellectual spheres. Rich writes, “This culture of manipulated passivity, nourishing violence at its core, has every stake in opposing women actively laying claim to our own lives” (Rich 14).

Badani’s story can be an inspiration for the women who are still under the shade of abusive authority: “I wanted this story to be about surviving abuse, finding your true self outside the frame of violence,” Badani shares (Badani Rao *Interview*). Badani’s real life experiences with violence and abuse demand her story be reread to fully understand the plight of her main characters.

Badani’s work is a call to all women who are struggling to break out of a strangling relationship and starting a quest to find their true selves. Badani reveals, “This was actually the story I never wanted to tell but I knew I had to” (Badani Rao *Interview*). Badani tells us the reason for not sharing the real story:

In terms of discovering something about myself during the process, I started my journey of healing a number of years back so the story brought up a number of

emotions that I had worked through. It was gratifying to realize I had taken steps forward but also drove home how important it is to process and find healing within yourself. (Badani Rao *Interview*)

An important message of Badani's book is to find a true hero within themselves and uphold a beacon of hope. Sonya and Marin are examples of this heroism. Although they are strong characters, in their hearts they still bear the stigma, pain, and scars of their abuse. The images of strong women is a necessity for resisting inflict on them rather than posing a soft and delicate women toward the world which will just exploit them in the name of femininity and take advantage of frailty.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE TERM “SILENCE”

Cheryl Glenn’s book, *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, is a useful resource to begin examining the term silence. The first chapter, “Defining Silence,” discusses aspects of silence both as a powerful form of rhetoric and an inadequate form of speaking truth. For my argument, I emphasize those areas where silence is considered a feminine virtue by famous scholars and how this is one of the reasons for women’s bearing the torture in their domestic sphere. Glenn highlights how famous male scholars, philosophers, writers, preachers, and intellectuals have represented, glorified, and sanctioned silence as one of the virtues of women. Glenn’s examples also include a different interpretation of silence:

In response to these beliefs in women’s natural silence, Jean Bethke Elshtain challenges us to consider that those silenced by power—whether overt or covert—are not people with nothing to say but are people without a public voice and space in which to say it.

Of course, years and years of imposed inaction and public silence strangle nascent thoughts and choke yet-to-be spoken words, turning the individuals thus constrained into reflections of the sorts of beings they were declared to be in the first place. (Glenn 10)

This quote authenticates how the expected representations and behavior of women, as depicted in the Bible and in the writings of famous philosophers like Aristotle, is silence. Speaking up and standing against injustice are considered taboo and revolutionary for women. Enduring violence in the domestic sphere—irrespective of culture, race, and ethnicity—is one of the closed doors that needs to be opened. The culture of silence that promotes the idea that silence is a virtue is one of

the reasons many victims lack confidence and self-esteem. As the quote above mentioned, the space for women to speak up has not yet been created, hinting women need to break that silence.

Glenn also cites other scholarship and references while introducing the idea of silence:

Thus, women's silence or the silence of any traditionally disenfranchised group often goes unremarked upon if noticed at all. In "Notes on Speechlessness," Michelle Cliff admonishes us to realize "the alliance of speechlessness and powerlessness; that the former maintains the latter; that the powerful are dedicated to the investiture of speechlessness on the powerlessness" (5). (Glenn 11)

This reflects on how silence and disempowerment are intertwined. One of the traditional ways to subjugate any community or group is to ensure their voices or message in any form remain unheard by others. For women, this is even more intense because long term patriarchal practices normalized women's silences in the eyes of men, women, and society.

The six chapters of Glenn's book are titled "Defining Silence", "Engendering Silence", "Witnessing Silence", "Attesting Silence", "Commanding Silence" and "Opening Silence". To Glenn, silence is powerful. However, I argue that silence may also be dangerous, as remaining silent might bring the eternal silence of the women victim's lives.

Glenn categorizes silence into expected silence and unexpected silences. Silence is expected from women, and its opposite is often shocking. Glenn defines the two forms of silence this way:

Sidney J. Baker's psycholinguistic investigation into the nature of interpersonal silence, for instance, uncovers two basic forms "when speech breaks down or words become irrelevant" (157). The first category, which he refers to as "negative

silence”, is best represented in situations where “fear, hatred, anger, or acute anxiety strike us dumb” (157).

In positive silence “When words become irrelevant, people, whether intimate friends, lovers, or close family members, luxuriate in a mutually comfortable zone of silence of tranquility. Words are unnecessary because no tensions need to be resolved with conversation or words”. (Glenn 17)

“Engendering Silence,” the title of Glenn’s second chapter, is closely associated with how gender theory, or the concept of silence from a masculine perception, promotes the colonization or silencing of women, with the assumption that men have the right or authority to silence women.

Glenn’s book provides a wide range and understanding of the term silence, categories of silence, and its usage and interpretation in different contexts. I will now demonstrate how this understanding works in Badani’s *Trail of Broken Wings*, where silence plays a significant role. Badani shows the silencing of Raneer and her three daughters by Brent, their husband and father. Brent felt empowered because Raneer and her daughters kept their abuse and oppression secret. In the case of his oldest daughter, Brent did not allow her to choose her education, career, or life partner (Badani 35). Brent was less successful in intimidating his third daughter, Sonya, who actually left home to get away from his abuse. But for a long time, Sonya carries this secret of abuse, even the mother and three daughters did not talk about this abuse explicitly among themselves till Brent’s admission into hospital. In Raneer’s case, Brent gradually grinded down her confidence and made her feel inferior and humiliated. For instance, in one argument with Raneer, Brent comments that Sonya’s choice of photography over law shows her stupidity, which Brent says she inherits from Raneer (210). Another example of Brent’s controlling behavior is evident in him not allowing Raneer to be photographed with their daughters. While travelling Brent instructs

Ranee how to capture an accurate photograph. Later, Ranee fails to find any photos of her and her daughters together in a picture gallery (171). Brent also does not allow the entire family to sit together at the dining table. When Brent falls into a coma, Ranee immediately buys a table of eight for the whole family to sit together (38). Brent's seemingly trivial actions gradually, day by day, shatter Ranee's self-confidence and eventually leads to her taking drastic actions. Glenn describes a similar marital dynamic:

Sociolinguists Pamela Fishman and Victoria DeFrancisco have both identified the ways husbands silence wives. Fishman writes that "the definition of what is appropriate or inappropriate conversation becomes the man's choice.... [Therefore, women] must be available to do what needs to be done in conversation, to do the shitwork and not complain" (98-99). DeFrancisco writes that although women talk more in marital conversations, they are interrupted more often, and their conversational topics are not often developed (417). The basic problem for all the wives in DeFrancisco's study was "getting a response at all" (417). Thus, many of the wives learned to remain silent rather than initiate fruitless conversation. For the subordinate, then, silence is not a means of exerting control; rather, it is a means of accepting that control, for it demonstrates silence-as-respect and a willingness to wait. (Glenn 32)

The women who occupy Badani's novel are in a similar vulnerable position, where men control women in such a way that women finally end up saying what men want them to say or act. Brent's words and action clarified how he wanted Ranee to act and talk.

**SECRECY, SILENCE, AND VIOLENCE IN BADANI'S TRAIL OF BROKEN WINGS:
BRIEF OVERVIEW OF TRAIL OF BROKEN WINGS**

In *Trail of Broken Wings*, Raneer moves to the USA from India with her husband, Brent, and her two eldest daughters. Sonya, the third daughter is born in the USA. Instead of finding a dream world, Raneer's world turns into a nightmare when Brent hits her for the first time. One factor underlying Brent's violence is his struggle to be assimilated into mainstream American culture and society, a struggle that many immigrants experience coming from South Asian countries like Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan to Western countries like the USA, UK, Canada, and Australia.

Brent's internal struggle to assimilate into a new culture shows up explicitly in the scene in which he forces Raneer to make an American breakfast because he is ashamed of smelling like spices and milk among his co-workers. His struggle with financial hardship, humiliation and racial and ethnic intolerance is funneled into a triggering issue of food, and it turns into explosive anger. Thus, Brent's beating of Raneer is an outward expression that released the anger and frustration that were suppressed in his workplace. Beating Raneer became a habit for Brent, and later this habit made him an abusive father to his three daughters. Raneer has been traumatized due to her exposure to the abuse from Brent, heightened by the fact of her failure to protect her daughters from the clutches of Brent's violence. Raneer's trauma emerged as a result of her silence, finally driving her to poison her abuser Brent, causing his death.

The shocking revelation that Raneer slowly poisoned her husband by secretly mixing eye drops into his tea every day, is successful because Badani keeps Raneer's responsibility for Brent's coma a secret until the end of the novel. Thus, the eye drops, which were meant to cure Brent's

eyes, are turned into an ironic remedy to cure Brent's violence toward Raneer and their three daughters.

SILENCED BY PATRIARCHY AND SOCIAL PRESSURE

Patriarchal dominance in India is a concept rooted not only in Indian culture but also in Asian culture. One example of these deep-rooted concepts of male chivalry and the justification of their action came out when Sonya revealed to David that Brent beat them. In response to David's question, "'No one tried to stop him?'" Sonya replied, "'No one wanted to", - "In the eyes of our community, he was perfect. In the eyes of my mother, he was right"' (Badani 240). Sonya's reply depicts women's status and expected behavior from the women in their society and culture. Sonya also indicates Ranees' acceptance of Brent's torture. Trisha reflects on women's unchanged condition as unmarried and married:

In India, a woman's marriage means she is moving from one man's house to another's. Both men chosen for her, one by an act of God, and the other by the father. As dictated by India's belief system, the men, the father and the husband, were two sides of the same coin. Both owned you and could do with you what they wished. But what happens when the woman wants her freedom? (Badani 95)

This highlights how women's independence has been restricted either by their fathers or by their husbands throughout their lives. It is like change of masters.

Brent's exercise of patriarchal power on his wife and daughters is revealed several times. Marin's education and marriage are chosen by Brent. In response to Trisha and Sonya's inquiry of why she is marrying Raj, Marin's reply is "I don't know," "Daddy found someone for me to marry, and I'm marrying him" (Badani 35). This is a repetition of the scene that happened with Ranees when Ranees' father chooses Brent for her. Ranees reminisces, "Her father was sure he had found a good man for her. It did not occur to him to ask if she thought the same" (Badani 37). These two incidents of Father's choosing grooms for their daughters support the cultural phenomena of not

having any choice of the bride's own to decide her life partner irrespective of age and education. Raneer got married at the age of eighteen while Marin got married at the age of twenty-one.

Raneer and her three daughters are glaring examples of the deeply rooted patriarchy practiced in India and restored and expanded in the United States. In an essay that appears in *Breaking the Silence* by Sandhya Nankani, Sujata Warriar identifies and raises the importance of understanding the generation of mother and other female figures in the family before discerning the daughter's character. She also emphasizes how the abuse is same in both South Asian countries and foreign countries, "What happens in South Asia is not outside the context of what happens to immigrant and second-generation South Asian women in the United States. We have to understand the global linkages that are at play here" (Warriar 91). The abuse is similar but the victim women's sufferings become more intense due to their unfamiliarity in a foreign country.

Despite risking their lives in an abusive relationship, women often do not disclose their sufferings to anyone. The social pressure to remain in the relationship comes from the Indian community in United States and also within the women's inner selves as they feel pressure to continue the relationship (Badani 110). What was easier for Namita without children might not be as easy for Raneer. Raneer needed to separate from Brent and bore the cost of fighting the legal cases and simultaneously taking on the responsibility of three daughters. Social structure and financial pressure gradually ostracize South Asian immigrant women, who find they must keep silent and endure the pain. Margaret Abraham's *Speaking the Unspeakable: Marital Violence Among South Asian Immigrants in the United States* familiarized most of the socio-cultural contexts of South Asian Countries and Communities. In the chapter titled "Marriage and Family," Abraham describes the position and status of women within the institution of marriage and family: "South Asian Women are expected to sacrifice their individual identity to the priorities of their

fathers, husbands, in-laws, children, and community” (Abraham 20). Male members of the family and the society posit a patriarchal dominance over women and girls. For the fear of stigma, shame and preserving culture and religion, the women are encouraged to give away their soul and body. This gradually deprives them of happiness and freedom and leaves them at a point of choosing between do or die situation.

The transition from a victim to a survivor is slippery, as taking action might risk the lives of women. Mary Ann Dutton points towards the inner strength and will power of the women in choosing either to stay with the batterer or to leave him (79). But certain surrounding circumstances make the choice difficult. One of them is the risk of living with the batterer under the same roof until the rescue mission or help reaches out to her. Because any sign of a rebellious step by the abused one enrages the abuser to hit with renewed anger and force. Then the abused woman suffers for showing her audacity to revolt. For example, Raneer wanted to end the arbitrariness of Brent’s abuse from a mother’s perspective. What she could not do in her entire life changed when her longing to see Sonya succeed finally drove her to slowly poison Brent. Additionally, the first time Raneer got an opportunity to escape she took revenge on Brent (Badani 268). This novel makes us see not only the battered woman but also the impact of the violence on children, especially on the daughters and granddaughter. *Trail of Broken Wings* is an example of how silence will not mitigate the problem rather trigger it. Throughout the novel, even progressive and educated women like Marin and Sonya talk about violence secretly as if it’s a social taboo. Rather than speaking up, Marin and Sonya are silent out of shame and embarrassment which demonstrates society’s negativity towards victims or survivors of domestic violence and the fear of social ostracization associated with it.

**UMA PARAMESWARAN: BIOGRAPHY AND BRIEF OVERVIEW OF *THE SWEET
SMELL OF MOTHER'S MILK-WET BODICE***

The second novel that I explore is *The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk-Wet Bodice* by Uma Parameswaran (2001). Born, raised, and educated in India, Uma Parameswaran completed her Ph.D. in English from Michigan State University in 1972. After retiring from the University of Winnipeg as a Professor in English and scholar of South Asian Canadian Literature, she currently resides in Canada, where she continues to serve in organizations that focus on the issues and rights of women (University of Minnesota 3). Unlike Sejal Badani, Uma Parameswaran did not have real life experience with domestic violence, but was moved by real-life stories and her familiarity with the Indian culture, immigrant Indian communities, and legal procedures in Canada. Her novella, *The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk-Wet Bodice*, is inspired by the true stories that she read from an Indian newspaper titled *The Indian Express* (Parameswaran 9).

These two novels introduce two unique scenarios of domestic violence. Badani's *Trail of Broken Wings* deals with the brutal torture (both physical and mental) of a mother and three daughters. Uma Parameswaran's *The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk-Wet Bodice* is focused on the systematic, slow entrapment and abuse of Namita and her position as a helpless stranger in Canada. Namita's story is more about psychological and mental torture than it is about physical violence.

Parameswaran begins with Namita's transition from India to Canada after her marriage and her subsequent adjustment and struggle in a new country with her in-laws to highlight her helpless situation. In addition, she uses details of Indian place and culture to explain Namita and her own family's background. This background provides context for the abuse Namita experiences.

After coming to Canada, Namita lives with her husband Tarun, her in-laws, and Tarun's brother and his wife, Menka. Tarun returned to Canada after their marriage leaving Namita and

his parents in India. Tarun's parents grow embarrassed by some of the questions their relatives asked about the new bride's dowry. As a result, they begin to feel betrayed by Namita's family, who they think should have provided more dowry. Tarun's relatives' queries arouse his family's greediness and demands. When his parents return to Canada, they continue to brood over this issue. Tarun shares the reason for his family's hatred and dissatisfaction with Namita immediately after her arrival in Canada but assures her that after a few weeks his parents will accept her and things will be fine (Parameswaran 43). Namita undergoes a series of stages in her short-married life after she reached Canada to stay with her in-laws and husband. Namita is isolated in her in-law's home even though she lives there with her husband, in-laws, and brother-in-law and his wife. And, even the relationship with her sister-in-law, Menka, is one of constant comparison with Namita. Namita is even isolated from her own parents back in India. The in-laws deliberately kept a distance between Namita and her husband, Tarun, and exploited her by dissociating her from the Indian community. Namita was never taken to the temple by her in-laws or husband. The reason is evident at the end of the novel when she herself reached the temple, Namita heard about Tarun's defaming her. Namita slowly realizes that this isolation and abuse is not only the result of her in-law's anger about the dowry, but a concerted effort by the entire family, even Tarun, to control her.

Her father-in-law and brother-in-law try to force Namita to sign divorce papers in Tarun's absence. Tarun's absence makes Namita believe that Tarun would never let it happen if he was at home. Because their first plan failed, they force her to call the Salvation Army Crisis Line before they throw her out of their house. And, after they force her to go to a women's shelter, even when she is at the shelter, they continue to isolate her from lawyers and counsellors who could help her. She continues to believe Tarun when he tells her that he is working to make their marriage work, although behind her back he is actively working with his parents to divorce her before the abuse

becomes known. Gradually, Namita realizes that Tarun and his family have been lying to her, and that Tarun's continued sexual relationship with her is not to preserve their marriage, but to satisfy himself. Finally, Namita asserts her independence from the abusive family, retrieves her belongings from the family's house, and leaves to make her own life in Canada.

The forced phone call to the Salvation Army is key to understanding just how Tarun and his family manipulated Namita. Namita felt that she had no option except to place the call, as she recognized the inevitability of leaving the only place in Canada that she is familiar with, her husband's house. Despite her resisting for an hour, they "literally twisted her arm, had dialed the Salvation Army number, and had listened in on the cordless extension while she was given the Bournedaya House telephone number" (Parameswaran 29). It is noteworthy that Namita tried to resist, but finally failed to stand against the two males. They threatened her with the police and being locked in jail. They also told her that:

she did not know the laws of this land; that if they were to phone the police and complain that she was an intruder, an illegal alien, the police would take her away, lock her up, send her back to where she came from. To Gehunnum, they added, because that was where she belonged, in hell. (Parameswaran 30)

Their threat of sending her back to Gehunnum (hell) is ironical because they consider their home country as a place of hell, but Namita viewed her country as a place of shelter and peace if she could just fly there to her parents.

This single incident summarizes multiple issues concerning immigrant women becoming the victims of domestic violence. It presents immigrant women's ignorance of laws in a foreign country ultimately tied up with isolation, fear, and in-laws how husbands can take advantage of this ignorance and loneliness. In Namita's case, they take away her passport and certificates.

Namita's in-laws assure her that they will return her documents and clothes. But they do not mention the jewelry given to her by her parents who believed that the jewelry would be her property in times of crisis. The jewelry is not returned to her because the in-laws considered the jewelry as gifts offered to them in the wedding.

THE NOTION, CULTURE, AND PRACTICE OF DOWRY

The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk-Wet Bodice provides an example of the very powerful role that the dowry plays in cultures that use it as a foundation for family and power structures. Although dowry is technically illegal in India, if the new bride does not bring a dowry, relatives and friends of the groom will criticize the bride's family because of the neglect of a long-practiced marriage ritual. In Namita's case, this expectation was used against her by a family that saw her and her dowry as a means to improve their own situation. This situation finally led to them abusing Namita, with Tarun's knowledge, because her dowry was unpaid.

Dowry is considered a prestige issue for the groom's family and "is used as a symbol of the groom's prestige, for ostentatious display to other families of his family's patriarchal ability to command such as wealth from the bride's family, or as a mechanism for the embourgeoisement of the groom's family" (Abraham 32). As one of the practices of traditional patriarchal dominance over women, the groom's family demands gifts from the bride's family such as money, property, gold, or furniture. Although dowry is not a religious tradition, it is a century-old practice, that has led to a system that supports men as superior and women as inferior to a degree that daughters are liabilities to the family and sons are not. For example, in *Trail of Broken Wings* Trisha reflects on the girls born in India and how the idea of dowry is associated with girls: "Girls, however, present a liability. Dowries must be saved for each daughter born. A payment to the boy's family for accepting their daughter in marriage" (Badani 96). Thus, in many South Asian cultures, daughters who grow up and remain unmarried are a matter of worry and shame for the family no matter how educated or attractive. What is even more humiliating for daughters is that the less beautiful the woman (traditionally women with black complexions are considered to be less beautiful and weaker candidates in the wedding market), the more dowry should be offered by her family to

compensate for her lack of beauty and to show gratitude to the groom because he agrees to marry a black-skinned woman. Margaret Abraham, a Professor of Sociology at Hofstra University, in *Speaking the Unspeakable: Martial Violence among South Asian Immigrants in the United States* argues that the dowry amount is traditionally arrived at, saying that:

The amount of a dowry varies depending on factors which include the bride's physical appearance, education, and family background as well as the eligibility of the groom. Especially his occupation...In many cases, after a marriage the groom and his parents begin to harass the bride, urging her to extract more dowry from her family. (Abraham 32)

Abraham also introduces the legal stance for the continuing practice of requiring a dowry: "Although the dowry has been illegal in India since the dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, it has been redefined as voluntary gifts to the bride from her family at her marriage" (32). Abraham also describes the dowry system as "a vicious circle" (33). In this author's experience, laws are confined to the courtroom in South Asia and legal charges against families for engaging in dowry 'gifts' are rare.

The scene in Parameswaran's *The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk-Wet Bodice* where Namita's elder sister Asha receives a marriage proposal can help explain the dowry system of Asian countries to a Western audience. When Asha's marriage proposal came, Namita's father is against offering or giving dowry but Bina ma said it is good to talk openly about their expectation. Bina ma seems to be very practical in that social context where they live. She perhaps understood that no dowry equaled no marriage:

Papaji was dead against such an occasion saying he would have none of anything that bore even a whiff of dowry negotiations, but Bina-Ma had her way. It is best

to talk about their expectations face to face, she said. She wanted to show them the jewelry Asha would be getting, and that would open up conversation about what else they expected. She did not use the tabooed word, dowry. (Parameswaran 37)

Asha's would be in-laws visit their house. It was like an open exhibition of jewelry. Bina ma did not keep anything secret, which shows her honesty. The entire point of their visit was getting a confirmation of dowry from Asha's family without any interest in seeing or talking to Asha.

The long-distance telephone calls, engagement and Tarun's uncle and aunt all made Namita's situation really different from Asha. Namita's father was against dowry but the practical approach and reply came from Bina ma, "Don't fret. I told you it is best to be upfront about it. After all, dowry is just the old way of making sure daughters also, and not just the sons, get a share of their father's property" (Parameswaran 40). But Namita's father was progressive enough to utter, "Old ways have to change, dowry is illegal, and I'll be damned if I marry my daughter to anyone barbaric enough to demand dowry" (Parameswaran 40).

Namita's situation was different from Asha's. Namita's father said, "Tarun's family had left all arrangements to them; such decent people, he said, they wanted nothing. Just do whatever you can for your *beti*, your daughter, they said, we make no demands" (Parameswaran 42). But Namita's father's assumptions of her in-laws being good people did not come true as we see the treatment of her in-laws towards her. Drawing an analogy with real-life statistics, we see victims from India and Pakistan born in the U.S. and who had immigrated to the U.S. pre-adolescence (meaning 1.5+ generations) were more likely to experience all three forms of intimate partner violence--physical violence, sexual assault, and stalking--compared to those born outside the U.S. and those who immigrated post-adolescence. (Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence). One of the reasons behind this violence is the patriarchal practice of domination and the culture of

silence carried from one generation to the next generation, with families torn between the traditions of host and home country.

Moreover, Joel Kuortti in his book *Writing Imagined Diasporas: South Asian Women Reshaping North American Identity*, points out that the purpose of the dowry can also be interpreted by individual family members. As an example of this individual interpretation, Kuortti discusses Namita's step-mother, Bina-Ma in *The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk-Wet Bodice*. In Bina-Ma's interpretation, the dowry is given from the daughter's family to the daughter as a property that would be her own. Kuortti argues:

Bina Ma sees dowry as a means to secure some equality for the daughters within the patriarchal structures. This is a very optimistic interpretation of the tradition, which has been under serious criticism for its misuse. This darker side of the practice turns out to be true for Namita as well. (Kuortti 107)

In addition to widespread cultural meanings for the dowry, it also has personal interpretations that complicate family expectations and assumptions.

While *The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk-Wet Bodice* focuses on the use of the dowry in a Hindu family, the dowry system is also practiced among Muslims in South Asia despite having no existence in their religious law. What does exist in Islamic law is mehr, the promise by the groom to pay property or money to the bride after marriage in order to provide the bride with some kind of economic security. In contrast to the dowry paid by the bride's family to the groom's family, this payment is specifically intended to be a safeguard for the bride herself in case of divorce. Mehr is described in this article,

One requirement of Muslim marriage in Bangladesh (and in many other Muslim countries where laws pertaining to marriage are based on religious tradition) is that the husband must agree to provide mehr (or, colloquially, den mohor) at the time of marriage.²⁵ Often translated as “dower,” mehr is property or payment promised by the groom and his family to the bride – a practice originally intended to provide the wife economic security and to limit the husband’s arbitrary use of unilateral divorce. The amount is customarily recorded in the marriage contract and can be claimed in the event of divorce or death of the husband. (Theoretically, wives may claim this payment at any time, but in practice, they rarely do so.²⁶) Thus, in theory, legal registration of a marriage provides the wife with a basis for filing suit to collect the dower if her husband deserts her or divorce her, or if he gives her grounds for divorce by habitually assaulting her. (Bates, Schuler, F. Islam, and Md. Islam 191)

Thus, according to this source, Muslim Bangladeshi wives can ask for den mohor at any time after their marriages.

Mehr is a legal right and obligation for Muslim men and women during marriage; dowry is completely a tradition without any connection with Islamic law or state law. The issues of mehr and dowry are complicated as a result of the many cultural adaptations from Hindu religion before partition from India in 1947. Like the dowry in Hindu traditions, the mehr in Islamic families is often misused or non-existent. To clarify the distinction between mehr and dowry, one of the articles highlights,

As opposed to mehr, dowry does not originate in Islamic law and is neither registered nor recorded on the marriage contract. Although it is now common practice in Bangladesh, it is supported neither by state law nor by personal law. In fact, dowry was declared illegal in Bangladesh in 1980 with the Dowry Prohibition Act, though this appears to have had no impact on the institution (Huda 2006).¹³ Furthermore, there is no consensus in the literature as to why dowry emerged among Muslim households in Bangladesh and Pakistan when the system is nonexistent and even shunned by religious leaders in the rest of the Muslim world. On account of evidences at the point of partition from India, dowry is often perceived to be cultural practice inherited from upper-caste Hindus (Rozario 2004). However, this view fails to account for the fact that dowries only became common practice in Bangladesh after partition. (Ambrus, Field and Torero 1356)

While the purpose of the mehr, like that of the traditional dowry as practiced in Namita's Hindu family, is the financial security of the bride, both the dowry and the mehr have also become a tradition that the groom (or the groom's family) regards as an issue of family prestige. Consequently, the dowry is demanded in Muslim families, the question of giving mehr to the wife often remains confined in the written documents.

The system of dowry in South Asian countries is not written into law. Its purpose is to allow parents to offer their daughters property and assets. Ultimately, however, husbands and their families have exploited the system to deprive women of their deserved share.

CULTURE OF SILENCE

South Asian women are raised within certain norms and values by their families regarding marriage, religion, rituals, and so on. Similarly, because they live in a patriarchal society, they are taught and trained to remain silent about their sufferings not only in their conjugal lives but also before marriage. Thus, silence is considered a virtuous quality that should be nurtured by South Asian women. Neely Mahapatra, an associate professor at the University of Wyoming, quotes Abraham to emphasize the nature of silence among South Asian immigrant women: “Abraham also reported that South Asian women have a propensity to remain silent about their intimate relationship or problems” (Mahapatra 388). This shows how South Asian women are hesitant to share problems happening in their conjugal life. One reason for the silence is cultural, as it is not encouraged to reveal what’s happening in private life. A second reason is it will disclose patriarchal oppression.

In *Trail of Broken Wings*, Sonya’s return home after getting the news of Brent’s admission into the hospital, revived their past life in a flashback, where from Trisha’s narrative point of view the tradition of bearing silence has been represented as glorious for the women in South Asian culture. Trisha reflects,

It is our conditioning, what is expected of a good Indian woman. We learned from a young age not to share our heartbreak, or despairs. It may cause others to view you with a negative eye, think less of you. (Badani 18)

This shows how women need to present themselves as traditional good women conforming to the expectation set by the society.

Women living under oppression and violence are often resistant and indecisive about fighting against the injustice happening to them. In *Writing Imagined Diasporas: South Asian*

Women Reshaping North American Identity, Joel Kuortti reinforces this reticent and compromising nature of these women. Kuortti writes, “While the phenomenon of domestic violence is widespread, in some studies of domestic violence, however, there is a notable underrepresentation of Asian women.” Kuortti quotes Krista, a character from Uma Parameswaran’s *The Sweet Smell of Mother’s Milk-Wet Bodice* who works in the shelter for abused women,

““These Asian women, they were a secretive bunch; never wanted to let on they had ever been in a shelter, or on welfare. Something about their culture, she supposed” (SS 32) In such a climate of silence and concealment, creative expressions of challenges to gendered violence become ever more significant””.

(Kuortti 102)

The annoyed tone is evident in Krista and this annoyance is based on the abused women’s sharing half of the truth with them. Because social workers sometimes don’t understand why the abused women want to go back to their husband and in-laws. Women who voluntarily serve in the shelter do not want to impose their decisions on the abused women even though they feel helpless to see them going back to the same abusive family or husband.

REPERCUSSION OF VIOLENCE IN FUTURE GENERATIONS

Trail of Broken Wings demonstrates the post traumatic effects of domestic violence on future generations. Sonya and Trisha's sharing their family secret with David and Eric (the persons whom they love) is also a tale of their striving to cope with normalcy, and the trauma of carrying a distorted self-image where they envision themselves evil and destructive.

Generation after generation the silence, trauma, and hatred, along with lifelong pain, of living in a suffocating relationship mean the loss of normalcy for victim women. In *Trail of Broken Wings*, we witness the generational, societal harm of ignoring domestic violence and the necessity for discussion of the impact of trauma on mental health. As Trisha ruminates, "With time we have learned to hold our secrets close rather than share" (Badani 18). The three daughters learned to remain silent watching their mother.

While highlighting the mother-daughter relationship, the parallel representation of Rane-Marin and Marin-Gia evokes an insightful and powerful message. Marin's blaming Ranee for not being able to protect her daughters from Brent's beating shows Ranee's helplessness. Marin, unlike Ranee, an independent and strong woman, also fails to stop her daughter Gia from becoming a victim of her boyfriend. Marin is unconsciously exercising the same control on her daughter that Brent holds on her until her marriage. Marin's removing Raj, Gia's father, completely in dealing with Gia's situation is the direct result of Brent's dominance over her. Marin's need to prove her self-sufficiency in taking control of Gia's life, regardless of Raj and Gia's consent, demonstrates one impact of domestic violence. Because of her own traumatic past, Marin finds it difficult to show love and care to her daughter, another aspect of the generational impact of domestic violence. Gia herself experiences abuse at the hands of her boyfriend, Adam. Unlike Ranee and Marin, Gia is not socially bound to her relationship, which reveals another facet of abuse and violence and

how unmarried women can also be entrapped in the cycle. Gia's case is important to understanding the helplessness of Rane, as Rane was in a position where she is committed to a relationship culturally, religiously, and with her three daughters. Rane was more prone to victimhood than Gia, but Gia's case shows how abuse can happen at any stage of a relationship and to anyone. While Rane, Marin, and Gia exemplify the helplessness of abused women, they also need to speak up and break this cycle.

For abused women, family life became synonymous with another form of social oppression. Tired of feeling helpless and silently carrying the burden of violence, some women are provoked to take extreme measures. In Rane's case, she slowly poisons Brent, who falls into a coma and eventually dies. Rane feels justified in killing Brent knowing her daughters will be free of his dominance. Again, these familial abnormalities are the result of silence, non-resistance, and not speaking up about the physical and mental harassment that happened not only to the abused wife but also to their children. The three daughters in the *Trail of Broken Wings* did not imitate Brent's behavior but they were traumatized. Due to this trauma, the anxiety or fear of becoming violent with their children chases them.

Married women with children often remain silent in the face of domestic violence because they worry about their children's future. They also may hope that their grown children will eventually mitigate their sorrow and misery. With this hope for their children, most South Asian women accept lifelong torture and insult from their abusive partners. Because of their cultural upbringing, they think it is necessary to be in an abusive relationship so that the children remain under the guidance of both parents. Ironically, it is actually unhealthy for children to grow up in a violent environment (Stacey 41). Scholar Shreya Bhandari's article cites a survey of "57 abused South Asian Women and found that women with children were least likely to seek help for the

fear of losing family honor or being separated from their children if legal help was sought” (Bhandari 4). *Trail of Broken Wings* is a good example of how mothers with children not only silently accept torture but also pass that culture of silence to their daughters.

William Stacey elaborates on the impact of domestic violence on future generations. A child growing up in an environment of domestic violence, Stacey argues, has a high chance of being abusive in the future, unconsciously or consciously:

First, children imitate their parents’ behavior and indirectly learn what is “appropriate,” what is rewarding, and what works in family arguments. Such imitation, furthermore, can produce different results in males and females. From watching their fathers, boys can learn that violence is a successful tactic for winning compliance from women...From watching their mothers, girls can learn that being beaten is part of a female’s normal lot in life as beating is a male prerogative.

(Stacey 41)

In *Trail of Broken Wings*, Gia’s case is different. Gia saw her mother as a strong woman and never saw the violence in her family. Yet, Gia is entrapped into the cycle of violence.

Margaret Abraham records the multiple experiences faced by victims of domestic violence. Mary Ann Dutton throws different shades on the post-traumatic situations. Badani’s *Trail of Broken Wings*, however, makes us rethink the impact of this continuation of trauma and extremity of silence on the next generation. Suppressed silence and secrecy gradually disassociate the daughters from pursuing a normal life; they can neither talk about it nor can they be oblivious of the grim truth of their lives. Scholars usually focus more on survivors who either work in or found shelters. Scholars have largely ignored cases like those of the three daughters in *Trail of Broken*

Wings, whose stories remain unnoticed, untold, and undiscovered, a situation which needs scholarly attention.

ASSIMILATION PROBLEMS

With a multi-racial and multi-cultural identity, Christine Vogt is an eminent scholar on the field of South Asian diasporic literature and Women's studies. In "Hyphenation and Double Vision in the Diaspora" Vogt elucidates the assimilation problems of South Asian Women and their overall struggle in balancing the cultural values between the home and host societies. She describes their situation as "a problematic position, in that it requires the South Asian diasporic woman to be critical of the traditions she was raised with as well as those that she encounters in the new 'home' cultural set-up" (Vogt 17). Defining this balancing as "problematic position," Vogt explains how often this process of balancing turns the women into outsiders in both cultures and argues that being caught up in this assimilation struggle might lead to identity loss, confusion or madness, and even loss of life.

Indeed, in addition to the cultural confusion that Vogt discusses, some women struggle to balance traditions and values practiced in both host and home societies because their husbands pressure them to assimilate in such a way as to support the husband's power over them. These women are not in a position to decide whether they would like to adopt or follow their own norms and values or follow what they encounter in their new country. (Vogt 21) Moreover, if these husbands, or even their in-laws are abusive, the women's freedom of choice is silenced and discouraged in such a way that they are unable to even explore being independent by learning the life skills necessary to escape their encaged state. (Vogt 62) For example, both *Trail of Broken Wings* and *The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk-Wet Bodice* show the characters' struggle to assimilate into the American culture and lifestyle. Brent and Raneer face this problem in *Trail of Broken Wings* and Namita in *The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk-Wet Bodice*. Assimilation problems include language barriers, religion, and culture. But the assimilation problem has

different consequences for men and women. Brent gets away with hitting his wife when he struggles to assimilate in a new country. But Raneer cannot hit Brent. The power structure is also at work here. In Raneer's case, we did not see Raneer's dealing with any American-born men or women. This could explain Raneer's inability to come out of her abusive relation. If Raneer would have got any chance of socializing with women outside of Indian Community, she might choose a different way to escape from the violence similar to Namita. Raneer's husband, Brent and Namita's in-laws kept them isolated from the outer world intimidating them about the dangers and uncertainties of that world.

Not only did Brent isolate Raneer, but he also attempted to control the balance between what was "American" and what was "Indian" in his daughters. Marin's first being informed of Gia's bruised body by her school principal conjures up the image of her father who was worried about his daughter's becoming too American despite his strict observation and abuse. Brent's concern and balancing with assimilation transmits to the second generation. Marin remembers Brent's saying as if to blame Raneer:

"Drugs"? Marin's voice rises in contrast to Karen's, anger lacing it. Her father's constant fear when they are growing up. "They are becoming too American," he would complain to Raneer. He was sure that somehow, even with the strict regime they lived under, they would stray and humiliate him. Whether it was from dating, drinking, or substances, he was convinced they would lose sight of their way. They never did, but that never swayed his belief they would. That same fear now grips Marin. "Has she been found with some?" (Badani 56)

This is an example of Brent's careful monitoring their assimilation into the culture of the host country. It also shows if anything goes wrong with the upbringing of their daughters, Raneer has to answer for that to Brent.

Contrary to that, Namita in *The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk-Wet Bodice* is an example of a changed persona after being freed from the confining house of her in-laws. She explores the warmth and friendliness of the people in the West. Her contemplation at the beginning of the novel when she went for a walk with Krista reveals that. (Parameswaran 16) This is the time when she tries to make a comparison between the environment of her home country and host country, which Raneer never got to explore because of Brent's dominance. Thus, the control over assimilation by husbands and fathers is not only deliberate but also generational.

Furthermore, while the assimilation of South Asian women is mainly controlled by husbands and in-laws, the assimilation of the husbands is often used as an excuse for abuse of wives and daughters. The groundwork for this abuse is discussed in Vogt's article entitled "Diaspora and Transculturality," in which she describes the association of Homi Bhabha's Third Space with the popular Hindu concept of Trishanku:

On the macro-level [] diasporic communities...resonate with Homi Bhabha's ideas of the Third Space, a hybrid location where, as Sura Rath observes 'the reality of the body, a material production of one culture, and the abstraction of the mind, a cultural sub-text of a global experience, provide the intertwining threads of [the] diasporic life, a neither/nor condition parallel to that of Trisahnku' (Rath, 2000:4).

(Vogt 19)

This reference to Third Space and Trishanku is similar and relevant here with the position of the South Asian Women. They are thrown into ambiguous positions by their husbands or in-laws and

they keep sinking in the world of confusion. Moving to a new country, they are abused, manipulated, and threatened. This happens because the abuser misrepresented the host country as a place of horror. This creates a state of nothingness or throws these women into a liminal state where they can neither go back to their home country out of shame, fear, and embarrassment nor they can share their misfortunes with anyone in host country out of distrust.

The idea of how Trishanku describes the experiences of South Asian women was first used by Parameswaran, who explains that

[m]embers of a diaspora live in a liminal world, a Trishanku existence, as I call it in my poetry. Trishanku, [...] was a king in Hindu scriptural lore who wanted to go to heaven in his mortal state. He enlisted the aid of sage Vishwasmitra, who propelled him upwards with his yogic power. But the Hindu counterpart to St. Peter said, 'Sorry, we don't admit people till they are dead.' Trishanku was plummeted down but Earth said, "Sorry we don't take back those who have left as long as they are in the same body." So, after being suttled back and forth, as a face-saving device, Trishanku was given his own constellation in the sky (Parameswaran, 2001: 292-293). (Vogt 19)

Parameswaran used this story of Trishanku to explicate the state of assimilation problems and struggle of South Asian women immigrants. While women's assimilation problems have been overlooked, it also often justifies the abuse or violence in favor of the abuser or batterer on the pretext of this assimilation issue. *Trail of Broken Wings* shows how Ranee became the victim of Brent's frustration.

Parameswaran also used another female religious and mythical figure, Sita, who is worshipped in Hinduism as the epitome of chastity and obedience towards her husband, Rama. In

Hinduism, women are encouraged to be like Sita and learn how to be selfless and tolerant. Women who become the victims of domestic violence struggle to get a fair judgment because of the cultural gaps between the West and the East. For example, “[w]omen with no family in the United States, ... were 3 times more likely to have been physically injured than those with family in the country” (Kallivayalil 789). This fact highlights how isolation make women vulnerable. Socially and culturally, women were raised and groomed as inferior and will be under constant domination of any male figure in a family. While moving to a new country, these women lack confidence. In their home countries, the married women usually have their families, friends, and relatives to share their conjugal life’s problems. In this way, they get a mental break, support, and suggestions from other women. Because of their shared identity and familiarity with these domestic problems, the other women immediately recognize these problems and the suffering women have an opportunity to release their tensions and anxieties with their near and dear ones. But coming to a new country, they are introduced to the other women and families of their new community, but those surroundings and socialization are all through her husband. Consequently, there is an unease and fear in sharing their problems with them for the fear of being misinterpreted. Indeed, Abraham uses many examples from real life of abused women who have been criticized by the women of her own community because of the abuser’s pretended public impression of a nice guy.

In both *Trail of Broken Wings* and *The Sweet Smell of Mother’s Milk-Wet Bodice*, we encounter women who made the mistake of relying on the false promises of their abusive partners. There are other examples of victim women in *The Sweet Smell of Mother’s Milk-Wet Bodice*. One of the women is Alina. Despite being beaten by her husband, Alina returned again to him to the utter disappointment of the shelter’s worker, Krista, who realizes that the abuse will not stop, despite all of Alina’s husband’s promises. Alina comments, “It’s not his fault. A man who cannot

feed his family gets broken” (Parameswaran 31). This sounds like Alina still supports her husband even though he broke her arm. In another example of support for an abusive husband, we see Raneer and her three daughters face and maintain a lifelong silence and shield so that no one can unravel the secret behind their perfectly pretended happy life. Edward Said writes, “the essential sadness [of the exile] can never be surmounted” and that the condition of exile is one of “terminal loss” (Said 173). However, Sujata Warrier explains how this sadness or frustration cannot give the license for husbands to beat their wives:

These are all excuses. We need to always be clear about this. At the heart of domestic violence is the issue of power, the usage of power to control the person with whom you are in an intimate relationship. Domestic violence is the abuse of that power. (Warrier 90)

The husbands and other male figures want to ensure and prove their power over their wives or other women, and they blame external issues for their bad temper or abusive behavior.

These novels deal with domestic violence from two different angles. Parameswaran’s *The Sweet Smell of Mother’s Milk-Wet Bodice* portrays Namita, the battered woman, who is experiencing those stages of her lives that Raneer experienced on her first arrival to USA. But the difference is that Raneer endured her pain and sufferings throughout her life and Raneer did not stay with her in-laws. Both Raneer and Brent moved to USA together and there is no presence of in-laws to provoke Brent against his wife and daughters. So, Brent’s violence stems from his struggle to assimilate into a new lifestyle.

We get the details of Brent’s hitting Raneer and the background story of his anger from Raneer’s narration. One of the customers called him “brownie” and told him to return to his homeland. Brent could not respond for fear of losing his job. But Brent picked up the dollar despite

that customer's throwing it to him because he could buy a pint of milk with that money. After reaching home, Brent hit Raneer when she was late in serving food to him. (Badani 62) This entire scenario is a vivid example of Brent's assimilation problem and how he was afraid to protest in his workplace but his anger fell on Raneer.

When Namita discovers the truth about Tarun and his family and how they cheated her, she is frantic to get back her rights. Namita became stronger when she finally returned to her in-law's house to retrieve the wooden Krishna statue. Her father-in-law tried to stop her from taking what was rightfully hers but Namita took the vacuum cleaner to protect herself from his advances (Parameswaran 76). Namita has changed by the end of the novel when she intentionally pours hot water on Tarun and informs him that she has retrieved her statue of worship sent from India, from her in-law's house. Namita's actions signal her transformation into a woman whom the situation compelled to be rebellious and fight for her rights. Namita broke her silence at the end of the novel because of her disillusionment with Tarun's false promises of a happy married life. Namita fought back at the early stage of her abuse, which took Raneer a lifetime.

MORE REASONS BEHIND SILENCE

Along with the assimilation problem, there are multiple layers of tensions and anxieties shrouded over South Asian immigrant women that contribute to their ongoing silence in the face of abuse. Their trio identity of being an immigrant, dependent, and women is challenged in their sudden encounter with violence. Transitioning into a new culture and unfamiliar with a new land, they cannot escape the violence as their husbands take advantage of their loneliness and dependency. Abraham delineates the position of women/wives who experience such alienation:

The lack of accountability on the part of the abuser's family reduces the social costs of perpetrating violence as a mechanism of power and control. This was the case for some of the women I interviewed. They were forced to conform to gender, age, and marital relationships assumed by the woman's in-laws as normative in South Asian culture. At the same time these relatives also exploited the fact that their daughter-in-law or sister-in-law could not seek her own family's help on a day-to-day basis because of geographic constraints. (Abraham 109)

Abraham shows how geographical constraints contribute to the isolation of immigrant women. These women, after getting married, often feel alienated socially, mentally, and physically when they do not get love, care, and support from their new husbands or in-laws. Namita is an example of this geographical constraint in *The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk-Wet Bodice*, as her exploitation at the hands of her father-in-law and brother-in-law shows. She was not only far away from her family but also in confinement within the four walls of her in-law's house. She does not know anyone in her community as her in-laws never took her to temple or any social gatherings.

In Abraham's discussion, lack of "friends" is classified as an internal barrier, throwing light on the important role of community and social circles from home countries. Namita met

friends from her community when she is thrown out of her in-laws' house. But in Ranees case, her relations and acquaintances encourage her to bear her suffering. Abraham sees silence as a shield of resistance among the women in the immigrant community and culture, arguing that

[m]any abused women are reluctant to seek support from friends and members of the community after their initial attempts are either rebuffed or met with sympathy that is soon followed by advice to be stoical so as to preserve the family. In some cases when other women try to help the abused women, their husbands dissuade them from interfering in other people's family matters. For mainstream members of the ethnic community, protecting the sanctity of the immigrant home implies the protection of South Asian culture. (Abraham 118)

Abraham also singles out cultural, social, and economic constraints, along with close-mindedness of the South Asian community, in perpetuating the situation. Women from the same community who do not face abuse cannot support the abused due to their dependency on their husbands and fear of disruption in their own family life. The subtle power structure of patriarchy also works here, as women with a harmonious conjugal life are also bound by their duties. They must be submissive towards their husbands and remain powerless, unable to use their voice to support other woman without getting consent or cooperation from their husbands. Ranees in *Trail of Broken Wings* is aware of the ineffectiveness of her community. Although she does not share her secret with them, they still sense it. Ranees goes to a community member's house for a ritual and the host woman inquires about her. Another woman joins the conversation and condoles Ranees. This conversation proves that they are aware of Brent's behavior, but they never utter the words "beating" or "torture." They discuss South Asian religious philosophy, which is such an important component of South Asian culture. These women from Ranees own community interpret her

torture as if Raneer is God's chosen person to bear the torture passively. "It is always the strongest and best that suffer," Nita says, clasping Raneer's hand in her own. "As if God knows that you have strength the rest of us lack." (Badani 109) This conversation encourages Raneer to bear the torture silently rather than resisting.

Raneer never shares her secret with them for the fear of losing the connection with them. An Indian belief holds that living close to someone with ill fate might also be ominous for them. The miserable one might bring misfortune for others:

A common belief among Indians is that if you spend too much time around someone experiencing bad luck, their energy can transfer to you. Their bad luck may become yours. If you are invited to a wedding and have an unexpected death in the family, no matter how distant, you must decline the invitation... It was why Raneer never revealed her truth to any of them—if they knew her misfortune, they would cease to be her friends. (Badani 109)

This is one example of the superstitious beliefs and rituals that have been followed despite their coming to a new country and that help to explain their silence.

In summary, immigrant women often stay in abusive relationships because of a reluctance to make private life public, isolation, and lack of support, language barriers, and the immigration experience. Most importantly, Bhandari argues, "Often there is a culture of shame and silence in South Asian groups that prevents women from disclosing abuse in their lives" (221). For the above-mentioned reasons, then, it is difficult for many of these women to believe in themselves to raise their voice against violence.

In *The Family Secret: Domestic Violence in America*, scholar William Stacey discusses another reason why women stay in abusive relationships, that is, the ongoing hope that their abuser will change. Stacey writes:

Lenore Walker, in her book *The Battered Woman*, described a three-stage cycle of battering that includes a period of building tension, the battering episode itself, and then a “honeymoon” phase. During the honeymoon phase the man tries to make up with the woman, showers her with affection, and acts repentant (and may sincerely feel that way) (Stacey 51). Stacey shows that four out of ten women are hopeful their abusers change. Stacey uses the expression “negative reasons” to explain why women cling to this hope. These negative reasons include “economic dependency, children (a reason related to economic dependency), direct coercion, and other reasons including indirect coercion such as threats related to leaving, threats to children, or the man threatening to commit suicide” (Stacey 55). In *Trail of Broken Wings*, for example, Ranee stayed in an abusive relation for her three daughters. The daughters, however, did not get a life free from anxiety and threat, rather they were under constant panic of being beaten by Brent. In *The Sweet Smell of Mother’s Milk -Wet Bodice*, Namita decided to revolt when she finally recognized Tarun’s mischievous intention. In Namita’s case, she was lucky to get relief from the thought of having children. Many wives dream of a happy, peaceful family life, with dignity and love from their partners. In *Trail of Broken Wings*, Brent expresses remorse after he beats his daughters which leads Ranee to think he might change. Ranee thus feels the need to pacify Brent rather than comfort the girls. Such temporary remorseful behavior by the abuser often convinces women to give them a second chance. Stacey uses another term, “learned helplessness”, first introduced by Lenore Walker, to describe the position of the victim women. Ranee, for

example, is aware of her helplessness, which might be the reason she remains silent throughout her married life.

In *The Sweet Smell of Milk-Wet Bodice*, the honeymoon phase is illustrated in Namita's case. Tarun convinced Namita that if she obeyed him everything would be fine. Tarun would get angry the moment Namita did not listen to him so that Namita began to think that the violence was her fault. When Namita moved to a new apartment from the shelter, Tarun emotionally blackmailed her and took advantage of her weakness. Namita has been carried away by the honeymoon phase offered by Tarun.

In *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*, Kimberle Crenshaw, a scholar of critical race theory, addresses the issue of marriage complexity for women immigrating from Asian countries. Crenshaw shows these women do not reach out for help because their only link to the outer world is their husband (and abuser). They often lack enough privacy, even in their own home, to call or seek outside help. In other words, their husband would be aware of such a phone call. Namita's married life is a great example of this lack of privacy as she is constantly being watched by Tarun's family. Crenshaw also reinforces the idea that language and cultural barriers result in women's silence as "cultural barriers often further discourage immigrant women from reporting or escaping battering situations" (1248). As I have discussed, many abused women refrain from taking action due to cultural issues and other reasons. Eventually, they may recoil into their own shells due to their abuse.

CAUSES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

In the article, “Domestic Violence and Abuse in Intimate Relationship from Public Health Perspective,” Zlatka Rakovec Felser, from the University of Maribor, Slovenia, points out one theoretical approach to domestic violence. “A feminist approach,” Felser writes, “emphasizes the significance of gender inequality and contends that it is a major factor in male-female violence.” (63) Felser explains that education and financial emancipation are two important tools to empower women in their relationships. They must also speak out in order to protest their unequal status.

Margaret Abraham in *Speaking the Unspeakable* illuminates what she terms Internal and External barriers to abuse. Internal barriers, according to Abraham, include the presence of in-laws and parents. Other internal barriers to domestic violence are friends, families, and the religious institution/community, who often work as mediators between husband and wife.

Internal barriers may also cause violence rather than resolve a domestic issue. Mediators may even sow the seeds of destruction out of social pressure. These internal barriers may happen to any immigrant trying to be assimilated into a new culture. For example, in Uma Parameswaran’s *The Sweet Smell of Mother’s Milk-Wet Bodice*, when Namita first came to Canada, she had an intimate and harmonious relationship with her husband, Tarun. It is Namita's in-laws that creates the distance between Namita and Tarun. Tarun, a newlywed, lived in the same house as his parents and did not have a space of his own to share with his wife. Namita’s in-laws later started demanding the dowry, which they did not do when the marriage was first arranged by the consent of the two families. Tarun’s parents eventually felt ashamed and offended when their relatives asked about Namita's dowry. It is for this reason that Tarun's family begins torturing Namita and creating a division in her relationship with Tarun. Abraham writes, “The absence or presence of parents and in-laws influences the dynamics of social relations within South Asian families in the

United States” (Abraham 107). In South Asian countries, sons are responsible for taking care of their parents in their old age. Under the patriarchal frame, men will go to work while women stay at home to take care of old in-laws. Another South Asian tradition pressures girls from a very early stage of their lives to be trained how to be a good future housewife. This tradition continued as a ritual reminder from grandmother to mother and from mother to daughter. Abraham also brings up how the cultural gap is a key to understanding why South Asian Immigrant women are often the victims of domestic violence:

Examinations of marital violence in the United States are generally based on the assumption that the dominant family form is couple oriented and the notion that love is the predominant criterion for marriages. Such assumptions exclude the variations in family structure and the impact of the reorganization of family relations within the immigrant context. (Abraham 108)

Abraham sheds more light on how the abuser and in-laws justify their abuse by naming it “tradition”. The root of much discrimination, humiliation, and violence towards wives lies in the confiscated definitions and cultural practices of the patriarchal power structure.

Abraham argues external barriers such as police, court system, and health care providers are factors preventing abuse. However, these factors appear later, after the violence or abuse is done and has been publicized by the victims. The novels depict two scenarios where immigrant women are trapped, either by their in-laws or husbands. Namita’s husband, Tarun, has been biased by what his parents told him about Namita when he is away from home. Yet, Namita serves that image of Ranee if Ranee would have revolted at an early stage of her abuse. Ranee could also be Alina, the lady in the shelter in *The Sweet Smell of Mother’s Milk-Wet Bodice*. After being beaten several times by her husband, Alina temporarily stays in a shelter only to regain her strength and

go back to her husband for another blow. Raneer and Namita both become desperate, but in different ways.

Trail of broken Wings foreshadows the probable consequences if Namita would have chosen to continue her life with Tarun, giving birth to a generation who will carry the scar and secrecy with them throughout their lives. *The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk-Wet Bodice* has brought up the settings and cultures of India to show how Namita has been raised and groomed in her birthplace. Conversely, *Trail of Broken Wings* did not go back and forth between Raneer's home and adopted countries, as she was much older and a mother of two daughters when she moved to the United States. Therefore, Raneer was more mature than Namita. Namita's situation was also different in that her dowry was the reason she was tortured by her in-laws.

Prema Kurien, in a review of Abrahams' book *Speaking the Unspeakable*, asserts, "Cultural definitions of marriage, gender and sexuality empower men at the expense of women and frequently justify abuse" (Kurien 1542). Religion and culture are both used as tools of justification to abuse women. This mentality can be seen in the South Asian community, where males feel it is okay to control their wives and forbid them to disobey. The culture itself encourages men from an early age to despise the women in their lives. Fathers, brothers, husbands, uncles receive respect from female family members, but this respect is not reciprocated towards women, no matter how much they contribute to the family. In this environment, boys grow up with a sense of superiority and authority over girls, while girls learn how to absorb pain and hide their emotions. Economically independent women who get praise and recognition in their workplace often find their status lowered in the eyes of other family members when they come back home to do household work. Even women with higher degrees and education cannot escape from the traditional system. For example, Namita is an independent, educated woman who taught in a

school close to her house in India. Her education and independence, however, mattered little in a traditional marriage and society.

Sujata Warriar's *Social, Legal, and Community Challenges Facing South Asian Immigrant Women* also highlights how women with higher education can become victims of domestic violence: "Clearly, domestic violence has nothing to do with professional degrees. Ph.D.'s, MD's, scientists, and corporate lawyers all find themselves in an abusive situation, as do second generation women who have grown up in the United States" (Warriar 91). A woman's position, education, and economic independence cannot resist the male ego and perceived superiority.

Researchers have identified and documented different coping strategies shared by the abused victims who endure physical, psychological, and sexual violence. Gradually, over time, feelings of entrapment and betrayal become entrenched and produce trauma in the victims' minds.

Religion and the community are the last internal barriers. Religion is used as a tool to exploit women in foreign country, too. Instead of using religion as the support tool for women, the community is using religion for heightening the oppression on women. As religious institutions are used to preserve the culture, beliefs of home countries, they try to represent the true self-effacing nature and personality of women.

Religious ideology frequently constructs family roles in ways that serve the interest of men, providing moral legitimacy by drawing upon religious texts. Religion also shapes people's perceptions of marital violence. It is frequently implicit that the primary burden of any adjustment in a marriage must come from the woman. From the perspective of most of the major religions practiced in South Asia, divorce is still perceived as a social stigma, particularly for the woman. (Abraham 120)

Abraham brought out how religious institutions have been used to dominate abused women rather than a place of security, refuge and shelter. She states, “Thus religious institutions that could play a role in addressing the problem of marital violence, because of their own patriarchal practices and their position on marriage, make it difficult for South Asian women who identify with their religious institution to leave” (Abraham 121). Abraham’s attempt to explicate and exemplify the predominant reasons makes the context relatable to the people other than the Asian origin and ethnicity.

CONCLUSION: RECOGNIZING THE PROBLEM, BREAKING THE SILENCE, AND FORGING NEW LIVES

Mary Ann Dutton notes that victims need to practice self-nurturance in order to control the effects of trauma. The cultural gap, however, even interferes with a women's attempts at self-nurturance. Their culture demands they think and live only for others, not for themselves. They do not have their own time and space to relax, and self-nurturance is considered a luxury. Again, Dutton clearly identifies that trauma can be lessened through self-advocacy:

Attention to nurturing the emotional self is as important as nurturing the physical self. Helping the battered woman to identify her emotional needs, identify ways in which she can get them met, and accept that she has a basic human right to do so is the beginning of the nurturing process. Whether her needs are for someone to hold her, listen to her, or tell her that she is a worthwhile person, meeting basic emotional needs is important in strengthening the inner resources from which the healing occurs. (Dutton 119)

It is also important that a society assures women have a safe space, a place where they can feel confident in speaking out against violence. This is significant, even when the abused one is under the process of torture. For example, Namita did not get emotional support from Menka, rather Menka commented negatively on Namita's appearance.

Dutton also notes the importance of a society being aware of violence against women. The section titled "Increasing Knowledge about Battering and its Effects," is about this issue of creating greater awareness of the issue among women. Knowledge and awareness, according to Dutton, will be a stepping-stone for women's empowerment. "Increasing the battered woman's knowledge about violence towards women in society is useful," Dutton writes, and "Understanding that the

‘personal is political’ provides a framework for seeing that her abusive situation is part of a widespread problem, not limited only to her” (Dutton 119). This is true in relation to the larger power dynamics the patriarchy plays in a society, especially in South Asian countries where women’s objectification in matrimonial purposes is a typical scenario. The more women know about other cases of survivors of domestic violence, the more they would know that they are not alone in their sufferings and silence. Breaking silence is important to make the community stronger and more unified.

Dutton discusses solutions which seem to correspond to Abraham’s ideas. For example, Dutton believes increasing social support is one of the means of getting rid of isolation. The wide network of social interaction and communication need to be built up through conversation, which will then gradually abolish the culture of silence and secrecy surrounding domestic violence. Dutton also points to the importance of self-nurturance and knowledge of battering and its effects, along with providing economic resources, social support, and intervention strategies (with a clinical psychologist perspective). One solution Dutton proposes is that shelters and the community should come forward and assure that battered women are financially self -dependent. Ultimately, Dutton focuses on how existing trauma in battered women can be healed through these strategies, but she does not mention that the root of increased domestic violence lies in enduring and carrying it for a long time. In fact, neither Dutton nor Abraham identifies preventative measures that might stop the violence before it happens, instead focusing on the process of curing and healing after the fact. They capably analyze the post-violence situation but did not discuss how it can be stopped in the bud.

Abraham expresses concerns regarding organizational awareness and support to South Asian immigrant victim women. Because often this movement gives rise to conflict between

individual and organization. Organizational policy and politics might suppress or misrepresent an individual's voice. Abraham also identifies the South Asian community's non-acknowledgement of marital violence. Abraham says, "We know that major segments of the South Asian community continue to be reluctant to acknowledge marital violence as a social problem." (179) To make a change in broader scale is not feasible but it is possible to change the individual woman's attitude towards their own self to enable themselves to speak up whenever they need. South Asian women need to practice self-advocacy from a very early stage of their lives so that they themselves realize their value as human beings. Remaining silent about the violence they have experienced misrepresents their family life. They are outwardly happy but inwardly carry a burden, a burden of truth. Many of these women remain silent because their culture demands silence. Divorce is stigmatized, leaving few options for victims of violence. Women and their families, therefore, must pretend all is well.

As has been demonstrated, remaining silent is a cultural issue among South Asian immigrant women. Practicing and believing in their own worth as human beings is challenging for these women. Domestic violence survivors do not want to talk about their past in fear of losing their present happiness. Those who suffered and are still suffering do not want to share and in both cases, the stigma, shame, embarrassment, and fear keep chasing the victims. This dangerous silence needs to be broken with a spirit of positivity and the notion that women victims only need sympathy must change. Women are not powerless, they do have agency, but we must recognize the challenges that they face in overcoming long standing cultural barriers to their happiness.

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