SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN IN CANADA AND MEDIA DISCOURSE:
A FEMINIST COLLABORATIVE ANALYSIS

by

MARIE-FRANCE DUBOIS

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Abstract

This paper is a critical reflection upon commonly found distortions in the representations of the lives of Canadian women of South Asian origin in the *Vancouver Sun*. The strategy adopted consists in presenting first, the views of three South Asian women activists who acted as collaborators and analyzed the constituted sample of articles; second, feminist anthropological readings are used to draw upon a theory of discourse which looks at news-products as active elements in the construction of reality. It is then argued that by focusing on a narrow range of topics, the prevalent media discourse encourages news readers to develop a homogenous perspective on Canadian women of South Asian origin. The depictions in the press suggest that not only are these women oppressed, but this oppression originates in elements of their own culture and assimilation is only possible by relinquishing these "oppressive" cultural traits. It is argued that the media reinforces the dominant patriarchal, racist and classist discourses prevailing in Canadian society.
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Chapter One: INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that the dominant discourses in the media constrain the representations of Canadian women of South Asian origin in ways which both deny and suppress the diversity of their experiences as well as agency. An exploration of the "preferred meanings" or tolerated interpretations of some aspects of the lives of Canadian women of South Asian origin reveals that these women receive attention only in relation to restricted topics such as arranged marriage, dowry, sex selection technology, violence against women, conflicts around immigration, problems of child rearing and of culture clashes for those of the second generation. Sporadically, the media also produce articles on South Asian women who are presented as role models because they appear successful in negotiating between their cultural backgrounds and the dominant cultures in Canadian society.

Writing about ethnicity, Indra (1981:64) suggested that by "associating only a very narrow range of activities with ethnicity and by restricting the causes and effects of these activities to the immediate past and present, the newspaper set the agenda within which ethnicity will be discussed." The three South Asian women activists with whom I conversed and I argue that a similar process takes place in newspapers affecting the readers’ perceptions of Canadian women of South Asian origin.

1.1 Media Discourse and Hegemony: A Theory of Discourse

My analysis draws from many media studies, emerging from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, especially the work of Stuart Hall (1977). I find relevance in media cultural studies because of their grounding in Marxist theories of domination and their preoccupation with questions of ideology, distorted communication and cultural hegemony (Davis 1985:45). Its proponents discard Barthes’ structuralist methods inspired by Saussurean linguistics, an approach which does not adequately answer questions concerning the political and institutional forces determining the role of the media in society (Connell and Mills 1985:35). While I will be looking at specific journalists’ practices and at specific news-products, I understand those as circumscribed by and
embedded in the conditions of production and institutional relationships of cultural organisations, as did Davis (1985:45) and Harris (1991:16). Moreover, news-products or media "texts" are taken not only as objects of reality, but as active and constitutive elements in the production of that reality (Connell & Mills 1985:38). It is in this light that I approach news-discourse and its influential and restrictive role in the construction of the lives of Canadian women of South Asian origin.

Said (1979), drawing from Foucault and Hartley (1982), also values a theory which understands discourse as contextualized in the social, political and historical conditions of its production:

Our everyday interactions are structured by our social/economical/political relations; these relations are experienced through various discourses, and discourses are structured by the generative system of language. (. . .) [we] must make sense of them through the meanings which discourses have established as the taken-for-granted routine of 'reality' (Hartley 1982:6-7).

Discourses, contextualized in specific historical conditions and power relations, are producers of meanings which we use to interpret the world. Looking at news discourse as texts, in their wider social context, is what differentiates discourse analysis studies from the more conventional approach of content analysis. Because content analysis functions to create 'hard' facts about types of representations or cultural meanings, it neglects to contextualize media constructions in a process of production in which societal power relations are activated (Jaddou and Williams 1981:106). Hence, the findings of content analysis have limited value in its uses for an understanding of the social forces activated through media discourses.

A discourse analysis approach therefore leads towards an examination of power relations. One way in which societal power relations interfere, some argue (Hartley 1982:24; van Dijk 1987:360), is in the limits their specific discourses impose on the range of possible interpretations, by producing and privileging some meanings over others. Hence, discourses produce "selected meanings" and are effective in allowing some interpretations of the world to be more "socially credible" than others. Discourses do so by creating a certain consensus around particular meanings which tend to reinforce
the values of dominant cultures. Gramsci’s notion of hegemony is helpful in suggesting how containment of cultural meaning takes place and manifests itself in capitalist democratic states. Hall, interpreting Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, writes:

Gramsci argued that 'hegemony' exists when a ruling class (or, rather, an alliance of ruling class fractions, a 'historical bloc') is able not only to coerce a subordinate class to conform to its interests, but exerts a 'total social authority' over those classes and the social formation as a whole. 'Hegemony' is in operation when the dominant class fractions not only dominate but direct - lead: when they not only possess the power to coerce but actively organize so as to command and win the consent of the subordinated classes to their continuing sway. 'Hegemony' thus depends on a combination of force and consent. But - Gramsci argues - in the liberal capitalist state, consent is normally in the lead, operating behind 'the armor of coercion' (Hall 1977:332) (my emphasis).

It is through an ideology of value-free media practices or alleged commitment to impartiality that consent is sought with populations of news consumers. If consent is won among subordinated groups or classes, the legitimation of beliefs and values reflecting the interest of an "alliance of classes" or "historical bloc" (in Gramscian terms), takes place. It is partially through the relative autonomy of the news media that the state, or dominant groups and classes, find the necessary conditions for the production, reproduction and diffusion of dominant ideological meanings (Hartley 1982:55).

While organizing and orchestrating its information, the media engage in a process of encoding i.e., a process of selection of codes which assign meanings to events, including problematic or troubling events. The selected codes "appear to embody the 'natural explanations which most members of the society would accept (that is, which appear naturally to incarnate the 'rationality' of our particular society)" (Hall 1997:343). Segments of population, however, can escape the intentions of the media apparatus, which is to win consent to its preferred meanings. Because hegemony or control over meanings is a process which "has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified" writes Williams (1977:122), it is also "continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own." Hall also writes: "( . . . ) hegemony is not a 'given' and permanent state of affairs,
but has to be actively won and secured: it can also be lost" (ibid., 333). Legitimation of preferred meanings then occurs through incessant negotiations which also allow a space for resistance or counter-hegemony.

The reality of any hegemony, in the extended political and cultural sense, is that, while by definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternatives or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the society (Williams 1977:113) (my emphasis).

1.2 Feminist Collaborative Methodology

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still colonizer, the speaking subject and you are now at the centre of my talk (hooks 1990:343).

In spite of the current debates about political implications of acts of representation and the academic discourses on collaboration, little is done to address the problems feminists of colour such as bell hooks (1984:12) see as a colonialism and paternalism endemic to white supremacist ideology in research methodologies used by most researchers including white feminists. The profusion of anthropological writings on textual strategies, or what Abu-Lughod called "decolonizations at the level of the text" (1991:143), has postponed constructive attempts at sharing power and authority with our research collaborators at the level of practice. Anthropologists might consider that there is too much at stake in such a project, and this contributes to explaining a general resistance, in academia, to attempts at "decolonizations" at the level of anthropological practice.

The problem of racism being at the forefront in feminist activist circles and in the feminist academic literature, I consider it essential as a feminist anthropologist to work towards establishing the

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1 I refer to white feminists and feminists of colour as whole groups, although clearly, there are many differences among us.

2 I use Kirby and McKenna’s (1989:31) definition of collaborators as persons who do not necessarily have research experience but who have a wealth of experience in relation to the research question.
grounds for a more egalitarian anthropological research practice. In the context of this study, a methodology of collaboration has been a first step in addressing the sharing of power in research practices. Concurrently with Oja and Smulyan (1989:17), I see this type of methodology as an improvement to prevailing practices because it can more effectively contribute to research designs and pursuits which reflect the interests of the research participants.

While there is always collaboration between researchers and research participants, a methodology based on collaboration ought to render explicit the nature and extent of collaboration in the research process. Consequently, I shall discuss the collaborative components of the methodology guiding this research. First, this media study was suggested by a South Asian woman activist whom I contacted, and was later confirmed as a relevant topic by other South Asian women I approached. Because feminist collaborative research is defined as research by, for, and with research collaborators (Boxer 1982:258; Kirby and McKenna 1989:28), the first step in this project consisted in formulating research questions which are of interest to South Asian women activists in Vancouver. Secondly, the collaborators read a sample of article I constituted, and provided their analysis of the media coverage. Their words are then not objects of analysis, but contribute their perspectives on the treatment of how aspects of the lives of other South Asian women in Canada are represented in the Vancouver Sun. A third component of this methodology involved collaborators reading and commenting on the written drafts of this work. Their insights and constructive criticism have influenced the shape of this document. For example, Yasmin suggested that the oral accounts of the collaborators be presented verbatim rather than through isolated quotes within the analysis as I had initially done in the first draft. She recommended I present excerpts of the conversations, including my questions, arguing that isolated

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3 Details on the sample of articles are given in the methods section.

4 Within the format of the requirements for a Masters thesis in Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, collaborative writing could not be achieved.
quotes did not reflect satisfactorily the nature of the conversations and exchange that took place during the research process. I proceeded then to reconstruct the thesis and when the second draft was circulated, Amarjit and Raminder both agreed that the new format was an improvement. Although this collaborative process produced a lengthier text and was more time-consuming, we acknowledge that it created an honest and frank research relationships between us. An additional benefit to this process was that it provided a period of reflection for the participants towards their own contributions to the research, as well as allowing opportunities to criticize, edit and comment on how I contextualized their words and analysis. Hence, using a methodology of collaboration sensitive to existing power inequalities among those involved in the research process bears potential in preventing the perpetuation of these same inequalities.

1.3 Methods

The following discussion is based on a sample of twenty articles published in the Vancouver Sun, depicting Canadian women of South Asian origin. I used the Canadian News Index to compile articles covering a four-year period (1989-1992). These articles include both, news articles written by Sun reporters and articles published in the OP/ED section. The articles in the latter category are published by the Vancouver Sun as "unsolicited submissions". Because minorities occupy a marginal position in the media, the OP/ED section constitutes a space where minority writers are invited to express their opinions. While these articles are not news as such, I included them in my sample because they succeeded in a process of selection and, consequently, are relevant in the overall context of media discourse.

The sample of articles was made available to three Canadian women activists of South Asian

\[\text{5}\] I read all articles referring to South Asians in the Vancouver Sun and discarded those which did not contain representations of women. However, some articles which I previously collected had not been itemized by the Canadian News Index (Canadian Press 1992; Dykk 1992; Gill 1991a; Wilson 1992).
origin in the Vancouver area who agreed to read and comment on the articles. Semi-directed interviews were then conducted with the research participants. Providing comments on the sample of 20 articles required considerable time and work which explains why the research participants did not discuss all of them. While one could argue that the sample used is biased and non-exhaustive, the nature of discourse analysis directed me to debate some articles more than others. A more rigorous sample would certainly have been necessary had I done a content analysis but that is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Chapter Two: MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF CANADIAN WOMEN OF SOUTH ASIAN ORIGIN IN THE VANCOUVER SUN

This chapter is divided in two sections, each presenting an analysis of the common-sense images of Canadian women of South Asian origin which have currency in the Vancouver Sun. First, the perspectives of South Asian women activists I conversed with are presented, and in the second part, I offer my own feminist anthropological reading. While my analysis of the sample draws from cultural and political writings by South Asian women, my collaborators provided an insider's view of media coverage by relating the sample of articles to their general experience of reading news about South Asian women in Canada in the mainstream press. The two types of analysis are presented separately to respect the distinctions among the various analytical voices.

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6 I spoke to South Asian women activists because I wanted to access the positions of women who are involved in political work as advocates for other South Asian women.

7 I consulted journals and magazines such as: Diva: A Quarterly Journal of South Asian Women; Rungh: A South Asian Quarterly of Culture, Comment and Criticism; Ankur; Sanvad; and Kinesis.

8 In addition to our discussion on media representations, I asked my research collaborators three questions regarding their self-identity i.e., if they identified as South Asian, as feminists, and as activists. These questions allowed the participants to define their own positionality.
2.1 Perspectives of Three South Asian Women Activists on Media Coverage

2.1.1 Conversing with Yasmin Jiwani

*Do you identify as a South Asian woman?*

Yasmin: I identify as a South Asian woman but that identity is not something I see as primordial. Well, to some extent cultural ties are primordial and I think part of it has to do with being part of a particular group and being socialized into that group. But, I think the South Asian label is a political label and the affiliation of calling myself a South Asian, that identity is constructed for me in the dynamics of my being here in this society. I never classified or labelled myself as a South Asian when I was in Africa. This is clearly something that is rooted, it’s actually based on a dynamic that’s two-sided. One side is the wider response I have had from the wider society which has categorized me as an East Indian woman and it’s a label that I resent. I think it’s pejorative in terms of it’s connotation and it is based on ignorance and outright racism. It’s an exclusionary device and in an effort to counter that, because I’m not East Indian . . . there is no country called East India, the idea of East India is, I think, based on the British East India company . . . You don’t call people by a company’s name, even if that company was a tool of colonization. We don’t call natives Hudson Bayers, do we?

So, I think that the whole notion of East Indians also has this negative charge to it. And, it’s almost a contemporary polite way of saying what was said before about people of South Asian origin, which was they were "rag-heads". I almost see the two terms as equivalent because racism isn’t static. It changes over time, it too evolves given the evolution of society. Discourse changes but the power relationships that the discourse covers or communicates are often very much the same. To me the label South Asia is inclusive. It includes people from South Asian countries and it includes people with origin in South Asia, which includes myself because I was born in Africa. I have never seen India, my parents went there once for a visit, they weren’t born there. My grandparents weren’t born there either. It [the South Asian label] includes that tie which is a very strong cultural tie, but at the same
time, gives me the feeling of inclusion, of being with other people who are like myself. It's a preferable alternative to the term East Indian or Indo-Canadian because not all South Asians are Canadian and not all South Asians were born in India. But, I think of it as a political term. I think of it as having an identity foisted on me. It is not that I want to be identified as "separate from" but because this society works on separating our differences. Given that, I'm already marginalized, already positioned in a particular way, I would rather take this label than another. For me, the other insight of that dynamic is that it resonates with who I am culturally, and it's inclusive.

One of the reasons why I'm asking about the label of South Asia is because in anthropology we create categories by using unifying criteria for selecting people. It gives a certain uniformity to the group of people considered. But this can also suppress or minimize differences between individuals. I am asking you how you identify because I assumed a number of things when I approached you but I don't want to take those things for granted. I'm asking about the South Asian identity because I have seen it in journals where women with roots in the India subcontinent use it. I'm wondering if you see some power in this label in terms of activism?

Yasmin: The very act of self-definition is itself an act of activism because what it is, is an attempt to counter the definitions that are imposed on us. ( . . . ) So, the label of South Asia, or having the chance to define ourselves regardless of who is going to believe us . . . for example you still have the press calling us East Indian. A lot of people still do that. People within the community call themselves that, having internalized the label. But for the sector of us who are activists, or who are aware of the issues, or who are somehow engaged in the struggle, that act of self-definition is crucial . . . it's the first step in which we can counter images of ourselves and definitions of ourselves that might be in currency outside. In a way, the journal of South Asian women [Diva], it's talking to South Asian women. It's an internal discourse that occasionally punctures the containers that surrounds us and spills it into the outside world.
So, you are an activist, what motivates you for being an activist?

Yasmin: I don’t think one chooses to be an activist, one has to be an activist. I don’t think we choose to be politicized. I think that by and large, most people are comfortable and if they are comfortable, they are not going to be jarred out of their comfortable ways. But, I think that it is the social effect of being positioned in the margins and of feeling it every day -- it’s what Sunera [Thobani] defined as the indignities of everyday life. Of constantly having to face this struggle day in and day out . . . that politicizes you, it is what makes you an activist. ( . . . ) I see activism as almost like . . . in the face of the constant demeaning, humiliating and dehumanizing effects of living in this society, the very fact that I can get up everyday and do what I have to do is, I think, activism. And, if there is one person you can change or you can influence to see the world in a different way, or to see it from your perspective, that’s activism! ( . . . ) If you are not there, who will? You know that nobody is going to step in for you, and you know that if you don’t say anything in that little space that is allowed, it will just go on. The thing about countering this kind of work is that it works at every level, from the level of lived reality, your daily encounters in the world with the people around you, to the level of institutions. It’s almost, you do get a sense of fatigue because the focus is on one area, and that’s the only area in which you can respond. That is the only area in which there is a latitude or permissibility for you to respond. You have to jump in and use the opportunity as you can.

What is that area?

Yasmin: That area has to do with those articles. What are the areas in which the South Asian woman is constructed in the public arena? Arranged marriages, racism, backward cultural traditions, oppressive cultural traditions and, cultural conflicts -- that’s basically it. These are the four areas and it’s only in these four areas that South Asians are asked to respond. The whole thing coheres around a confrontational dynamic in which this particular group is portrayed in a highly specific way, largely to reaffirm Western society’s notion of itself as a sanitized, superior and progressive entity.
Are there some articles that you think are better than others? There are different kinds of articles in there. Some are written by South Asian woman activists [Thobani 1992a], some are written by South Asian male freelancers [Dhillon 1991; Gill 1991a, 1991b], some are written by white reporters [see Griffin, Wigod, Parton, Aird and others] -- so it comes from different perspectives.

Yasmin: It comes from different perspectives but look at the process of selection. Sunera’s article [Thobani 1992a:A13] is in there because she wrote an article after seeing that article citing Mobina Jaffer [Gill 1991b:A19]. Sunera sent that article. It was printed in the OP/ED page and you can clearly see the writing at the end by the Sun editor, that these are unsolicited opinions and not of the Sun. Usually the criteria of news is anything unexpected, that’s deviant, that basically ruptures expectations, that silences, that resonates with the cultural framework of the people -- and bad news, right? It has to be negative. Bad news is what usually makes it. ( . . . ) Sunera’s article got in because the Sun also has to maintain it’s credibility, that it is presenting all sides of the issue, or a notion of balance. And so, what it tends to do is to use oppositional perspectives in small doses to inoculate the audience. But, the content in Sunera’s article is that last piece by the editor. The content in the Veil issue,9 is the fact that the group of Muslim women who wrote to the editor to complain about the coverage were subsequently presented in the newspaper as either being born or educated here, which completely positioned them outside. So, the articles may be different but what they have to say fits in the larger picture and the larger picture inevitably distances this community as a community that is oppressive, backward, that propagates violence against women, is highly sexist and traditional . . . the idea of a frozen culture -- so you have a community that is basically deviant.

Even Deepa Mehta’s article [Aird 1991:C1], sure Deepa wants to destroy illusion, destroy stereotypes and things like that. But, what is the whole purpose of mentioning Mehta smoking

9 The Vancouver Sun published a series of six articles by Deborah Scroggins, in July 1992, about Muslim women in Afghanistan. The articles focused on rape, legal bondage to men, surgical mutilation, etc.
cigarettes . . . the fact that these films are irreverent. The whole frame of the article really raises questions about the positioning. What is Aird trying to do here? And, not so much Aird but the editor because he has obviously selected this article to be put in a certain place. But again, it's usually around issues of racism -- minorities complaining -- that's a common theme in the coverage of other minorities, other than South Asian.

(. . .) The media always de-historicizes. But the historical context is alarmingly absent when it comes to issues of racism but alarmingly present when it comes to issues of dowry. But even then -- there is no comparison in the sense that, it's just like in the article, the people said, arranged marriages have been around for a long time, the Japanese practice arranged marriages. How come the Japanese arranged marriages are never a focus of attention in the press? The whole institution of dowry has been around for a long time and is practised by many cultures. That's never been brought up! It's always this community is this way, this community is that way!

Women are also often presented as complaining. Our claims are presented as complaints, in spite of obvious sexual inequalities and differential access to power. Do you think there are similarities in the ways women in general and women from the minorities are presented in the press?

Yasmin: Yes! women are significantly under-represented. Valerie Casselton mentioned at the National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL) 1993 conference, that out of approximately 1400 articles published on Meech Lake, only 5 looked at it from a woman's perspective. That is shocking and she had similar statistics about the constitution. But what I found in my reading of the newspaper is that there is more use of statistics -- hard facts when it comes to white women than for women of minorities. When do you see statistics on the inequality in employment for people of colour? There

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10 Mehta's film Sam and Me was presented at the 1991 Vancouver Film Festival. In Aird's words, it is "a bittersweet look at the relationship between two outsiders, one a young man just off the plane from India, the other a rebellious old Jew who just wants to go back to Israel to die" (Aird 1991:C1).
are government statistics showing that people of colour hired in federal government departments, doing the same work, end up getting paid less than their white counterparts. This is the government who embraces the policy of employment equity. If this happens in a federal department, can you imagine what it is outside, but there are never any comparable statistics. When it comes to women, we learn that women earn 66 cents to every dollar a man earns. Immediately, we learn hard statistics. How many women are raped every minute in Canada. How many are molested, how many have a chance of being beaten up once in their lifetime. All of these fact sheets are right there, but when it comes to minorities, there is nothing. There is just this sort of "They [minorities] are saying they are not getting equal opportunities," or "they are saying this," or "they are saying that." But, there is nothing to support it and so, the image one gets is that these guys don't even have a ground to stand on.

This is made even more trenchant by the fact that here, immigration laws are presented as the liberalization of immigration in 1967 which allowed these people to come in. Even within that image, the cracks are never examined. Who does Canada allow to come in? Even, among the refugees, it always chooses the "cream of the crop". Why are former Yugoslavian refugees being treated better? Why are there more of them allowed in than Somalian refugees? The *Sun* has printed story after story of Somalian refugees abusing the welfare system, as criminals, as here under false pretences, and who have to be deported.

There is a real race prejudice and you can see that. With the Somalis, what are they looking at? Female circumcision, arranged marriages . . . the whole idea is to portray these people as sexist, as backward, oppressive, and as being too different to accept them here. In one of the newscast, Valcourt [Bernard Valcourt, Minister of Immigration] actually used the term: "they are too different - - they are nomads," and nobody asked him what he meant, everyone is different, right?

*Was there some positive aspects in these articles?*

Yasmin: I don't see it so much in terms of positive or negative as much as I see it as some kind of
framing of these issues and the whole frame as such is negatively charged. There is an agenda. In some instances, this is where the role of the advocate or an activist clashes with academic disciplines. As an academic, you are not supposed to be an activist, you are supposed to think about these things - see them objectively. Being part of this culture and identifying myself as such, you can’t divorce that. It’s my lived reality that’s an issue here. And so, I can’t say that these framings are the way that ideology works and that’s the way the system works. It’s having direct impact on me, on the way I am seen. The fact that my credentials are constantly questioned -- that my views are constantly interrogated because I’m not allowed to have views, right?

You are saying that for you, there are real contradictions in doing academic work. As a South Asian woman, you cannot not be an advocate for the group of women with whom you identify. Why do you bring this up in the context of news framing?

Yasmin: There is a tendency to discount the views that I have presented. It’s based on a conspiracy theory -- the same accusation that is levelled at Noam Chomsky’s work -- that is, it is a conspiracy theory of the media. Well, it’s a conspiracy theory if one wants to look at it from that "academic" perspective -- ivory tower perspective. When you are in it, it’s not a conspiracy theory. It’s the reality that is constantly being portrayed to you. If you are judged on the basis of what is written about you or your community, you become almost unwillingly the ambassador of that community wherever you are.

When I talk outside, it’s often expected that I am talking about the entire South Asian women’s community. And I often have to make it a point that I am not. You cannot make this generalization or the categorization that because I happen to be of South Asian origin and culture that I will necessarily articulate the views of all South Asians because that is assuming that we have a mindset that’s the same, and that’s not true! But, my argument had more to do with the notion that as an activist and an academic, you are not allowed to get into this, there is a contradiction involved.
However, if you are a feminist and an academic ( . . . ), it's fine to have a feminist perspective when you do a certain piece of work. But, when you have a race perspective, you are accused of not being objective. What I am referring primarily to is that, if a white feminist were to become an advocate for a group of people of colour, that would be fine. But, if it is a woman of colour who is working in her own community and who studies her own community, suddenly, it is problematic. That's where the racism comes in and, that's where the whole debate on objectivity comes in. Yes, sure, everybody has read van den Berghe [Race and Racism, 1967], but suddenly it becomes an issue. Or, you are taken to be the sole representative of that community and you are put in that binary position, neither of which you can fulfil. Racism is never seen as a legitimized issue. There are inequalities in society, these are historically entrenched and need to be dealt with. That [addressing the issue of racism] is never there and you can see it really clearly. I mean, the assumption is so grounded in the fact that we are all the same, that if I look at the South Asian community, I am "subjected". It is too close to me but, if a white researcher looks at the South Asian community, it's different. The fact that there are so many differences within the South Asian community is never the issue. The fact that the axiomatic principle of intercultural communication which is that there is more differences in a group than between groups is never brought up. No, these are MY peoples. They say: Yes, you are right! We have been telling your stories for a long time. Now, you have the right to tell your own story. But, it's delegitimized.

Do you define yourself as a feminist?

Yasmin: I identify myself as a feminist but my definition of feminism is a very basic one. You are struggling for equal rights as a woman. And that's it. You don't want to be treated like a doormat, you're a feminist! And to me, that's my version and that's the thing: that version has never been accepted as being equivalent to Western notions of feminism and dictated by the feminist movement in the West. So, my mother's feminism would never be recognized. The feminist perspective that I
embrace includes the notion of race and gender in it. It’s not just the notion of gender because women of colour will turn into their communities, will turn to their families for protection from a racist environment. Whereas Western feminism always sees the home and the family as a source of oppression.

2.1.2 **Conversing with Amarjit Pannun**

*As you read these articles and encountered representations of South Asian women, how did you relate to these representations?*

Amarjit: Some of them are very stereotypical, fall under certain categories: arranged marriages, dowry or seeing South Asian women as some kind of anomaly coming from this backward culture and tradition. And in terms of who the writers were, even people of South Asian origin fed into the stereotypes. They would talk about their culture in terms of being backwards, or try to explain its anomalous nature to a white audience but there was never any discussion, except for the article by Sunera [Thobani 1992a:A13] ( . . . ) in terms of how this fits into . . . let’s see arranged marriages, how they occurred in Europe and elsewhere. Even in the aristocracy now, it exists. But nobody ever looked at it as a phenomenon in totality. Such things are always a kind of anomaly, this sort of highly signified other. In terms of that, I would not go out of my way to read articles written either by South Asians or non South Asians. It doesn’t interest me because of the vein in which it is written. There are some pieces, a couple, that are really nice, like one human being talking to another, for instance that father who has two children and his wife died of cancer [Sahota 1992:A3]. That was real, that was like a human phenomenon. It didn’t matter that he was Sikh, that he wore a turban, the colour of his skin. He is someone who lost his partner and he is now raising his children. I mean it was nice and neutral ( . . . ) in terms of how one wants to be understood.

*He [Sahota] is talking about an experience which could happen to anybody regardless of her/his culture. It’s not a sensationalized issue that is discussed.*
Amarjit: That’s right, yet that’s the way many other articles are written. People are presented as the exception to the rule. There are a couple of these that are about arranged marriages which worked out really well but which showed people as exceptions, or people rebelling against their own culture. Somehow they see their cultural values as oppressive, they are not analyzed, only compared to Western values. Somehow, there is no context, no historicity to it. And then, the titles -- I guess it’s newspaper writing -- but, for example, "repels others" [speaking of the practice of arranged marriage in Wigod (1989b:E13)], really really loaded descriptions ( . . . ) That’s difficult! It’s very loaded, it’s not saying that some people opt out [of arranged marriages], it’s not a neutral description, it’s something to be despised, or it’s repellent in some way.

There is a description by one of the authors [Parton 1991:B1] of some Indian woman and the author uses classic adjectives about her being doe-eyed, which for example occurs in Sanskrit literature . . . some of the stories about the gods in the Hindu scriptures and how women are described. Men are described as strong and what not, women are slim waisted, fair skin, voluptuous and doe-eyed. And so, to see this in a newspaper article written by a white woman and, just the way she was described . . . I guess I always saw it [doe-eyed] as gentle, submissive, serene, etc.

Did you find there were different views, different representations of South Asian women?
Amarjit: Some of them are quite excellent, they challenge how people think. They are representative and respectful of reality. For example how Mehta [Aird 1991:C1] presents herself, that’s just the way it is, people are resistant to being categorized. For instance, this "South Asian" term, I never use it to describe myself. I’ve always been Punjabi Sikh. That’s my identity and I have never used Indo-Canadian. Only, I have to acknowledge that this is how other people categorize this community, in terms of politics. ( . . . ) Some of these [articles], I think, are much more representative of how people feel and see their lives. So the Mehta article [Aird 1991:C1] and the one of women who organized out of Abbotsford [Griffin 1991:B3] and Sunera Thobani’s one [Thobani 1992:A13], I think,
are much more representative of women's situations and women's realities. It's just respectful. It's talking about those individuals and what they are facing rather than looking at them under a microscope. It's taking what they are doing and what they are like as interesting.

_Do you think that the subject, the person who is being interviewed really makes a difference in the end product, i.e., in what is going to end up in the paper?_ In Aird's article, Deepa Mehta challenges how women are usually represented. Elizabeth Aird had to deal with the question of representation because Deepa Mehta pointed it out. Mehta wanted to make sure that she was going to be represented in the way she perceives herself. She did make strong statements about that.

Amarjit: Yes, this is why I think this is interesting. It's interesting in that she is being interviewed because she made a movie, and the movie did well. They are interviewing the director, then because the director is Indian and because the movie has this theme [refer to footnote #10], they have to take into account her cultural heritage, the immigrant experience and all those kinds of issues. In here [Griffin 1991:B3], it feels sort of the same way, these people fighting against racism and setting up services to help themselves and in that way there is a lot of self-definition because the group is being explored. They are looking at the organization they set up. And then Sunera's [Thobani 1992a:A13] is a response to a call. She isn't being defined on the basis of her cultural background and yet, these external categories of information are what the white Western audience or non-Indian audience would want to know about. ( . . . ) Here, because the issues are different and defined differently, it tends to be more respectful. There is integrity to it.

The rest of the articles are in response to how others see us. They don't want to know about our daily lives but they want to know about these bizarre cultural practices we have . . . about preferring men, you know male children, and dowries or arranged marriages, or the clash between East and West in our children or in our minds. They are not really interested in us, they want either contradictions for us or contradictions in their own heads that they think would exist for us. And then,
these "weird cultural practices" that they think are alien, [it is] because we come from a culture where they are still practised to a large extent, and the West no longer practices them. I'm talking about European history, you have similar cultural histories in terms of how European cultures changed.

We became an object of study. It's not us deciding what's interesting, to an extent it is white people . . . for instance, a white reporter . . . Ah! you see that's the thing, it's hard for me to think in terms of colour. Everything is a cultural phenomenon, it's pan-human in a way, but, how come they don't do articles on male drinking culture? Or why the colour white has come into existence for wedding dresses? Or, how this notion of love marriage came about? Or, you know, things that happen here that are the norm because it's the dominant practice? And then, as Indian, I'm also a visible minority. I don't know . . . it just doesn't help our position in this society to help us assimilate better . . . if that's one's goal.

Is that your goal?

Amarjit: No, but it doesn't help people have insight into us. It segregates us as some sort of alien, that we have such bizarre, such different cultural practices. And then, our colour on top of that . . . tabooed. It's going to be next to impossible to understand us, you know, trying to be sensitive, so that people can get their heads around us when they see some guy with a turban or an Indian woman wearing an Indian suit.

You mentioned that you would like to see articles on some cultural aspects of the lives of white people. But, I see a lot of articles on the dominant cultures in this country. Are you saying that the press focuses on particular topics for South Asians and other topics for white people?

Amarjit: Yes, for the most part we recognize that we live in a multicultural society and everybody has to be represented. But, the representations of us tend to be what the dominant culture would consider problematic or of interest. When, for example, articles are written about native communities, topics often revolve around alcoholism or sexual abuse. Rather, they could be looking at structures that
promote racist ideology and how it impacts on different groups in our society. For instance, in the case of South Asians, the focus could be their struggles in particular jobs or industry and what not. Those articles exist in academic journals but they don’t make it into the public media. And, that’s where understanding is really necessary. That’s real information, useful information. How is the exploration of arranged marriages, in the way it is taken up in the articles, useful for anybody? Unless someone was thinking about having an arranged marriage and happened not to be South Asian, but otherwise it is not useful information. These articles are for the mainstream definitely, for the dominant culture! They are not informative, the practices covered are shown as anomalous. In fact, some of these topics are even anomalous to me even though I belong to this community. They are wild and wacko! You know, it’s not something that I would support myself because of the way it is presented, it is presented as a South Asian phenomenon and people generalize. It’s presented in such a way that the exceptions become the norm.

What do you mean by these things that are "wacko"? You say that you would not support them but you recognize that they exist?

Amarjit: Oh! sure, but they are exceptions. For instance, these people going down to Bellingham to determine the sex of their child and then abort female children . . .

These are exceptions?

Amarjit: I believe so, if you were to look at it in terms of percentage of South Asians, I think you would discover that they are exceptions [refers to Dhillon 1991].

That’s not the way they are presented in the articles.

Amarjit: No, it’s not. They make it sound as if everyone that’s brown and pregnant is heading out to Bellingham. You know, that isn’t it! When they write about particular women who are doing well, they look at women that crossed over to an extent or weren’t "traditional". Like Jaffer for example [Gill 1991b:A19], or Raminder Dosanjh [Griffin 1990a:B2] -- she is portrayed as already a rebel in
her own society and so that’s why she was successful here. It is presented in that way, rather than in terms of an ongoing negotiation between that particular individual, her or his family, that’s what the reality is. The reality is not that people are rejecting their culture. They are negotiating. If you were to talk to women I went to school with, some are still single and they are my peers or older, some have had semi-arranged marriages, some had formerly arranged marriages and then there were some that lived with their partners before they got married, and some that married out of the community. The one woman who lived with her partner, he was Indian. It wasn’t that she took off . . . There is a continuum of experiences and that’s not what is represented. What is represented is what will be sensational for the mainstream, but it creates, it generates alienation.

_I would like to talk about Gill’s article Woman in the Middle (Gill 1991b) . . ._

Amarjit: I don’t know how to respond to that one because there is a strange dynamic here. This writer is trying to explain an insider to his culture, and then explain his culture to mainstream society. Jaffer [Mobina Jaffer, the "Woman in the Middle"], some of her success in the community of multiculturalism is because of the mere fact that she is Indian. If she was a white woman, and had done all this [she is the first Indo-Canadian lawyer to practice in British Columbia], it would be inconsequential. Part of her fame and fortune is because she is brown, so . . . She is in the same position that he [Gill] places himself, that is to explain the predicament of Indian women, the predicament that the mainstream culture sees them in. That they don’t leave their homes, only breed babies and whatever else. And then, the statement that they are not part of the flow of life in Canada, well . . . Indian women do janitorial work in all major cities in Canada. It is Indian women in B.C. who harvest the food . . . so, they are very much part of the flow of life in Canada.

_In that same article, there is also mention of another woman, Sashi Assanand, who says that there are types of Indian women. I am wondering if you think that it is useful to present it in that way to the general public, that there are categories of Indian women?_
Amarjit: Well, it’s not useful in the way it is presented. The first group of women who are described [role has been defined as "a bearer of children, who abides by her husband’s wishes and cares for his family . . . these women are only to be seen not heard . . . very submissive" (Gill 1991b:A19)], is right out of the stereotype of what Indian women are perceived to be ( . . . ) the issue is that she should be talking about the isolation people experience as a result of the immigrant experience and lack of English. There is a lack of ESL programming in the community. It should have been talked about in that way, not that these women are somehow to blame.

Do you identify as an activist?

Amarjit: I identify as a community worker and I do advocacy so I guess, it is activism. I suppose the word activist encompasses some of that.

Would you define yourself as a feminist and if so, can you explain what that means to you?

Amarjit: Yes, I identify as a feminist. If I am talking to another woman that I know is a feminist, I will identify as a feminist. My feminism is that I am opposed to all forms of domination. I define myself as a feminist/humanist. I use the humanist definition because people understand it. It is my social philosophy.

Is feminism basically a philosophical position for you?

Amarjit: No. I believe in the marriage of theory and practice (...) My feminism means: anti-racist, anti-sexist, also anti-capitalist and anti-classist. That is how I live my life, in terms of how I interact with people, stances I take in conversations . . . I espouse feminist ideals.

Has your philosophy influenced your criticism of these articles? In other words, would you consider your reading of these articles a feminist reading?

Amarjit: Yes. I responded as a South Asian woman who lives here but wasn’t born here and continue to be in contact with my cultural values. I looked at these articles defining South Asian women in terms of their roles and lives. I saw them [the articles] as very much male biased, they are informed
by a patriarchal structure. I was looking at how South Asian writers or not were constructing difference, defining their own positions in the case of South Asian writers and I guess interpreting. I have done unlearning racism work so I guess I looked at internalized racism and racist ideology. I come from a working class background and I work with a cross-section, a spectrum of Indians from different socio-economic backgrounds. So, I was sensitive to who was getting voiced and how they were being portrayed.

Can this work that we have just done inform feminist anthropologists about writing about people from different cultures than their own?

Amarjit: You have to be sensitized to the concept of race and how mainstream society uses it to inform its processes. So, I think a South Asian woman like Sunera [Thobani] -- how she is responding not to look at what I see as racist assumptions about cultural differences, arranged marriages, dowry, sex selection. These aren’t cultural racial phenomena. These are results of other larger structures. Definitely, I think that talking to or working with women of colour would inform white feminism.

2.1.3 Conversing with Raminder Dosanjh

Do you identify as an activist?

Raminder: Yes, I do. I look at myself as an activist because I look at things around me and try to change them. I can’t look at things and say "Ok, it’s happening, let’s forget it!" When I see something that needs to be challenged, I try to find time and address it in my own little way. To be an activist for me, means various things. It means first of all to unlearn the learned stereotypes and continuously challenge the sexism, racism, poverty and other inequities around us, starting with oneself, one’s family and the society in general.

Do you identify as a feminist?

Raminder: I would say so. I think I am a feminist. Again, different people have different definitions
of feminism. For me feminism means that all women should be treated with dignity and respect, regardless of whatever choices they make, whether they are married, living at home, raising children or whether they are out pursuing their career. And, unfortunately, that is not so here, and that is not so in many other countries in the world. I see the inequities and I've spent some time working at eradicating some of them because I would like to see that day when everybody is treated with respect and as equal partners.

*What do you think of the representation of South Asian women in this sample of articles?*

Raminder: Every time you hear about the South Asian women in the media, you hear about them during the sex selection campaign, you hear about them when they are in situations of arranged marriages, when they talk about dowry or dowry deaths, bride burning or Sati. Of all of these incidents, there was one that took place in India in all these years, some time ago. Related to that, we were invited to talk about this issue on a radio program. We told them, Sati is not a common practice here or in India. This incident of Sati was a totally isolated incident. But you know, all of a sudden, there was this interest in this thing. But, when there are good things happening, you don’t hear about them. Also, when one such incident takes place, it is attributed to the whole community, it’s made to look as if it is a common practice in the community.

*You mentioned something about sex selection. Dhillon [1991] is talking about his aunt going to Blaine, Washington for sex selection. I talked to other women who said they had never heard about that.*

Raminder: The headlines have made it to look like it is a common practice among Indo-Canadians. It’s not uncommon to find people with preference for male children when you live in a male dominated society where women are devalued all the time. But the fact is that we had not heard about sex selection being practiced in our community until this doctor targeted our community with his add campaign. For instance, I don’t have a daughter and I have always missed not having one. In fact,
we even had an application in to adopt one. Both times we had sons, we had names selected for a girl. When you read that stuff in the media, you immediately think that every South Asian or Indo-Canadian person wants a boy. The Indo-Canadian community is not different from the rest of society. Preference for male offspring exists in this community as in many communities around the world. There are many voices fighting a battle to eradicate this acute form of discrimination. But, the unfortunate part is that you only hear one side of the story. The report in the media leaves a very stereotypical image of the community by focusing on a few individuals who have internalized the sexism around them and have been victimized by Stephen’s add campaign. In essence, the real issue is lost and you are left with a very biased view of the community.

*Especially when this practice is not exclusive to Indian people.*

Raminder: That’s exactly what I was going to say, that it’s not exclusive to the Indian community at all. There is all kind of research that shows that preference for male offspring exists in many parts of the world including for example, Britain, the United States and Danemark. There is a clinic in Toronto which has been frequented not only by Indo-Canadians but by many others. In fact, it’s been more of a mainstream practice where people have gone to have the sex selected and statistics show that people are from different backgrounds. But that never came into light through these articles. Instead, the articles left the impression that the Indo-Canadian culture condones this horrible practice while there was no reflection of the intensity of this doctor’s campaign or his moral and ethical responsibilities. Any store you went to, you saw his leaflets, any newspaper you opened, you saw his advertisements. What he was doing was actually planting the idea and taking no responsibility for perpetuating this practice and its consequences on women’s lives. In fact, he blamed it on the Indo-Canadian culture while he profited by exploiting the community for his own gain.
2.2 A Feminist Anthropological Analysis of the Vancouver Sun Coverage of Canadian Women of South Asian Origin

Because minorities have not been gatekeepers in mainstream mass media, Wilson and Gutiérrez found that in the United States, the frequency and nature of minority coverage in mainstream reporting reflect the values and attitudes of the majority of the population.

By their professional judgments, the gatekeepers of news reveal how consequential minorities are to American society and determine the ways in which they are interpreted to the majority audience (Wilson and Gutiérrez 1985:134).

Although he did not consider factors of ethnicity, Whitlow (1977) also found that some gatekeepers of both sexes tended to reject news items about women in non-traditional sex roles. This contributes to explaining why topics of interest in news and feature articles about South Asian women in the Vancouver Sun revolve around a limited range of topics such as arranged marriages, sex selection, dowry, violence against women, immigration, multiculturalism and culture clashes between East and West. All of these domains are dealt with in a culturally-based framework i.e., as emerging or originating from an Indian culture. Similarly, three articles (Aird 1991; Wilson 1992; Dykk 1992) which constitute exceptions from the above mentioned topics, discuss art-related issues such as film direction and plays in relation to multiculturalism. The media then offers channels of diffusion for the ideological effect of the state’s policy of multiculturalism.

The state has to come up with policies which maintain the status quo (i.e., keeps cheap "coloured" labour accessible to capital) while giving the public, both white and non-white, the impression that the state is combatting racism and promoting racial equality (Bolaria and Li 1985:29, quoted in Srivastava and Ames 1989:19).

It is relevant to examine the messages conveyed by news discourses seen as producers of restricted, preferred or constraining meanings. What is the discourse underlying the topics assumed relevant in relation to South Asian women, by gatekeepers, for the readers of the Vancouver Sun. What are the underlying assumptions of preferred meanings associated with Canadian women of South
Asian origin? There is a preferred meaning of the "Canadian woman of South Asian origin": Her predicament is to live under her family's authority, go through a marriage arranged by her parents, to be considered according to the value of her dowry, and as resorting to sex selection technology to favour male children. She is also often portrayed at the receiving end of violence perpetrated by males in her household. These topics are domains which are not usually associated with the lives of Canadian women who are not of South Asian origin. The dissemination of such a predicament for South Asian women in Canada has advantages for those who do not fit into this category:

The circulation of images of South Asian women as tradition-bound, submissive, weak, and victimized affirms the image of the West as an advanced and progressive entity (Jiwani 1992:45).

I will now deal with five topics which come back with regularity in media coverage and which constrain the reader's perceptions of South Asian women in Canada.

2.2.1 **Arranged marriages**

The regularity with which articles on South Asian arranged marriages are published (five out of the nineteen articles constituting the sample considered for this paper look at the practice of arranged marriages) suggests that discussions of the marital status of Canadian women of South Asian origin, have the press criteria of newsworthiness. In a first article, Wigod (1989a) describes the procedures families undertake to find future partners for their children:

From the time a child becomes a teenager, the family researches prospective partners for him or her, taking into account factors like caste, wealth and social status. (...) Acting *en bloc*, the family takes responsibility for marrying off its members. It does this work diligently, researching a candidate's every trait (Wigod 1989a:E13).

A similar process takes place in Parton's article (1991) in which she explains how Meena Dhir's family travelled to India to select "with great care" a future husband for her.

The following day, in her birthplace in Ludhiana in the Punjab, her family gave a party at her mother's sister's house. They invited the Chosen One and his family, and everyone knew the reason. The party offered a place for their arranged introduction -- a chance, if either wanted, to back out. She eventually gave a slight nod, and everyone understood. He was acceptable.
She would marry him. They had never held hands; never kissed or had a date; never spent a moment alone. She had yet to learn his full name, but she would marry him (Parton 1991:B1).

The latter part of the above quote reminds readers of a certain peculiarity attached to the practice of arranged marriages compared to the Canadian standard of so-called "love marriages."

Traditionally, the future bride and groom within an arranged marriage, did not usually know each other but Wigod (1989a) points out that this is changing in the Canadian context. On the other hand, Parton’s article emphasizes the fact that the future bride and groom do not know each other. This contributes to the portrayal of arranged marriages as a restrictive practice which condones the contemporary Western pre-marriage liberties.

The idea of arranged marriage horrifies Westerners, who recoil at its seeming disregard for personal freedom. Says Hemi Dhanoa, a social worker with the Vancouver multicultural group Mosaic: "The mainstream community, when they look at arranged marriages, it flashes before them as a very negative thing" (Wigod 1989a:E13).

Consequently, discussions on arranged marriages in the *Vancouver Sun* present women with very little agency with regard to when, and with whom, they will marry. Umendra Singh, assistant editor of *The Link*, describes the role of women in the negotiation preceding the marriage, as for example, when potential candidates are introduced to the woman and her family, in this fashion:

At the first meeting, when "the girl comes in, she usually serves the tea or food. That's how it's done. The boy sees the girl then" (Wigod 1989a:E13).

By highlighting the restrictions imposed on their behaviour before marriage, various articles also emphasize that it is a woman’s responsibility to safeguard the family’s honour:

Unmarried girls are not allowed to mix with boys because any misconduct would sully a family’s honor. "When you are born, you are your parent’s daughter," says Raminder Dosanjh, a founding member of the India Mahila Association, a Vancouver group with feminist leanings. "You have to really watch what you do so you don’t bring any disrespect to your father’s family" (ibid., E13).

Nothing is mentioned as to what constitutes acceptable behaviour for unmarried boys. Therefore, the notion that a family’s good reputation rests solely on the socially acceptable conduct of its female
members is maintained. Wigod's second article (1989b) on the same topic and published just below the first one, is written in the same vein, as only young women and no men are asked about their views on the practice. Wigod is careful in presenting two views against and two views in favour of it. But, why does it fall only on women to discuss the good and the bad of this form of marriage? Once again, marriage and relationships are portrayed as a woman's domain, one in which South Asian women can demonstrate their analytical skills and express an opinion. Elements of coercion or pressure exercised on women of marriageable age are raised by some women and emphasized in the newspaper as a contentious issue.

Perminder Hari, a 22 year old Delta woman would like to marry another Sikh and wouldn't mind if her parents introduced her to eligible men. But she won’t be coerced. "If it’s something I didn’t want to do, I wouldn’t agree with it," she says (Wigod 1989b:E13).

Similarly,

Sat Basi feels under considerable pressure to marry. The 28 year-old woman, who lives with her parents in Vancouver says: "We get people -- friends, relatives -- phoning all the time, [saying], 'We've got a guy for your daughter.'"

Basi disagrees with arranged marriages because couples aren’t allowed to date. She says: "I can’t meet a guy for an hour and say 'Yes, I’ll marry him.' You have to get to know that person (Wigod 1989a:E13).

Another opposing view, attributed to a 30 year-old Burnaby woman born into a Hindu family in Kenya goes like this:

Having seen her best friend undergo an arranged marriage and then flee her in-laws' house in despair three months later, she set her heart against arranged marriage when she was 18. Her main objection is one a Westerner would raise. "There is no connection between the people," she says. "When you meet a person on their own, you develop a history with them . . . You get to know the person separately from your families. She also deplores semi-arranged marriage -- the freer modern variant in which young people may veto the mates their parents offer them. 'You can say no, but how many times can you say no? You’re still expected to say yes’ (ibid., E13).

Dating and getting to know a potential future partner are the reasons indicated by some women who have reservations an arranged marriage. These however, are practices which are part of mainstream
Canadian culture and they contribute to the glorification of Canadian mainstream values which leave it up to the couple to decide when and how they will marry if they decide to do so. The views presented above and credited to young South Asian women make a more compelling argument against this practice as women are said to directly suffer as a result of this form of marriage. Whereas views such as "I really don’t mind the idea," or "wouldn’t mind if her parents introduced her to eligible men," seem to passively accept rather than affirm the values of arranged marriage.

2.2.2 Dowry

The article *The Worth of A Wife* (Gill 1991a) deals with the practice of dowry in the Vancouver area. More specifically, this article addresses the issue of insufficient and exorbitant dowries. Dowry as a social practice does not exist exclusively among people of Indian origin. The article recognizes this, yet emphasizes that while "This custom has faded in many cultures, among Indo-Canadians it has been gaining momentum since the early 1980s" (Gill 1991a:A15). This point leaves ambiguities about the uniqueness of this phenomenon. Is it only in the Canadian context that dowries have gained momentum? The article *The Worth of a Wife* presents dowries as a social practice surviving only among peoples of Indian origin. While this is the case in some countries of the Indian diaspora, other communities of overseas Indians have abandoned dowry practices, for example in contemporary rural Trinidad (Nevadomsky 1983:197).

As is frequently the case in newspaper discussions of phenomena associated with people of colour, in *The Worth of a Wife*, dowries are presented as negative or in deviant forms. In the case of one particular woman, the dowry was considered insufficient, and discussed more generally in the context of excessive dowry costs. The consequences of discussing dowries in this kind of framework is that dowries become a sort of "evil" and South Asian women are seen as lacking control over dowry-related arrangements or are almost referred to as "marketable goods." Articles on dowries provide a limited understanding of the practice and ways in which dowries may facilitate women’s
control. There are studies in the British context which challenge mass media stereotypes of Asian women portrayed both as victims engaged in constant struggles against "oppressive" cultural traits, and as passive subjects unable to engage with the British economy (Bhachu 1991:402).

Dowries -- *daajis* -- represent the legitimate and recognized property rights of women and have been elaborated since migration to Britain as a result of women's entry into the waged labor market. Young Sikh women play a central role in manufacturing them, because the arena of dowry in the '80s and '90s in Britain has become a more important area of consumption than in the past (\ldots) It is a cultural idiom that has always been relevant but which has seen significant inflation and which is controlled by the specificities of their class positions and sub-cultural consumptions patterns (Bhachu 1991:403).

While there is no research equivalent to Bhachu's in the Canadian context, we learn from her work that it is not only in Canada that dowries have taken such proportions. More importantly, Sikh women in Britain are active agents in manufacturing inflated dowries. In *The Worth of a Wife*, there is no mention of whether or not South Asian women play a role in contributing to their own dowries. What we see next to the text, is the drawing of a woman on her knees carrying a gigantic box wrapped like a gift onto her frail body.

In the same article, the views on dowries of various members of South Asian communities are presented. The explanation given by Ragh Singh Bains, a counsellor at Immigrant Services Society, for his assertion that "never before have the demands for dowry been so exorbitant and so widespread as today in Canada" is that "people have stronger ties to their families in India than ever before". The author then uses Bain's comment to provide information about dowry practices in the Indian context, beginning with statistics on women abuse and wife burning in India. The assessment of the situation in India is also problematic because equally characterized with an obliteration of Indian women's agency and their activism in what is called the dowry debate. About dowries in India, it says:

One of the reasons families come under great pressure to offer material goods is because in the old days Indian laws did not allow women to inherit an equal family property or income. And the proponents of dowry justify it on the ground that it is a way of providing the bride with a share of the family wealth (Gill 1991a:A15).
Hence, dowries in India are contextualized in a discussion of inheritance rights. It is explained that, in the old days, dowries in India provided a sort of compensation for women in lieu of a share of the family inheritance. Today, the laws in India recognize women’s equal right to inheritance through the 1956 Hindu Succession Act (Kishwar 1989:4). In practice however, Indian women very often are disinherited. In Gill’s article, the state of affairs is presented as follows:

Now, the Hindu Succession Act gives women the right to inherit an equal share of the property. But traditions die hard, and in most cases the family property is given to male members of the family. Women do not usually contest this, and therefore it only strengthens the argument that dowry alone ensures the fair share of the family’s wealth (ibid., A15) (my emphasis).

There are reasons why Indian women do not usually contest the conception that their dowry constitutes a fair share of the family’s wealth and consequently, Gill’s statement needs to be qualified. It is mentioned that the dowry has been outlawed in India since 1961, "but because of vague regulations and ill-equipped and indifferent police force, the victims are largely unprotected" (ibid., A15). Indian feminists writing in Manushi, a women’s journal in India, also situate the dowry debate as closely related with questions of inheritance rights for Indian women. However, they do not consider ambiguous laws and the indifference of police as the only causes of this problem for Indian women. While these factors help maintain the status quo, women’s inheritance is rooted in the ideology of a patriarchal society. If dowries, and consequently exclusive property inheritance to male heirs are seen as "traditions", it is relevant to raise the fact that men in India have been actively preserving men’s interests.

It is significant that historically, any attempt to ensure women’s inheritance rights has been violently opposed by women’s fathers and brothers (the supposed victims of the dowry system). For instance, a perusal of the parliamentary debates in the years preceding the passing of the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, is very instructive in this regard. Men were united across party lines in opposing equal inheritance rights for women on the ground that it would create discord between brothers and sisters. In other words, they virtually admitted that a key element in the asserted harmony between brothers and sisters is the disinheritance of the women (Kishwar 1989:4).
Analyzed in the context of patriarchal family structures, dowry is not seen as a "tradition" maintained and perpetuated on its own but rather, as enduring because of the direct actions and rhetoric which Indian men have evoked in their opposition to women's equal access to family inheritance. Women in India have explained that it is the forces supporting the power relations within the family and not "tradition" that hinder their rights.

While the majority of women in India do not demand implementation of the laws with regards to their equal rights to inheritance, some women do (Kishwar 1989:6). However, women who take legal actions expose themselves to being ostracized by their villages and families as well as the difficulties of fighting against a discriminatory and hostile legal system.

One reason is that our legal system works in a way that it safeguards only those individuals who are in a position to claim their rights by fighting long, costly and often inconclusive battles. Women as individuals are rarely in a position to do this (Kishwar 1989:6).

To endorse the view that the effect of the majority of women in India not contesting the situation, "strengthens the argument that dowry alone ensures the fair share of the family's wealth", is equivalent to making women responsible for the injustices they suffer.

A common reaction to the fact that the antidowry campaign is ineffective because women are too backward to respond to it, and it is primarily because women lack courage to refuse dowry that it continues. It seems to me that such a response is uninformed and insensitive (Kishwar 1989:3).

The women's movement in India has been fighting for many years the consequences dowries have on women not accessing their share of inheritance. A small number of women have taken individual actions against their families, and collectively women have not been passive about this issue. Evidence from *Manushi* shows that Indian women have contested and mobilized themselves against power relations within the family which have deprived them of their inheritance rights.

Going back to the country of origin is a common strategy for those trying to find explanations for social practices common among people of colour established in countries of migration. However,
such strategies have a tendency to position social and cultural practices outside of the social context in which they are practised, a social context which may contribute to their development and perpetuation. While it is true that some families in the Canadian context might have strong connections with India, for many South Asian women, Canada may be the second and third country of migration.

Again and again we hear of the backwardness of our culture which is to be blamed for women’s exploitation in our community. Rarely do we hear how patriarchal relations within the Indo-Canadian community are transformed and strengthened through the workings of the Canadian patriarchal and racist state and economy (Thobani 1990:13).

Similarly, this process of abstraction from prevailing social structures is seen by Pratibha Parmar, a British sociologist, as a limiting culturalist bias:

The emphasis in the work ( . . . ) is on Asian communities themselves, rather than on the economic, political and ideological structures which reproduce Asian women as a specific class category. The hazards of this approach are that it becomes easy to blame cultural, religious and communal factors for the subordinate positions which Asian women occupy in the British social structure (Parmar 1982:238).

Looking at India for explanations concerning an increase in dowries in a migratory context such as Canada, ignores any role the nature of the Canadian economy and patriarchal relations play in their interaction with social practices of Canadians of South Asian origin.

2.1.3 Sex Selection

In 1990, John D. Stephens, a doctor from the United States, targeted South Asian women in Vancouver with an aggressive marketing campaign promoting ultrasound techniques to determine the sex of fetuses at 12 to 14 weeks of pregnancy. Vancouver-based South Asian feminist Sunera Thobani notes that sex selection technology is essentially a process of "male selection" because it is overwhelmingly used to abort female fetuses (1992b:19). While two articles in the Vancouver Sun by
Griffin (1990a, 1990b) include the responses of South Asian women critics, another article by Dhillon (1991) shows total ignorance of the activism of South Asian women who have challenged sexist and racist myths with regards to sex selection techniques.

In *It’s a boy* (Dhillon 1991:A11), the author tells of a trip to Blaine, Washington, with his pregnant aunt and uncle who have an appointment with Dr. Stephens. They are resorting to the ultrasound scanning technique to determine the sex of their fetus. While in some ways the author presents himself as the outside observer capable of "objectively" assessing the situation, he also contextualizes the issue as a personal one, judging himself partly responsible if his relatives opted for an abortion based on the sex of the fetus. He displays his "superiority" in presenting the situation in this manner:

> Had I thought everything through? After all, there was a question of life and death. If it turned out that it wasn’t a boy, and that they decided to have an abortion because they didn’t want another girl (they have two), I would be committing a crime by helping to take a life just because it wasn’t the right sex. Now, I’m not pro-choice or pro-life, but I did feel very guilty. Then I assessed the situation: two uneducated people [he had initially presented them as barely speaking English] desperately searching for a son to fulfil their personal but more importantly, their social lives.

Now, many people may blame me for not doing the right thing. They would say that it is up to me to offer an educated opinion, to show them that it’s not right to do this, to tell them that they may be taking a life, even if they’re not aware of the rights of the fetus. I did explain over and over again, but you’re not going to convince a woman who has already had four pregnancies: two girls and two miscarriages. They want that boy and they’re willing to do anything to get it (Dhillon 1991:A11) (my emphasis).

The author circumscribes the problem as his own inability to convince his "uneducated" relatives about the wrongness of their actions. His lack of success is explained in part by the way he represents the other parties involved in the situation. It is both his aunt and uncle who "desperately [are] searching for a son to fulfil their personal but more importantly their social lives", but it is the "woman who has already had four pregnancies" whom he cannot convince. The author barely recognizes the social aspect of his relatives wanting a son. However, the discussion makes it a
personal issue. In this personalization centred on the author himself, the South Asian woman involved in this story is not asked why a son is so important.

By disassociating himself both from pro-choicers and anti-choicers, the author of *It's a Boy* infers that sex selection is to be looked at in light of the issues raised in the debate about the right to abortion rather than in the context of abortion of female fetuses resulting from sex selection technology. Raising his own feeling of guilt, he avoids taking any political stance on the issue of male selection. "South Asian women clearly understand that this technology [sex selection] is not an issue of "choice" but rather an expression of the devaluation of women in a patriarchal world" (Thobani 1992b:19).

In reality, these technologies have very little to do with women's choice, the technologies are to be understood within the context of the power relations of our world today and, collectively, women have very little power in this world. (. . .) Reproductive technologies target all women, although specific groups of women are being targeted with specific techniques which reflect these divisions of race and class among women (Thobani 1990:12).

The other problem raised in this article is that it reinforces the myth of preference for male children as culturally related and characteristic only of South Asian communities:

In our community, a family with sons is looked upon as a very blessed and proud family, even if those sons turn out to be druggies and alcoholics. A family with daughters is always seen as unfortunate and lacking (Dhillon 1991:A11) (my emphasis).

Evidence from the political writings of South Asian women and from the interviews presented earlier suggests that the homogenous view of South Asian communities preferring male children raises problems:

Clearly it is not only women of Indian origin and their use of sex selection who are provoking this kind of response [to sex selection technology] all over the world. Yet, while these practices occur in the mainstream white community too, the myth being created is that only Third World communities -- the Indian community in this case -- practice femicide. Furthermore, femicide by selective abortion is now presented as part
of our "culture" (Thobani 1990:12).\textsuperscript{11}

It is precisely for these reasons that the sex selection campaign has been criticized by South Asian women activists in Vancouver as sexist and racist.

The Indo-Canadian community is not a monolith with identical attitudes and practices. If there are people in our communities who defend such practices, there are many who are outraged and determined to stop it. Again and again, we are quoted the statistics of this practice in India. Rarely do we hear of the women's movement in India and the militant activism around this issue (Thobani 1990:13).

By virtue of his "educated" opinion, Dhillon's strategy is to situate himself outside of what he claims are the beliefs and attitudes of his community. He dissociates himself from what he claims is a culturally grounded problem. He also implies that those preferring male children do so because they are like his "uneducated" relatives in suggesting that "more education is needed in the community" (Dhillon 1991:A11). He himself does not fall in this "cultural backwardness" category precisely because he has lived in Canada for most of his life, while his relatives "have been in the country only three years" (ibid., A11). Implicit in that view is that the more recent an immigrant, the more you are "contaminated" with the "backwardness" of Indian culture.

2.2.4 Violence Against South Asian Women

In the article The Worth of a Wife, Gill writes that it is to "spare embarrassment to family and friends" that few women [who are abused by their husbands] report assault charges to the police, or leave their husbands. While it is known that women often stay in abusive relationships, it negates the fact that women "find themselves being pressured not to take any radical actions (such as making their grievance public) that might damage the honourable name of their family" (Thakur 1992:31). The above article also suggests that if women were to report to the police, their situation would improve.

\textsuperscript{11} Statistics and examples of male selection were given for Canada, Britain, U.S., Denmark in Thobani's article. As well, "a doctor who has sex selection clinics in 46 countries in Europe, America, Asia and Latin America stated that of 263 couples who had approached him, 248 selected to have boys" (Thobani 1990:12).
This is an oversimplification of what women go through when dealing with the patriarchal and racist police authorities in Canada. This view not only overrides the racism women face when dealing with the police force, it also ignores the fact that women very often are not believed when they report violence to the authorities. Also,

When women do press charges, they face legal and other obstacles. The woman who pressed charges against a violent men is not allowed to have her own lawyer in court. It is the State’s Crown Prosecutor who supposedly acts on her behalf. Hence, she appears in court only as a witness to her own case. To make matters worse, due to time constraints and case overload (30 to 40 cases must be dealt with each morning), the Crown Prosecutor is unable to properly represent the abused women (Thakur 1992:31).

Confronting husbands and in-laws in the prevalent Canadian legal context is not difficult only for South Asian women, but it has to be done within the overall "inadequacy of structures and services in our society which could be accessed by victims [survivors] of male violence" (Thakur 1992:30). Even when the South Asian family is a site of gender oppression, it is also a refuge against racism (Dua 1992:8). This problem has also been raised by Black feminists:

Whatever inequalities exist in such households, they are clearly also sites of support for their members. In saying this we are recognizing that black women may have significant issues to face within black households. Struggles over sexuality and against domestic violence, for example, have been important issues for all feminists, and have involved confronting assumptions about domestic relationships. But at the same time the black family is a source of support in the context of harassment and attacks from white people (Bhavani and Coulson 1986:88).

Clearly, the suggestion that women do not report violence to spare embarrassment to their relatives and friends totally constrains South Asian women in passive and submissive roles. They are presented as choosing the more deserving reputation of their husband and in-laws over their own well-being or that of their children. This view is rather ill-informed about the power relations at work in Canadian society when women of colour come forward to denounce the violence they endure. It also denies the agency of South Asian women as they have been fighting violence against women via their involvement in their communities, in feminist organizations, women’s shelters and rape crisis centres.
across Canada.

2.2.5 **South Asian Women Voices in the *Vancouver Sun***

In her study of media representation of Native women, Harris suggests that newspapers do not completely silence women's voices. It would be impossible, she says, to:

> silence the very voices upon which the press is dependent for news, for it is often women negotiators and spokespeople who are the main source for the journalists. However, the news sample is quite particular in its selection of who may legitimately speak as a Native woman in the patriarchal/racist hegemonic discourse of the press (1991:17).

Wilson and Gutiérrez (1985) also argue that while ethnic minority elites have little access to the media, they have practically none if they represent "radical" views. It is in this context that I will examine the voices upon which the press in Vancouver has made itself dependent for news about South Asian women, and the ways in which these women are permitted to speak within the discourse promoted by the news media.

This discussion is based more specifically on four articles: "Woman in the middle" (Gill 1991b), "Indo-Canadian woman aims to reduce racial stereotyping" (Griffin 1991), "East Indian women find strong voice in Mahila leader" (Griffin 1990a) and, "Mehta pokes holes in our shallow assumptions about minorities" (Aird 1991). These articles introduce us to South Asian women who are considered, or claim themselves to be, role models for other women in their communities on the basis of their success at negotiating between cultural systems. As Yasmin Jiwani pointed out, these women can be designated as "cultural power brokers". I shall now briefly draw up the newspaper portraits of these women.

Mobina Jaffer, born in Uganda and educated in England, the first Indo-Canadian lawyer to practise in British Columbia, is presented as a successful woman who is also "caught between the ways of the old world and those of the new. And neither seems to care about her" (Gill 1991b:A19). Jaffer is given a voice in this article because she was considered by Gill, the reporter and an editor at the
Vancouver Sun, as a suitable representative of those women who:

With struggle, persistence and patience, have gained enough self-confidence to voice their concerns and advocate change (ibid., A19) (my emphasis).

What is required therefore to advocate change and voice concerns on behalf of South Asian women is self-confidence. In other words, South Asian women are assumed to be without self-confidence and the latter can only be acquired through a long (patient) process (struggle) steeped in tenacity (persistence). Hence, the energy and stamina needed from South Asian women is geared towards the acquisition of self-confidence rather than at fighting what needs to be changed. No doubt Jaffer, trained as a lawyer, has enough self-confidence to be an advocate for women. But what would she advocate in terms of changes for South Asian women and how is it framed? Here is a portion of the text presented as introduction:

(. . .) little has changed for Canadian women of East Indian origin. They remain in a frozen culture that refuses to grant them either the permission or the opportunity for progress. In some instances, Indo-Canadian women have actually taken a step backward to the days when they first left India 20 or 30 years ago.

Indo-Canadian women face two barriers: sexism and racism. Racism or bigotry is so pervasive that it is not only encountered by recent immigrant women, but even professionals such as Jaffer (Gill 1991b:A19) (my emphasis).

This is the context, not unproblematic, in which Jaffer is invited to express her views about other South Asian women:

They have been conditioned not to change (. . .)

We work outside the home where we follow the fresh, vibrant, Canadian culture, but in our homes we are supposed to follow the culture of our birthplace . . . a culture that does not even exist any more in that birthplace.

The situation [barriers of sexism and racism] is even more serious among women who are unable to speak English. The evolution that has taken place among mainstream Canadian women has not touched immigrant women or women of color in any ways (. . .) These women [unable to speak English] are not even part of the flow of life in Canada (Gill 1991b:A19) (my emphasis).

According to this article, if nothing has changed for South Asian women in Canada, it is
because they "remain in a frozen culture" (ibid., p. A19). It is that same "frozen culture" which assumes that all Indian women who immigrated to Canada share one culture regardless of their upbringing, class, caste, religion and education, that restrains them from "progress". What is believed as constituting progress is clearly participation in the "fresh, vibrant, Canadian culture" and the "flow of life in Canada" (ibid., p. A19).

Having identified the problems of South Asian women as circumscribed in their homes where cultural codes prevail, Jaffer says that this cultural heritage which once existed in her birthplace "does not even exist anymore in that birthplace" (ibid., p. A19). That statement suggests that in Uganda, Jaffer's birthplace, people with origins in the Indian subcontinent have assimilated into the dominant culture. Whether this is true or not is irrelevant. What is relevant though, is that Jaffer advocates that it is through assimilation that the emancipation of South Asian women in Canada will come.

Also problematic in this notion of "frozen culture" is the implication that the cultures of peoples of South Asian origin are static and isolated from outside cultural influences. Jaffer's success comes from her positioning outside of her community and thus she is able to assert that "they have been conditioned not to change" (Gill 1991b:A19). In situating herself outside, she implies that she escaped this so-called conditioning. It is not explained how this fact was accomplished nor why, in Jaffer's eyes, other South Asian women have not done so. The problems of South Asian women in Canada are attributed to their "cultural" conditioning not to change or act differently from what their cultural codes dictate. While Jaffer addresses the issue of racism by giving an example of how she experiences it in her workplace, she does not consider the racism endured by other South Asian women. In the same article, Judy Tyabji, Liberal MLA for Okanagan East, is quoted:

"Change is one of the biggest fears, especially for the first generation (...) My offering to the Indo-Canadian community is by being a role model (...) Women have to be shown that they can get the best of both worlds, without fears (ibid., A19)."

According to Tyabji, it is because South Asian women are afraid that they resist change. Both Jaffer
and Tyabji look at themselves as role models because they have overcome the so-called conditioning of their cultures, or the fears associated with changes. They both advocate changes although Tyabji supports partial assimilation.

Satwinder Bains, another "cultural power broker" is presented in an article entitled "Indo-Canadian woman aims to reduce racial stereotyping" (Griffin 1991:B3). Bains is described as having had a "bicultural upbringing in what was once the summer capital of the British Empire in the Indian subcontinent [Simla in northern India]" (ibid., p. B3), as well as having "attended a very British school named Auckland House where exams came from and were marked by staff at Cambridge University in England" (ibid., p. B3). One of the goals of this article is to announce a one-day workshop organized by the *Indo-Canadian Women's Organization* (ICWO), a secular organization for professional women. ICWO provides opportunities for women to "become politically active" as well as to "ensure the public becomes aware of the wide diversity among Indo-Canadian women" (ibid., p. B3). While it is true that women's organizations contribute to, and facilitate women's political involvement, they are not the only channels nor the most efficient ones for women's advocacy through politics. The reasons South Asian women establish their own organizations is not only to create opportunities for themselves, but also to point to the racism prevailing in mainstream Canadian women's organizations.

This exclusion and silencing of the voices of women of colour continues unabated after several years of the unlearning [racism] process, and was clearly evident during some major IWD [International Women's Day] events in Vancouver (Thobani 1991:7).

Also relevant is the fact that Bains is presented as critical towards her community:

Bains is also capable of criticizing her own community. She doesn't always agree with Sikhs quoted in the media as speaking for the community, and suggests that maybe Indo-Canadians, especially women, are partially at fault for not speaking up and organizing themselves (ibid., p.B4).

As a "cultural power broker", Bains does not fit with the "preferred meanings" associated with
South Asian women in the news media discourse. She is portrayed as a politically active Indo-Canadian woman, but more importantly, she can criticize her own community, including the women who "fit" into the news media discourse of preferred meanings. In doing so, however, Bains adopts a woman-blaming type of attitude and ignores a history of efforts by South Asian women who have "spoken up" and founded women's organizations such as *India Mahila Association* and the *South Asian Women's Action Network*, both Vancouver-based organizations.

Another South Asian woman who does not fit "the popular picture of the ethereal, sari-clad creature from India, soft-spoken and spiritual" (Aird 1991:C1) is Deepa Mehta, a Toronto filmmaker. "She smokes a lot of Rothman’s and uses a lot of words that can’t be printed in a family newspaper" (ibid., C1). Mehta is presented as critical of multiculturalism which "simplifies our notion of each other" (ibid., C1) and critical of the "well-meaning but silly assumptions that native-born Canadians make about immigrants," (ibid., C1). Contrasted with the previous article, where the focus of the criticism is located within the South Asian community, the discourse here allows a critique by a South Asian woman of Canadian society. "If this emerging breed of irreverent films [*Sam and Me*] makes polite Canadians squirm, that’s just what Mehta wants," (ibid., C1). Deepa Mehta is depicted as a troublemaker, which could have the effect of discrediting her views potentially perceived as too "radical" in the eyes of a "polite Canadian public".

The last woman I consider is Raminder Dosanjh who was at the time, director of *India Mahila Association*, the first Indo-Canadian women’s organization in British Columbia. The article mentioned her as one of the organizers of the protest against the sex selection marketing campaign discussed earlier. As someone "who is comfortable straddling the multicultural fence" (Griffin 1990a:B2), Dosanjh differs from Jaffer and Bains in that she criticizes racism and sexism in Canadian society. In other words, she does not reproduce the dominant discourse often making South Asian women responsible for the systematic barriers they encounter in Canadian society. Dosanjh also criticizes the
media and stresses the importance of Canadians realizing the non-homogeneity of South Asian communities:

Most of the images in the media of South Asian women are images where they are seen as powerless, dependant, traditional, Dosanjh said. I think it is important for people to see that every community has a wide spectrum of people (ibid., p. B2).

While acknowledging Dosanjh's activism, it also presents her as someone who "crossed over". The message one gets reading this article is that women who are seen as "cultural power brokers" are non-"traditional" meaning that they have life experiences which differentiates them from the majority of South Asian women. For example, it is because of Dosanjh's cosmopolitan upbringing and of her parents' strong belief in education that she can successfully negotiate between her own cultural background and the dominant cultures of Canada. She is portrayed as having opposed her parents with her refusal to have an arranged marriage. This reinforces the notion that South Asian women who are assertive and make their own decisions about their future need to do so by rejecting values attached to their cultural heritage.

Chapter Three: CONCLUSION

Indra (1981:65) found, in her study of women and ethnicity in Vancouver newspapers over the period 1905-1976, that the coverage of women in news with ethnic content has been insignificant and has shown no signs of increase in volume. The sample used for this paper, however shows that this has changed in the last two decades. This increase indicates to some degree, that the Vancouver press has reconsidered its stance on advocating the situations of Canadian women of South Asian origin.

An analysis constituted of the readings of my collaborators, three Canadian women activists of South Asian origin, and my own feminist anthropological reading revealed that the messages conveyed through the "preferred meanings" that is the common-sense images of Canadian women of South Asian origin reveals a homogenous portrayal of the lives of Canadian women of South Asian
origin.

The strategy of the press, which has been to present issues of arranged marriages, dowry, sex selection and violence against women as the most relevant topics of interest in relation to South Asian women in Canada, emphasizes the differences between women from that community and other Canadian women. These differences are contextualized as culturally bound and outside the Canadian social patriarchal and sexist context, the context within which these differences are given currency. The prevalent media discourse in the *Vancouver Sun* implies that the assimilation of South Asian women to Canadian society is hindered by those very cultural differences which are constructed as problematic and "deviant". This suggests three things to newspaper readers. The first is that South Asian women in Canada want and need to assimilate in order to neutralize contradictions between their cultural heritage and dominant mainstream values of Canadian society. Second, it suggests that South Asian women are oppressed and the source of their oppression is cultural. And last, South Asian women are so radically "different" culturally that assimilation is only possible at the cost of giving up some of those "oppressive" cultural traits.

While my collaborators and I have discussed issues and statements attributed to specific Canadian women of South Asian origin, to specific reporters, both white and South Asian, our criticism has not been directed at individuals. Rather, the theoretical position adopted considering media "texts" as constitutive elements in the production of reality, as well as understanding the media’s "preferred meanings" as being circumscribed and validated within a media discourse, revealed that the *Vancouver Sun* has been effective in establishing the homogenous portrayal of Canadian women of South Asian origin discussed in this essay as the taken-for-granted reality.
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