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“Kiranjit Ahluwalia’s story is harrowing and shocking, but ultimately triumphant. It is a story of survival and hope in the face of almost insurmountable odds.” (From the jacket cover of Circle of Light: The Autobiography of Kiranjit Ahluwalia.)

Introduction

The book jumped out at me – there was a photo on the cover of three South Asian women holding hands, uplifted in a sign of victory. Having done work on forms of literary self-representation by Asian women in Britain, exploring how such works can serve as a form of political and social action, I was intrigued by this book. Entitled Circle of Light: the Autobiography of Kiranjit Ahluwalia, it was being promoted in the front of a mainstream bookstore store in London. It was reviewed in The Guardian that same day, again, a mainstream, albeit Left-leaning, newspaper. The review was entitled, “Telling it like it was” (Daniels 1997).

What did it mean, I wondered, to “tell it like it was”? Did it mean telling the truth? The review (accompanied by a large photo of Ahluwalia) explained that Kiranjit Ahluwalia, a “battered wife turned husband killer,” presented an account of her life “from a loving childhood in rural Punjab, through a decade of domestic hell in Crawley to the strangely liberating experience of prison.” Indeed, it said that this was a story about “ten years in an arranged marriage which began violently and ended in 1989 when she set fire to her sleeping husband, Deepak.” With the help of friend and writer Rahila Gupta, she “detailed beatings, paralyzing humiliation, forced sex and the discovery of her husband’s affair with a white woman.”

Alarm bells went off in my head: arranged marriage, beatings, a victimized Asian woman. Such stereotypical notions of South Asian women, images so prevalent in the British media, political discussions, and immigration regulations. But did this book do more than present stereotypes? It was written by Asian women. Was this an attempt to tell the “truth,” despite the imperialist discourse in which it was embedded? What follows is an exploration of how this book grapples with presenting an empowering vision of South Asian (or British Asian) women, through the story of Kiranjit Ahluwalia. This article will ask in what ways the book succeeds in creating an empowering cultural representation, through the narrativization of legal proceedings. To what extent does the book obscure Kiranjit’s experience, given its reliance on a dominant discourse that works on the basis of racialized exclusion, an essentially colonial discourse? More to the point, I will ask if and how the story of violence faced by many South Asian women, and Kiranjit in particular, can be spoken here; can such suffering be made visible, can it come into being, or is it transformed in the usage of the dominant discourses that it must employ to be heard? Is suffering sold here in return for legal justice and control over collective self-representation, and how can we see this as an empowering move?

I will investigate what I see to be the two dominant narratives necessarily engaged in this book in order for this story of suffering to come into being. Each entails particular performances of
identity. Ultimately, this will lead into a discussion of how suffering is (re)configured through the narratives, and if this image of suffering, which is the currency used to gain an audience for the book, detracts from personhood or what Radin calls “human flourishing,” by being sold as a commodity (Radin 1987).

The first narrative I will explore is the legal narrative; what story had to be told in court about Kiranjit, about her act? What defenses are drawn upon in order to win her case? In particular, I will discuss the use of the “cultural defense,” the employment of a discourse of women’s rights, and the framing of her appeal through a medical discourse of diminished responsibility. It must be noted here that the legal narrative that I am drawing upon is the one presented in the book; I do not have direct access to the trial transcripts. Thus, in fact I am examining the uses of the legal narrative in the book to portray empowerment, not the legal narrative itself.

Second, I will look at the market narrative or narrative as commodity; how is this book determined by its nature as a commodity? How is language that will sell employed without selling the suffering of these women? The two dominant narratives work together in framing identities through concepts of abstract individualism. As noted by Collier et. al. (1995), the legal practices developed in Europe and its colonies since the eighteenth century are intimately connected to the development of capitalism; Pashukanis used the term “bourgeois law” to emphasize the fact that the creator and beneficiary of law is the property-owning individual (1989). As interconnected systems, both the law and capitalism are based on notions of personhood that encourage the distinction between subject and object, inside and outside, person and thing. As Radin suggests, this world of abstract beings, equal before the law and politically equal, facilitates conceiving of concrete personal attributes as commodified objects (Radin 1987:1892). In this vein, I will argue that the two dominant narratives further the commodification of suffering.

Both the legal narrative and the market narrative require intermediaries for Kiranjit. In the legal case, she speaks only through various lawyers and through representatives from the women’s activist group Southall Black Sisters. These legal stories are themselves told through the book, which is in turn mediated by Rahila Gupta, the woman chosen because (as stated in her preface) “Kiranjit’s English would not quite mould itself to the ‘words from the heart’ that were waiting to tumble out” (p.xii). Thus, Kiranjit never speaks directly. In order to enter a discourse in which her story can be made public, in order to be represented, we realize that she must be a dislocated subject (Spivak 1988).

This makes it apparent that we are dealing with several different subjects of Circle of Light, each occupying different positions and having unequal access to the means of representation: South Asian women, battered women, and Kiranjit Ahluwalia. And the question is this: do the two dominant discourses occupy these subjects so completely, do they take the subjects over in such a way that they simply cannot speak the violence, the oppression? And just as importantly, how do the subjects colonize or oppress one another? Finally, which subjects – if any – are empowered by this commoditized representation of suffering?

My goal here, in discussing the effects of Circle of Light as collective self-representation, is to further the process of representation; this is an effort to collaborate with those who cannot speak, not by representing them but by making room for their silence.
The Legal Narrative

*Circle of Light* is the autobiography of Kiranjit Ahluwalia; but its focus is her murder of her husband by setting him alight with petrol. The story begins with her sitting in prison, and then moves back to recount her life in India before migrating to Britain. There is an epilogue to this autobiography, entitled “The SBS story” (referring to the “Southall Black Sisters” – the activist group of Asian and African-Caribbean women in Britain who led the campaign to get Kiranjit released from prison and have her life sentence overturned). The epilogue is concerned solely with Kiranjit’s defense, and how it was formulated. The point here is that the book is collectively authored despite being an autobiography, written with the larger goal of shaping images of Asian women in Britain. Thus, when I talk about the legal narrative, I draw on both Kiranjit’s story and on the SBS story, as well as the modifications made to Kiranjit’s own story by Rahila Gupta, interspersed in bracketed form. In other words, the “legal narrative” includes how the book itself describes the creation of Kiranjit as a legal subject.

At her first trial, Kiranjit was sentenced to life in prison for killing her husband. The Southall Black Sisters had helped her from the time of her arrest, but they themselves had little experience with the workings of the law. They, along with a group of lawyers, women’s groups and community members then campaigned to be given grant to appeal. This involved “the reconstruction of Kiranjit,” as they explain in the epilogue. In discussing this production of identity, I want to focus on the strategies that the defense employed to get leave to appeal, and then put the appeal into effect. These involve a discourse based on culture, one that revolves around a notion of women’s rights and global sisterhood, and finally, a medical discourse that defines Kiranjit as operating under diminished responsibility, partly due to battered women’s syndrome. I will examine how these discourses are used to tell Kiranjit’s story of violence. I want to avoid attributing intentionality as much as possible, however; my goal is to explore the ways in which the story gets told. I am interested in the way the book operates; not in how it was intended to operate, as I do not have access to that information.

The Cultural Defense

Kiranjit’s “culture” did not enter into the first trial. The jury was only allowed to know that she was an Asian woman, and that her husband had been an Asian man. They were left to draw whatever meaning from this they desired. To get leave to appeal, SBS decided that Kiranjit’s cultural background was needed to explain her actions. They felt that she had been convicted of murder because the prosecution had persuaded the jury that this was not a case of provocation known to the law. Her use of caustic soda and petrol seemed premeditated and peculiarly vicious. The defense sought to show that in India, “burning is one of the commonest forms of both killing women and of suicide” and also “a common form of suicide among Asian women in Britain,” despite burning being a very uncommon form of homicide in Britain (p.332). SBS relate that “this information was not given to the jury to try and put into context why Kiranjit had thrown petrol on Deepak” (p.332-3).

Thus, in order to define what a “reasonable Asian woman” would do, to an all-white, all-male jury, they opened the question of culture. The related issues were determined to be the notion of izzat (or honor), the use of fire to attack Deepak as mentioned above, Kiranjit’s relationship with her family and his and their involvement in the relationship, and the fact that the marriage was arranged. It was believed that a greater knowledge of her culture would allow the jury to understand that she was constrained in her ability to leave her abusive situation.
This strategy had the effect of focusing on Kiranjit's identity, constructing an identity in fact, rather than looking at her specific act, devoid of context. Several people have described the dilemma of creating cultural identities for legal consumption; the "cultural defense" is a plea that can be made in the United States, although it is subject to much controversy. I am thinking, however, of work done for indigenous land claims. James Clifford demonstrates the difficulty of speaking for cultural authenticity in "Identity at Mashpee"; he reveals the absence of the reality of Mashpee lives due to the narrative required in the trial. In particular, he notes how cultural wholeness must be demonstrated, part of which requires the continuity of history and identity (Clifford 1988). Rosemary Coombe is perhaps more to the point when she suggests that claims involving culture are forced to fit into the framework of possessive individualism like other rights claims, requiring that culture act as an autonomous individual with an unchanging essence (1993). Culture must be essentialized; Kiranjit must make claims in language that speaks of culture as a coherent object. For instance, she describes how damaging her culture is to women. In the appeal, SBS write that they had to "get her thinking of all the circumstances, thinking of all the pressures that might have been placed on her. What did she think of her religion, what did she think of her culture...?" (p.339). Culture must be thought of as external to oneself, as something frozen, quantifiable, alienable. And indeed, in Kiranjit's speech to the public at the launch of her appeal, she claimed, "There have been countless women subjected to such oppression -- there is only one thing that prevents them from challenging or being freed from this kind of married life. This is my society, religion and culture. I will never let this religion and culture influence my children. I will never let them be stifled by the bonds of arranged marriages. I will give them the right to live their own lives" (p.245).

Not only does this discourse frame Kiranjit as a particular cultural subject, meaning that she was seen to be determined in large part by culture while others in Britain were "free" individuals; certain tropes were integral to this cultural defense -- certain stereotypes. Again, with respect to Native claims, Chris Tennant argues that cultural representational practices from the larger social context inevitably influence the construction of subjects and objects of legal discourse. They help determine the imaginative landscapes available to the court (Tennant 1994). In the case of South Asians in Britain, a wealth of colonial imagery informs perceptions of South Asian "culture." As Rushdie writes, "Four hundred years of conquest and looting, four centuries of being told that you are superior to the Fuzzy-Wuzzies and the wogs, leave their stain. This stain has seeped into every part of the culture, the language and the daily life; and nothing much has been done to wash it out" (1992:130-1). With respect to women, stereotypes include Asian women as victims, unable to exercise any control over their lives. Their cultural values are represented as repressive -- traits they must accept, rather than choose or modify. One phrase describing the hegemonic construction of Asian women is particularly apt: Asian women are seen to be "passive/docile/conflicted/dominated by oppressive traditions and men" (Bhachu 1993:102). Following Tennant in seeing the cultural context as inseparable from the production of legal discourse, and recognizing that the ways to divide up subjects to fit legal categories are inseparable from dominant imagery, we understand that this stereotyped vision of Asian women, determined by culture, was the vehicle to successfully being heard.

Women's rights

The campaign for appeal was conducted in coalition with various women's activist groups; in fact, the campaign included three women who had killed their husbands after histories of domestic
abuse. The other two were white women. Thus, SBS worked with Justice for Women, Feminist Coalition Against Child Sexual Abuse, Crawley Women’s Aid, and other feminists, feeling that they would gain more from greater numbers, especially in publicity. Certainly, this influenced the discourse put forth both in the legal proceedings and in the campaign; and it enters into the narrative of *Circle of Light* in various ways.

Let me first mention that the women’s rights discourse cannot be disconnected from the way in which culture is used in the defense, despite the potential for women’s rights and cultural rights to come into conflict. In this situation, they build off one another, again, by drawing on colonial discourses and racial stereotypes. The narrative of global sisterhood required that Kiranjit’s experience of gendered violence be reflected through the prism of an essentialized culture. And, as will be shown, these two discourses in turn connect to the medical discourse employed in the legal narrative.

The most specific type of gender-based claim made in the legal narrative is that of battered women’s syndrome. Without going into detail, this is a gender-specific defense that does not acknowledge any other identity claim – not class, race, or ethnicity. In other words, its origins in a race and class-specific framework (i.e. white, middle class) are unacknowledged; the only factor made visible is gender. It suggests that women do not commit violence in the same way as do men. The defense draws on a syndrome that explains why many women who are suffering at the hands of their partners are unable to leave violent situations. In this vein, the campaign to free Kiranjit was launched with slogans of “The real crime – Domestic violence. Self-defense is no offense” (p.342).

In order to speak out against the violence, *Circle of Light* shows that SBS and Kiranjit found themselves drawing on women’s rights discourses steeped in colonial imagery; indeed, women’s rights can still be seen as the legacy of Western feminism, which has tended to erase the power differences between women of the North and South, or First and Third worlds. While the discourse has undergone many transformations and permutations as it has been appropriated in different locales, and while it has been a crucial tool for mobilization against various types of oppression around the world, including by women from the developing world, this book demonstrates the complexity of employing a discourse with such a legacy. In her speech to the public at the outset of the appeal, Kiranjit invoked women’s rights, reinscribing the liberal notion that we are all individuals who contract with one another to live in a society where each maximizes her personal freedom; in other words, community links are of little importance – independence is what empowers women: “I have seen women fight for their rights. I have seen them making their own decisions. I too must become strong to make my decisions on my own for my future” (p.246). In her autobiography, she describes how the discussions of sex in prison were liberating; she exclaims, “being in jail has opened up new possibilities which I never had before” (p.246). She learned to swear, and wrote about drinking tea and chatting with the other inmates about “sex, drugs, and rock ‘n ‘roll” (p.249). It is clear that a particular vision of empowerment is being illustrated here.

The neo-colonial views of pitiable Asian women are articulated by the women she befriends while in prison; in a bracketed insertion to the autobiography we read that one white feminist wrote to British MPs asking for understanding for Kiranjit because “she was born into a restrictive culture which is totally alien to our Western society...where women are treated as equals” (p.261).
Here we see Asian women being opposed to liberated Western women, and Westerners are appealed to as the saviours of their poor victimized sisters. Kiran writes that she and this woman became very close, first by correspondence, and then through her visits to Kiran in prison.

Kiranjit speaks in the language of rights, but does this necessarily mean she is being empowered by it? Moreover, does it mean she is going against her background by employing it? The situation is too complex for either of these to be the case. As Sherene Razack has pointed out, what is difficult to introduce into women's rights as human rights is the "interlocking oppressions and First World domination," for what is produced in the discourse is a transcendental signified, a universal woman. Not only are differences between women erased, but so are the multiple sources of violence and the ways in which women are complicit in oppressing other women. As the feminist who wrote to the MP illustrates, Western feminists too have imagined Exotic Other Females in need of their benevolent protection (Razack 1995:56). More generally, in the language of women's rights, the links between gender, race and class remain unacknowledged.

The Medical Discourse

The cultural and women's rights narratives are intertwined with a medical discourse - all successfully employed in the appeal. In the first trial, the fact that Kiranjit was beaten was not introduced to the jury as part of her profile. In the appeal, this silence was rectified, but only through the use of a discourse that introduced the beatings Kiranjit had suffered as her personal characteristic, rather than as a social fact. In addition, as SBS explain, "in our case, if battering were to be regarded as a personal characteristic of a more or less permanent nature, its effect would have to be explained by medical experts. So we began, with a mixture of reluctance, distaste and fascination, to enter the world of forensic medicine and mental disorder" (p.353). SBS found a doctor "who had done a lot of work on 'psychological disturbance in Asians living in Britain.'" His testimony stated, "Occurring in the context of Asian culture, prolonged experience of violence, and a depressed, over-controlled state, I consider the provocation sufficient to cause a reasonable woman to react as Kiranjit Ahluwalia did" (p.280). He supported his report with evidence of "self-immolation" as a common method of suicide by women whether living in India or Britain, and also drew on notions of "dowry burning" where brides are murdered if their families fail to provide the dowry demanded from them. He found that Kiranjit was working under a condition of diminished responsibility (p.280-1). SBS supported this with their own report of violence in the Asian community, highlighting why women find it hard to leave their partners.

As mentioned, battered women's syndrome was also used to argue the appeal. SBS write that they had to fit Kiranjit into the category of battered woman, which she did not necessarily occupy; their worry was that it was created in the US context, for women in different circumstances, and that she might not conform to the necessary picture with its checklist of symptoms. Nevertheless, Kiranjit's condition was successfully medicalized, and she was framed as a battered and victimized woman. The Crown psychiatrist concluded, "I believe that the majority of evidence points to the fact that Ahluwalia was significantly disordered mentally at the material time." He spoke of her "abnormality of mind." While the defense tried to take a two-pronged approach, arguing both for diminished responsibility and for provocation - extending the definition of provocation so as to incorporate a build up of abuse - only the argument for diminished responsibility was successfully heard. In other words, while the defense
tried not to place all the blame on Kiranjit by arguing that provocation could be cumulative, and involve a time-lag between the act of killing and the last act of (domestic) violence, the normal understanding of provocation was upheld; loss of self-control had to be 'sudden' and 'temporary.' Thus, the conditions in which Kiranjit acted remained for the most part unacknowledged; the blame lay with her character.

SBS explain that in the United States there is room to consider one's environment, but in England they did not have the option of drawing the main evidence from the woman's experience or of supporting it with statistics. Instead, they had to rely on a medical interpretation of her state of mind (p.353). This in turn required that they bring in culture, the only other way to make mention of her social context – again, recorded as a personal characteristic. “Culture,” as mentioned earlier, included the position of women in Asian communities, the practice of dowry and arranged marriage, the stigma of divorce, and the concept of izzat or family honor. Her various “personal characteristics” were what successfully demonstrated that Kiranjit was working under diminished responsibility at the time of the act; these included battery and her culture. While killing one’s husband is surely not “normal,” in the legal narrative, Kiranjit’s culture was connected to her mental instability (i.e. “psychological disturbance of Asians living in Britain”). By conflating the cultural and medical discourses, Asian culture was pathologized as part of the cause of mental abnormality, and exclusions on the basis of cultural difference were thereby normalized. Again, this served to reaffirm a colonial discourse that defines Asians as abnormal, as Other.

The Market Narrative

The appeal proved successful; Kiranjit was released, and one article quotes her as saying, “my release is not only my victory but a victory for women all over the world. Domestic violence is a crime...there are other women serving life sentences for killing violent husbands, and I will now help them. I will join campaigns to release them, and I will do volunteer work to raise funds and help them” (p.315). In this same spirit, her story, as told in Circle of Light, is supposed to help inspire battered women (p.xii).

Circle of Light can be seen as part of an ongoing project of cultural reproduction and representation by British Asian women. Entering the realm of image and knowledge production in order to interpret and construct facets of one’s own cultural systems and identities for public consumption is one option to counter negative stereotypes that circulate in the public realm, through media, literature, and political discourse. In taking control of the means of one’s own representation, the potential is present to explore the complexity of identifications without being reductive. The question is, in what capacity can one really control the means of one’s representation? There must be people willing to consume the representations that one produces.

There was substantial media coverage of Kiranjit’s trial; that much is apparent from the book. There was attention granted on sensationalist grounds – a woman murdering her husband by setting fire to him – but SBS and their coalition also courted the media, “convinced that side by side with the legal preparations we had to keep up public pressure. So began a series of strategy discussions to try to attract media attention to Kiranjit.” Circle of Light can be seen as a continued effort to represent the events on their own terms, to represent the violence done to Kiranjit and other Asian women in a language that speaks the violence done to them – the end goal being the power and ability to change such situations.
Nevertheless, there are many constraints on actually entering the dominant public realm. Salman Rushdie has written about the project of "giving voice" as a minority, which involves bearing the burden of representing one's community to the greater public in situations where the community is still seen as alien. Whether or not one simply wants to tell a story about oneself, that story is always interpreted as that of the minority group – it is perceived as a window onto Otherness (Rushdie 1988). Publishers are another gatekeeper: there are certain strategies that one must follow in order to interest them. These are determined by power relationships working at many levels; language is one such level, providing circumscribed rhetorical forms, each of which embody ideological stances.

But in general, to circulate one's images, and to reach large audiences, one is forced to contend with market forces; if one is writing a book, on a practical level, publishers are interested in the book's sales. One must employ the strategies and discourses that capture audiences. This market discourse, which allows for the international circulation of commodities, imposes structure on what can be written and how. In what follows, I will document some of the ways in which this book is shaped as a commodity, in a particular capitalist discourse.

The Princess of Wales

In the preface, Rahila Gupta states that "we found ourselves galvanized into action only when Kiranjit met the Princess of Wales at the reopening of Chiswick Refuge. The Princess advised her to write a book, all the press covered the story, and hacks of all shapes and sizes chased her to offer their services" (p.xii). Again, on the back of the book jacket, we are told that "After her release, Kiranjit met the Princess of Wales, who urged her to write a book about her experiences." Princess Diana serves as the legitimating figure here; her words guarantee sales. But what does it mean to respond to her call, to be interpolated by her? In one sense, Diana was a princess "of the people," eliciting attention and solidarity from people all over the world; she was also a woman who had suffered – i.e. with an eating disorder and a broken marriage – a woman who could join in the bonds of global sisterhood. However, in another sense, her call epitomizes imperialist discourse: she is English royalty, telling Kiranjit, as subject of the nation and Commonwealth, to speak. This implicates the book in discourses of dominance; it is a performance initiated by the English nation-state.

Mediated English

Circle of Light is the autobiography of a woman who does not feel entirely comfortable speaking or writing in English; she is a native Punjabi speaker. However, to reach an English public and sell on an English market, the story had to be told in English. The issues of translation thus arise; already, much post-colonial theory questions the ability to speak in one's own voice if one employs the language of the colonizer. How much more salient is the muting if one is not only speaking in the language of the colonizer, but through another person? Indeed, not only is English used, but English that is explicated, in brackets, by the authors. Implicit in this move is the need to clarify, to complete the story, the ability to tell it better, the power to alter someone else's words. Implicit in it is the power differential between one who needs the other in order to be able to speak. It must be noted that the mediator is not a white English person – Rahila Gupta is an active member of the British Asian community in London. This does make a difference in that she does not speak from a position of privilege vis-à-vis the dominant society, nor vis-à-vis the Asian community. She and Kiranjit share the subject position of being Asian.
women in Britain. However, it is also important not to homogenize the Asian presence in England: within it there are major ethnic, religious and class differences. Born in Bombay, Gupta came to London at age 19 to do an M.Phil in English Drama. As a writer she has worked with the Asian Women Writers' Workshop, co-editing one of their anthologies; she has used her writing to rework images of British Asians in multiple fora, and has been a member of SBS for some time. Thus even in situations of seeming solidarity and shared location, power differentials emerge in contexts like the market, and shape subjectivities in specific ways. The power difference between Rahila and Kiranjit is clear; as Rahila Gupta states in her preface: “I was therapist, confidante, careers advisor and debt counselor all rolled into one” (p.xiv). Each of the aforementioned relationships suggests that Rahila is the one with power, the one who can help – and Kiranjit is the one in need.

**Autobiography**

Autobiography is usually understood as a form of expression consistent with the moral underpinnings of Western tradition. St. Augustine's *Confessions* are taken as the narrative prototype for a tradition of individualism. It entails a retrospective literary structure, with formally imposed closure, and exhibits the phenomenon of conversion; in this process, the observing self is separated from the observed. This particular narrative structure of autobiography imposes on the subject a specific type of identity. Klor de Alva has written how the transformation of Nahua self in the colonization of the New World was accomplished through autobiographical confessional practice; this contributed to a new conception of identity, body and mind that fortified the ascendancy of the European world (Klor de Alva 1992). In light of this, what does it mean for Kiranjit's story to be presented in the form of autobiography, or even more specifically, of testimonio, a genre of autobiography or life history that developed in close relation to movements for national liberation? (Beverley 1992:93). These are desirable products, easily recognizable on the market. There is a demand for them; but what does it mean for Kiranjit's story to be moulded into such a form, to be marketed as such a product?

Without going into it too deeply, I think it is worth mentioning a critique of the testimonial literature that has arisen since the 1960's in the Third World. Robert Carr argues that it is impossible to read testimonial literature in the West outside the influence of capital and colonial discourse; texts that purport to represent Third World women must be situated in a global marketplace where these communities come into public discourse as already exploited, and serve as pretexts for the accumulation of knowledge and power. Taking as his example the book *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, as framed by anthropologist Burgos-Debray, he demonstrates how Menchu becomes a universal symbol – that of universal sisterhood. What becomes invisible in this image of sisterhood and solidarity, however, are the labour exploitation, guerrilla warfare and genocide in Guatemala that are an intimate part of Menchu's life (Carr 1994:153).

This critique resonates with *Circle of Light* which constructs Kiranjit as a Third World subject but crucially, one within the First World. Indeed, in many instances, a symbol of sisterhood can be seen to substitute for Kiranjit's particular story. The campaign conducted to overturn her sentence is just one example; the discourse was one of global sisterhood united against domestic violence. The story did not mention the poverty of many Asian immigrants in Britain – of Kiranjit herself – a as a key force in the violence; nor did it mention the violence embedded in Britain's colonial relationship with the subcontinent or the continued dominance of the West in
terms of global capital. These factors have in many cases led directly to the influx of immigrants into Britain, and much of the Western world, as sources of cheap, surplus labour to be exploited in the production of surplus values for the ruling class. The form of testimonio serves a vested interest of the global marketplace in keeping invisible the complicity of the West in the forms of suffering that many pay to read about.

**Sensationalism**

Why choose to speak the story of Asian women through a story of murder and violence? Why choose suffering as the currency by which to enter the public realm, by which to gain an audience? It sells, certainly. Many (particularly men, in this case) from minority communities would ask this as well; why publicize our shame? In this sense, the women are speaking out about the violence in the community, instead of being held silent by patriarchal community norms. However, again, the use of tropes of violence echo imperialist notions of barbaric Other men, and of victimized women needing protection. They can be incorporated into a discursive apparatus about Western superiority and Third World inferiority. Can the gender-based violence experienced by Kiranjit and other Asian women possibly be heard through these stereotypes, or will it just be incorporated as a vision of the Other, this representation taken as an illustration of racialized alterity?

**Empowerment, Effacement and The Selling of Suffering**

How can we interpret the effects of this book? Does it make visible Kiranjit’s specific experience of gender-based violence, or that of other British Asian women? Or does it transform their experiences by interpolating them as subjects of discourses that in other ways oppress them – racialized imperialist discourses? Do the performances of identity and suffering required in the courtroom and again in *Circle of Light* work against any form of empowerment?

In several of her articles, Rosemary Coombe explores strategies by which to combat appropriation of Native American land and culture. She concludes that “ironically, it appears that the most successful way for indigenous peoples to challenge these stereotypical representations of themselves is to claim them – to claim the misrecognitions of others as their own property” (Coombe 1996:217). Indeed, she argues that such proprietary counterclaims are probably more persuasive as a form of counterpublicity than assertions that racial stereotyping and derogatory portrayals damage the image of a people and the self-esteem of their children (1996:218). It is only in the bourgeois public sphere that they are able to protest inappropriate commodifications.

Can *Circle of Light* be seen as taking such a strategy, i.e. turning the story of domestic violence into a commodity that British Asian women own and send into circulation to combat stereotypes in whatever ways possible? Can they be seen to be playing by the rules of commodity culture, commoditizing a notion of their culture and their suffering in order to expose it, to reconstitute it as something women can fight against? In thinking about domestic violence as a commodity, we must ask ourselves how turning suffering into a commodity changes it, how it alters or violates the experience. Radin’s concept of “market-inalienability” is helpful in discussing the complexities of defining and identifying empowerment through commoditization: using her framework, I want to ask if selling suffering can be interpreted as empowering in this particular case (Radin 1987). In other words, does the way the experience of suffering is represented in *Circle of Light* alter the potential for “human flourishing” that Radin speaks of, or create inferior notions of personhood, counteracting any other forms of empowerment, any benefits gained?
Radin argues that the characteristic rhetoric of economic analysis is morally wrong when it is put forward as the sole discourse of human life. Instead, she suggests that we should evaluate whether something can be bought or sold in connection with "our best current concept of human flourishing" (Radin 1987:1851). Market-alienability and in-alienability are the terms she uses to refer to the possibility for separation of something from its holder, through the mechanism of market trading. Radin sets up a continuum, one pole being universal commodification, and the other being universal noncommodification. She positions herself in the middle, suggesting that market-inalienability be grounded in the noncommodification of things important to personhood. So for instance, while she points out that critics of market society show that commodification simultaneously expresses and creates alienation and that human alienation and market alienability are connected, she suggests that in a non-ideal world, sometimes it may be better to commodify incompletely rather than not to commodify at all.

I want to draw attention to a point that Radin makes about the period of "transition" (i.e. to a more just society), which suggests that suffering may be an attribute that should be incompletely commodified at this historical moment, instead of not commodified at all. To illustrate, she writes that a liberal pluralist may argue that certain rights remain inalienable, such as the right to sell oneself into slavery; this is because we view slavery as so destructive of personhood that we would presume all instances to be coerced. The desperation of poverty is one such form of coercion; someone living in poverty may be forced to sell personal things or attributes to survive, and yet such relinquishments may diminish her/him as persons. A liberal may then argue that such attributes be made market-inalienable. Radin points out, however, that preventing the sale of something that seems harmful or disempowering, but something that would give a disenfranchised person money to survive, would be utterly unjust if we then did not provide the would-be seller with the goods she needs or the money she would have received. What is needed instead is a large scale redistribution of wealth and power, and ultimately, a move away from capitalism and commodification. This leaves many people in a double bind.

Such a double bind is part of the dilemma of the transition to a more just society. How is one to act in the world, short of putting all one's energies toward revolution? How was Kiranjit supposed to act in her situation of abuse, and then in court, faced with a charge of life imprisonment? Such a double bind exists for many Asians in Britain. Already fighting poverty, racism and oppression, should they not have the ability to fight discrimination and violence by selling images, including those of suffering, on the market, counteracting other derogatory images? I want first to discuss what Radin describes as the key elements of personhood: freedom, identity, and contextuality. Next, I will relate these to Circle of Light to ask if alienating suffering in this context diminishes the possibility for human flourishing. It must be noted that of course there is no formula for what is "personal" or what ultimately constitutes personhood; as Radin herself remarks, a moral judgment is required in each case (1987:1908).7

Radin asserts that freedom must be understood in relation to the contextuality aspect of personhood. In other words, contextuality implies that physical and social context are integral to personal individuation and self-development; thus, self-development in accordance with one's own will (freedom) requires one to will certain interactions with the physical and social context. Commodification undermines personal identity by conceiving of personal attributes, relationships, and moral commitments as monetizable and alienable from the self: examples of these are one's politics, religion, family, experiences, or sexuality. These are things and people
that are at once part of one's surroundings and integral to the self. Radin argues that to think that people's experiences or moral commitments could be fungible and commensurate with those of another, or that a person without her moral commitments is still the same person, "is to do violence to our deepest understanding of what it is to be human" (Radin 1987:1906). If these are commodified, human flourishing is diminished, degrading the person.

To answer if Circle of Light alienates aspects integral to personhood by commodifying Kiranjit's suffering, we can examine how freedom, identity and contextualization are affected in this particular case. Radin suggests that for non ideal circumstances, the double bind of market-inalienability just discussed can be solved by incomplete commodification, or degrees of commodification determined by each specific case. We must begin by noting that suffering is already commoditized in many circumstances; people receive damages for pain and suffering. Media and news reporting sell the suffering associated with war and with famine in magazines, on cable television. How is suffering different in this case? In what capacity is it a contested commodity? Who is benefiting, and who is being disempowered by the commoditization?

In the case of Circle of Light, I have argued that the narratives of dominance (legal and market) occupy the subjects in very specific ways, shaping them and their stories. The subjects – Kiranjit, battered women, and South Asian women – each get silenced at points, and silence each other at other points. The question is, have their experiences of suffering been altered in such a way as to lead to a degradation of personhood? Are their identities, contexts and freedom being violated through the objectification and transformation of suffering in the book? First, I want to point out some of the contradictions in Circle of Light that let the subjects speak beyond the dominant narratives, and then I will explore whether the commodification of suffering in the book leads to empowerment or not.

Circle of Light describes Kiranjit's life, but it also relates how she became a legal subject. The process of "reconstructing" her is not hidden; SBS makes it clear in the "SBS story." If we read their construction of the process, sometimes pushing beyond it, we can see the conflicts between subjects (Kiranjit, SBS, Rahila Gupta) that permeate the text. As such, the book constructs split and contradictory subjects, not fully captured by either of the dominant narratives.

For instance, Kiranjit's resistance to telling her story comes out in several places. In one example, a woman from SBS named Pragna was working with Kiranjit to get her information straight for the appeal – trying to get "the truth." She admits that she was skeptical of Kiranjit. The SBS story reveals that "trying to uncover the truth was to become almost an end in itself for Pragna, amounting to obsession" (p.347). Kiranjit's lack of acquiescence is implied in the text, in the phrase, "[Pragna] cited an example of her problems with Kiranjit." Similarly, Pragna claims that "[Kiranjit] was giving me contradictory statements..." (p.347). After her release, at the celebration, the SBS story recounts how Pragna asked Kiranjit if she had told her the whole truth. "Kiranjit laughed. 'Do you really want to know?' she said. It was partly tease and partly warning" (p.322). Finally, in the writing up of the book, Rahila Gupta writes in her introduction how Kiranjit dealt with the power imbalance involved in the writing up process, "she would want to trade information refusing to continue until I had answered a personal question" (p.xvi). These are glimpses of a subject not completely erased, not completely encompassed by larger narratives of the dominant ideology.
Similarly, the Southall Black Sisters themselves demonstrate their doubts and concerns in their highly self-conscious production of culture and identity. They reveal their initial abhorrence of the idea of using a medical defense, but show how eventually they are driven by pragmatics. In another example, after deciding to bring culture into the appeal, Pragna had to write a report on violence in the Asian community. The process of writing it was described as tortuous: “She had to tread very carefully in order to describe common aspects of Asian women’s experience in this country without creating a new racial stereotype – the battered Asian woman” (p.374). The question here would be how is the process of construction itself sold, how much is it appropriated by the racialized end product? One could see the process of deliberation adding to the validity of such images – we are urged to think that they did their best to avoid stereotypes, and that therefore the product we now consume is free of prejudice.

Finally, Circle of Light contradicts itself in places. For instance, right after describing how the Princess of Wales advised Kiranjit to write a book, Rahila Gupta writes, “none of us wanted the story to be sensationalized” (p.xii). The very act of including Diana sensationalizes – there is perhaps no figure in the world who can match her status as a popular icon/commodity; but this demonstrates the contradictions built into this form of representation, the difficulty of fitting empowering images and identities into narratives that will win criminal court cases and sell books.

Do these contradictions mediate the alienation of suffering, by letting the complexity of experience be seen? In asking this question, it might be argued that I’m missing the most important point of the book: the fact that Kiranjit Ahluwalia was released – that she won her case. Is that not empowerment? Does it really matter that her experience was altered in court, that her suffering was turned into a commodity through the book? I do not want to make the mistake that Spivak warns against – that of confusing darstellung with vertretung. In simple terms, I realize that this book is an example of darstellung, or speaking about; although it speaks about the trial, it cannot substitute for vertretung, or speaking for, in the political or legal sense. In the end, is Kiranjit not free to walk around outside? Does this not alter the way in which her representation is performed in the book, despite the imperial tropes? Is that intervention not more material and ultimately more salient than one made by speaking about?

Here, I draw on Sherene Razack’s work on domestic violence in the context of claims for asylum on the basis of gender persecution, for the problems that she so eloquently names in that context mirror the ones that I find with this collective self-representation. Razack agrees that if a story of cultural othering must be told to save a woman from violence, then who can complain if we “fight sexism with racism”? (1995:72). Yet she argues that there are indeed built-in limitations to this practical approach. First, victims must be able to access readily understood racial tropes. What if Asian women were not perceived as passive and weak, in need of a saviour from Asian men? Razack explores this reality in the context of Asian and African Caribbean women in Canada, and in this same vein, I would hazard a guess that the strategies used for Kiranjit would not work for African immigrants in Britain. Second, if one must always pathologize one’s culture, there need not be a discussion of the conditions in which these women live; in other words, there is no need to touch on the reasons for migration, or the subsequent economic vulnerability of many abused women. As Razack states, “the light need never be shone on First World complicity” (p.73). Finally, racist constructs operate under the logic that Third World women are to be pitied, and ironically, if women emerge as strong
enough to have escaped violent situations, this does not work in their favour. This is clear in Kiranjit’s case: when she was conceived of as a killer, able to muster the means to escape abuse, she was convicted; only by turning her into a pitiable battered woman was she released.

On a purely practical basis, what do women do who cannot fit their realities into imperial frames? These are the women that are discriminated against. These are the women that this representation erases. Kiranjit first got a life sentence; this was not a typical sentence given to a woman for killing her husband. As one letter printed in Circle of Light points out, a white woman who suffered domestic violence and committed a similar crime got two years probation. It was only when Kiranjit became a subject of a racialized imperial framework that she was granted the privilege that other (white) citizens often automatically possess.

Yes, she was released. What does this mean for notions of personhood, empowerment, and human flourishing? What kind of victory is it? It is a victory, a form of empowerment for her, as an individual – but let us be clear – in a strange twist, it is empowering to her only if we see her as an abstract individual, devoid of context. In other words, it violates the elements that Radin describes as integral to personhood. The context in which she both suffered and acted is transformed, reinterpreted; her cultural and historical background are traded in for the empowerment of universal womanhood. Her identity – intimately connected to the context, and to her multiple commitments and histories as both a gendered, and racialized subject – is therefore also altered. Thus, for other battered Asian and minority women – the other “subjects” of this story – the case of empowerment is unclear. While glimpses of their subjectivities can be traced in the contradictions of the narratives, we are left with an overwhelming sense that Asian women cannot be strong and still Asian, in Britain; this forces on them the unacceptable choice of either being pathologized to be empowered, or having their historical specificity, and their cultural context, erased.

Before I conclude, let me return to my goal in writing this piece: this is an attempt to make room for silences, or for that which cannot be easily articulated. My goal has been to show the complexity involved in representing suffering in the courtroom and the marketplace, rather than to dismiss the political and ethical agendas of the book. I am not criticizing their strategies because I disagree with the overall project of the book; on the contrary, because their project is so important – and because some sort of public depiction of violence is inevitable in campaigns against violence – it is essential to examine the broader implications of “selling suffering.”

Commodifying one form of suffering meant obscuring others, such as the violence of poverty, racism, and the violence done by Western hegemony. The legal and market narratives precluded their appearance. In this case, I would therefore conclude that suffering be market-inalienable, as the amount that Circle of Light empowers is negligible compared to the ways in which it serves to efface the experience of suffering and of violence endured.
Notes

1. I want to draw attention to the slipperiness of labels, and how they constitute an important part of strategies for both empowerment and oppression. “British Asian” replaced the label “Black” in Britain in the mid-1980s in describing those of Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan or Bangladeshi origin. It was part of the move from the politics of anti-racism to a politics of ethnicity and multiculturalism. The distinction between “South Asian” and “British Asian” reflects different contexts and patterns of immigration, different political climates and race relations. There is a much larger presence of those with origins in the sub-Continent in Britain than in the US, where the term South Asian is used to distinguish people from the sub-Continent from those with origins in East Asia (China, Japan, Korea, etc.) who make up a larger percentage of the US population. I make note of this because the labels in both Britain and the US are contested terms, referring to very specific historical and political climates. The term British Asian is controversial enough that I do not feel comfortable using it exclusively. It is embedded in a politics of multiculturalism that has served in many instances to further ghettoize minorities rather than empower them. While I do not want to conflate the two terms or contexts, I draw attention to the fact that ethnicity is continually contested — a point important for Kiranjit’s case and for Circle of Light — by using the terms interchangeably throughout the paper.

2. I am grateful to Sherene Razack for making me think about and phrase the problem in this way.

3. I use the term “collective self-representation” to illustrate the fact that when outside dominant modes of representation, personal and collective identities and representations often cannot be differentiated from one another. The personal story is most often not original in its encounters with prejudice and hardship; further, because individuals from minority groups are often represented as homogeneous by dominant imagery, they are left with the nearly impossible task of responding as a group and yet illustrating the flexibility of group borders.

4. Cultural difference has been used as a mitigating factor in sentencing, and while couched as sensitivity to cultural difference, on the one hand, it has been argued that such language disguises the fact that culture acts as a marker of inferiority — where people are seen as frozen in time by their cultures. Similarly, it has been argued that culture is used in the courtroom to excuse patriarchal practices (see Koptiuch 1996; Okin 1997; Razack 1995, 1998; Volpp 1994; Rimonte 1991; Das 1995). On the other hand, emphasizing cultural values has also been an important oppositional strategy for indigenous peoples as well as for people of colour (Razack 1998; Coombe 1993, 1996; Messer, 1995).

5. It is relevant here that sati – the consignment to flames of the wife on her husband’s funeral pyre – has been long regarded as a symbol by which the whole of Indian society could be characterized as either a land of miracles or savagery (cf. Das 1995). Thus, while the important role of fire in Indian society is invoked here by mentioning sati and dowry-burning, it also invokes the pathology of colonialism and the stigmatization of Indian identity by the British.

7. It must also be noted that while these elements serve as guidelines to determine what is personal and inalienable, they themselves are the product of a very specific context.

8. Kleinman, Lock and Das have edited a volume called *Social Suffering* which is dedicated to the exploration of suffering as a component of the global political economy. In this, they speak of the multiple ways in which victimhood and suffering are commodified. Also see Kleinman's "Pitch, Picture, Power: The Globalization of Local Suffering and the Transformation of Social Experience" in *Ethnos*, 60 (3-4): 181-191, 1995; and Kleinman and Kleinman, "The Appeal of Experience, the Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in our Time," *Daedalus*.

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