

The Poetics and Politics of Snow

Re-Orienting Discourses of Gendered
Violence and Spousal Sponsorship
in Anita Rau Badami's *Tell It to the Trees*

Gendered Violence as Orientalist Discourse

South Asian communities often find themselves featured in the Canadian media for horrific cases of gendered violence. The “Shafia family” murder of Rona, Mohammed Shafia’s first wife, and his three daughters is one such case; the slaying of Amandeep Kaur Dhillon by her father-in-law is another.¹ These are shocking instances of violence against women, made all the more disturbing for their apparent confirmation of long-held stereotypes of “Oriental” male tyranny and female victimhood. I offer the following case in point: in a *Globe and Mail* article published in the aftermath of the Shafia trials, Sheema Khan perpetuates the false dichotomies at the heart of Orientalist discourse as follows: “Clearly, there are some who are unapologetic, standing firmly behind such a heinous practice [i.e., honour killings]. Of these, a few migrate with such pathological thinking, unwilling to change. . . . Yet, are they fully aware of the differences between their traditional culture and the freedoms afforded by a liberal democratic society?” (n. pag.). Khan’s rhetoric—notice descriptors such as “heinous,” “pathological,” and “traditional culture”—not only depicts honour killing as a phenomenon that is endemic to non-Western cultures, but also as an “imported” cultural practice in an otherwise untainted “liberal democratic society.” In this regard, violent acts perpetrated by non-Western males are attributed to innate religio-cultural “defects” explained away by the purportedly radical ideological differences between a (modern) mainstream Euro-Canadian culture and its (traditionalist) Orientalist other.

Drawing on Edward Said’s identification of Orientalism’s prototypical villain—namely, the Muslim male or “Mohametane”—Joyce Zonana reminds us that the “Oriental despot” was, throughout the feminist writings of

the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the most popularized metonym for misogyny and patriarchal oppression. Moreover, Zonana argues that “feminist orientalism,” which refers to the representation of European patriarchy through Oriental imagery, is a specific brand of early European feminist discourse that served “to displace patriarchal oppression onto an ‘Oriental,’ ‘Mohametan’ society, enabling British readers to contemplate local problems without questioning their own self-definition as Westerners and Christians” (593). Chandra T. Mohanty identifies the continued over-reliance, in contemporary feminist discourse, on such colonial constructs to account for gender dynamics in non-Western societies: “discursive categor[ies] of analysis used in Western feminist discourse . . . construct ‘third world women’ as a homogeneous ‘powerless’ group often located as implicit *victims* of particular cultural and socioeconomic systems” (23).

One might argue that the kind of discursive Orientalism associated with the Shafia case has served a similar function, both in the entrenchment of colonial constructs and as a strategy of displacement, in the Canadian media. In a critical response to the simplistic attribution of the Shafia murders as “honour killings,” criminal law professor Payam Akhavan argues,

far from being a religious belief, honour killings have their roots in tribal societies—predating Islam, Christianity and Hinduism—where loyalty to the tribe and honour were important cultural practices. . . . When we see something which belongs to a specific religion or specific culture, it’s somewhat deceptive and misleading because we create a platform for feeling virtuous . . . and masking the reality of massive domestic abuse in our own culture. (qtd. in Montgomery n. pag.)²

Journalist Sue Montgomery adds that while the concept of honour killing has been modernized over time in Western society, it is at the root of its juridical practice, including the English common law and European civil law of “defence of provocation,” which has justified a man’s right to take the life of an adulterous wife or have a murder sentence reduced to manslaughter when “provoked by rage or anger” (n. pag.).

Khan’s reduction of gendered violence to an instance of “pathological thinking” thus amounts to what community practitioners refer to as “an essentialist discourse of ‘culture-blame’” (Chokshi et al. 153). Indeed, sociologists Ritu Chokshi, Sabra Desai and Andalee Adamali attest to the way gendered violence is “pathologized” in ethno-cultural terms:

The current mainstream discourse and media portrayal of abused South Asian women are built largely around the depiction of a pathological community, thus placing the blame for domestic violence within the South Asian community

as if it is an inherent result of South Asian culture . . . This further isolates the community and absolves the larger Canadian society from responsibility for examining the intersecting issues and finding solutions that mitigate them. (148)

The conclusions of Chokshi, Desai, and Adamali are shared by Indian feminist Geetanjali Gangoli who, referring to the Indian context, has noted that “seeking cultural explanations for violence against women in Third World countries when similar research conclusions are not made for violence against women in Western countries can be dangerous and counterproductive” (100).

Suffice it to say that while this paper does not take issue with the grim reality of gendered violence in South Asia or its diaspora, it does take issue with the representation of gendered violence in South Asian communities as an ipso facto confirmation of Orientalist assumptions. As the previous examples illustrate, Orientalism is alive and well in contemporary Canadian public discourse, but it is particularly “dangerous and counterproductive” when conflated with the policies and practices of immigration and citizenship. In her study of immigration laws as they impact migrant women, Margaret Walton-Roberts writes that “the Canadian legal system . . . easily reproduces and extends patriarchy rather than contemplate more complex gender sensitive rulings that would displace Orientalist assumptions. . . .” (268). When read both as Orientalist discourse and State practice, then, the Shafia and Dhillon cases assume another troubling dimension: while the ethno-cultural or socio-religious factors that *should*, in fact, be examined for having played a role in the particular manifestations of violence in the family, these factors do not become meaningful objects of research and inquiry for their own sake. Rather, they become emblematic of a much larger “immigrant problem.” What is left out of this equation is any discussion of the Shafias or Dhillons as “Canadian” citizens—that is, unless they are used as examples to justify punitive or reformist immigration policies and measures—much less any discussion of domestic violence, itself, as a “Canadian” reality.

Between Spouse and State: Anita Rau Badami’s *Tell It to the Trees*

Anita Rau Badami’s most recent novel *Tell It to the Trees* (2011) seems to confirm, rather than meaningfully challenge, representations of gendered violence as a “pathological” ethno-cultural condition. It has many of the ingredients that are by now quite familiar in writing by or about South Asian women in North America,³ including the arranged marriage plot, intergenerational familial contexts and conflicts, the immigrant condition,

and the division between East and West as it is commonly reflected in a woman's cultural and social plight against a patriarchal family life. However, I contend that Badami complicates these themes in various structural, aesthetic, and thematic ways. Gendered violence is witnessed through an inverted dual setting in which the female protagonist Suman looks back to a life of relative safety and wellbeing in India—that is, before she finds herself in her new-found status as a battered bride in Canada. Suman's wholly unsentimental recollections of the various circumstances surrounding her hasty marriage further complicate readings of subaltern women as mere victims of a "gendered despotism" that stands as the "defining feature of Eastern life" (Zonana 600). Badami's decision to convey Suman's plight through a framework of multiple perspectives (which include those of her stepdaughter Varsha, her son Hemant, and Anu, the Indo-Canadian woman who becomes her ally), not only positions the "victim" within a dysfunctional household gripped by a history of violence, but also brings to light the issue of domestic abuse within a complex matrix of enabling factors: "individual, institutional and structural" (Chokshi et al. 148), or, put another way, between self, society, and State.

The particular emphasis on Suman's internal and external "states" of being in the Canadian context effectively positions the Occident, rather than the Orient, at the geopolitical and cultural epicentre of Suman's wretched plight. This is further reinforced by the particular aesthetics underpinning Badami's richly evocative and haunting text: namely, what I term to be "the poetics and politics of snow." Suman's extreme dread of and helplessness in the snow-bound Canadian winter is a leitmotif in the novel, such that snow imagery serves as a metonym for the migrant woman's acute disenfranchisement in her adoptive environment. Significantly, this focalization technique draws the South Asian household or ethno-cultural community within the wider frame of the Canadian geo-scape. As a politicized statement, then, this aesthetic trope invites us to critically re-direct our gaze *away* from the "Orient" as the singular marker of an abject and dysfunctional alterity, and encourages us to consider issues of gendered violence as a distinctly Canadian reality, even as it is perpetrated or experienced by the purported "Other" among us.

At the centre of *Tell It to the Trees* is the deceptively straightforward tale of a female migrant who has entered Canada by means of what we can surmise to be spousal sponsorship. Spousal sponsorship involves the legal application by a Canadian citizen to bring a husband or wife from another country into Canada as his/her sole dependent.⁴ A policy study by the *Status of Women Canada* attests that the "Sponsored individuals are . . . required to fulfil certain

promises that impinge on their Rights” (Côté et al. 28). At its core, spousal sponsorship can be seen as a quintessential transnational act, and it is certainly a common aspect of the immigrant experience for many South Asian women. (Some 80% of women from the Subcontinent who are sponsored as a family member enter the country under these terms [Sharma 156]). However, while spousal sponsorship has been a common feature of South Asian women’s migration histories in Canada, it has not been a common feature in discussions, particularly in literature and criticism, of its interaction with other kinds of social realities, such as arranged marriage, cultural integration, and patterns of female dependence and marital entrapment. In examining a range of Indo-Canadian women poets, Kavita Sharma notes that Indo-Canadian women writers themselves evade “the harsh realities” faced by “the majority of Indo-Canadian women immigrants” (162), and fixate instead on the homeland.

Tell It to the Trees does not break this pattern in any obvious sense. Indeed, spousal sponsorship is neither explicitly named nor tied to the central issue of domestic violence, and the narrative makes only the most fleeting statements about the immigration process itself. Nonetheless, we can safely assume that the central female character, Suman, is a sponsored bride, since her emigration to Canada by means of an arranged marriage could only be facilitated under such terms. This is confirmed by the language and symbols that Suman uses to describe her entrapment and isolation, as they are overly determined by her precarious legal status as “Mrs. Vikram Dharma”:

So here I am stuck in a world full of borders and boundaries, unable to travel because I can’t show proof of my identity to the people who guard the entryways and exits. It is not enough to say, I am Suman, daughter of a beloved man, wife of a hated one. I still need a piece of paper with my photograph, stamped by the government of a country. Without that I am nobody other than the wife of a man who is my guardian, my custodian, my prison. (121-22)

As a dependent of her male sponsor, the customary anxieties or, indeed, the benefits of transnational citizenship as they are signified in “a world full of borders,” “travel,” “entryways and exits,” are privileged sites of mobility that have as little to do with Suman’s reality as the prospect of escape from her State-sanctioned legal “guardian.” Suman’s self-made portrait as a prisoner within a male-dominated household also confirms Walton-Roberts’ assertion that there is a historical tendency to reproduce the division between the public and the private in the constitution of State citizenship. Examining the various “scales”—from the household to the national to the transnational—

through which State policy has an effect on individuals in incongruent and uneven ways, Walton-Roberts writes: "Gender shapes immigration processes. . . and women who migrate through marriage are subject to increased vulnerability because of their tenuous legal status; something immigration policies often unintentionally amplify by granting control of the immigration procedure to the resident spouse" (268).

As critic Mala Pandurang writes of the transnational South Asian woman, "[i]t is crucial to formulate analytical tools to assess states of subjectivity, at *the point of departure*. It is only thus that we can arrive at any conclusion about shifts of identity and dilemmas of liminality that take place after *arrival*" (89). In Suman's narrative, the terms of departure and the realities of arrival are juxtaposed in unexpected ways. We are first invited to look back to Suman's homeland through a predictable range of geographic and cultural contrasts (the heat vs. the cold; the cramped quarters of an Indian city vs. the sparsely populated spaces of rural Canada; the extended communal family vs. the nuclear family, etc.). However, these dichotomies are quickly divested of their cultural and ideological schisms as we imagine India through a complex character rather than through the language of archetype. In this vein, Suman's seemingly rash agreement to marry a man of whom little is known beyond his status as a "distant relative of our front-door neighbour" (Badami 68), is ironically juxtaposed against a long-standing tradition of romantic idealism: "I too imagined myself a Parvati, or a Mumtaz Mahal, a Juliet or a Laila, the object of a hero's undying love. I too wished to be borne away on horseback, in a train, or a plane, . . . by a man who would allow me to expand beyond my boundaries" (43). As these examples reveal, however, Suman's romantic idealism stems as much from Eastern influences (such as the Hindu sacred epics or the enduring story of the Taj Mahal captured in the references to "Parvati" and "Mumtaz Mahal," respectively), as from Western popular culture (epitomized in the Shakespearean allusion or her earlier references to depictions, "inside the 'glossy covers of magazines,'" of "New York, Trafalgar Square, Down Under" [42]). Orientalist constructs are further derailed by the fact that it is Suman's father who cautions his daughter against what he perceives to be an ill-advised union, which he fears will turn his daughter into a glorified caretaker: "But I am not sure I want you to travel thousands of miles with a stranger to look after his child and mother." The father's counsel, "[t]he decision is yours, but don't do anything at the cost of your own happiness" (73), with its emphasis on Suman's independence and free will, assumes a "feminist" stance that subverts

assumptions about the father's absolute authority as the family patriarch.

Suman also comments on the pecuniary nature of her marriage in a country whose "economy . . . runs on marriages. [And where] [w]eddings are big business" (41), but she seems equally aware that this system has only been reproduced in Canada, where she is similarly "nobody other than the wife of a man who is my guardian (122)." In fact, the "transcontinental" dimension of Suman's arranged marriage would necessarily be facilitated by the cooperation of two sovereign States. On the Canadian side, the financial nature of spousal sponsorship is all too evident in juridical policy and the legislative vocabulary that accompanies it. Notably, the sponsoring member must sign a contract known as an "undertaking" which absolves the Canadian government of financial responsibility for the sponsored individual (Indo-Canadian Women's Association 86).⁵ This, as Sharma notes, confirms that the sponsored spouse's "dependence has been sanctioned and even enforced by law" (156). Suman's seemingly insurmountable predicament is ironically contrasted to the speed and ease with which Vikram, her marriage suitor, is able to facilitate the sponsorship: i.e., a total of ten months, from the time of his first wife's death to the arrival of his second wife in Canada.

In fact, when Vikram arrives in India in search of a new bride, he most likely does so through his status as a PIO—a Person of Indian Origin (a foreign national whose parents were born in post-Partition India). While Badami does not overtly classify him as such, her narrative draws attention to all the signs of Vikram's outsidership in his ancestral land. He is shown to arrive in India "for the first time in his life," donning "khaki trousers and T-shirt," and with what Suman dubs "that gloss of Abroad on him" (68). The Punjab State Women's Commission notes that "[i]n India, the foreign-returned man has always had a certain allure, as if he were more polished, more worldly. He also promises in dollars not in rupees" (qtd. in Walton-Roberts 277). Significantly, Suman's community is awed by what they fancifully (and erroneously) speculate to be the "Foreign Boy's" (Badami 69) brilliant professional credentials and illustrious genealogy. As a PIO, Vikram's "foreignness" in *India* as a "Westernized" man calls into question Orientalist constructions of "non-Western" males in culturally essentialist and antithetical terms. Vikram himself is shown to be as at odds with Indian custom as he is able to exploit it for his own self-interest. On the one hand, Suman remarks that he had the peculiar habit of looking his elders "straight in the eye," which is construed as a "lack of respect" (68, 69); he also forgoes custom by visiting Suman's home without

his family's permission, which makes "Ganesh Maamu and his fifteen family members [come] rushing in to retrieve him, somewhat put out that we had claimed him first" (71). As this episode illustrates, the community continually excuses Vikram's cultural mis-steps and social impropriety on the basis that he is a cultural outsider, reinforcing the point that it is in his prefigurement as a "foreign-returned" (68) suitor that Vikram is able to expedite and capitalize on his quest for a new bride.

The Poetics and Politics of Snow

Within the aforementioned contexts is embedded what I term as the "poetics and politics of snow." Snow is a leitmotif insofar as the reader is continually asked to pay attention to this ubiquitous symbol, from the prologue's opening line—"Sunday morning. Snow floats down like glitter dust from a flat winter sky" (1)—to the frightening events that take place in the small winter-bound British Columbian township of Merritt's Point. Here, something must also be said about the stunning jacket cover of the first edition: a photographic image of a lone sari-clad woman walking along a barren snow-covered road, the vivid colours (green, gold, saffron) of her sari "an incongruous sight" (97) in the stark white landscape. From cover to cover, then, the image of snow engulfs both reader and characters in a circular narrative circumscribed by an incontrovertibly "Canadian" environment. Badami's snow-bound landscape recalls Margaret Atwood's claim that "[t]here is a sense in Canadian literature that the true and only season here is winter" (*Survival* 49). One might say that Badami's fatalistic representation of a place where "your breath hangs like a ghost before your face" (64) positions her latest work firmly within a Canadian literary tradition in which "[d]eath by the hazards of nature is a familiar event" (Simpson-Housley and Norcliffe 223). However, the Canadian winter also assumes a specific resonance for immigrant writers from southern climes, for whom metaphors of ice and snow emblemize the struggle for adaptation and survival as culturally and geographically displaced beings.⁶

Badami herself confesses to the profound impact that her "contentious relationship with winter" would come to have on *Tell It to the Trees*: "the creepiest character in this book is Winter. . . . It's a translation of my own dislike of this very Canadian season. There, that's my guilty little secret. I live in Canada, profess to be partly Canadian but cannot pretend to like winter" ("Afterword" n. pag.). Badami's statement attests to the way the northern winter is a pervasive metaphor of culture shock and alienation for

many immigrant writers. For poet Rienzi Crusz, the Canadian winter is the figurative “dark antonym” (“Dark Antonyms” 20) to his native tropical Sri Lanka, which further alludes to the émigré’s divided self or “geography,” for whom a “hibiscus heart / freezes to its roots, / . . . final as winter’s argument” (“Geography of Voice” 24). The Canadian winter as a metonym for the émigré’s divided geographies reaches its metaphysical apotheosis in Lakshmi Gill’s poem “Out of Canada” where, even in the anticipation of death, the landscape proves inhospitable: “It assaults me at every turn: / my eyes are offended / by what they see—the bright / sunlight on the snow / icy shafts that pierce straight / to my head . . . / I cannot die here in this country / where would I be buried” (49).

Not only has snow (and the Canadian winter) served as an apt metaphor for the radical transformations and challenges of immigrant subjecthood, but it has also assumed more political overtones where the immigrant condition is compounded by race, racism and the legacies of European imperialism. Poet and scholar Himani Bannerji has been particularly adept in “politicizing,” if you will, the metaphor of snow and winter. This is epitomized in her poem “Paki Go Home,” where the racial epithet of “Paki” commonly lanced at South Asian immigrants eerily emerges from “winter sleeping in the womb of the afternoon” and, like “a grenade explodes” in “words [that] run down / like frothy white spit” (5). As María Laura Arce Álvarez suggests, the Canadian winter in Bannerji’s poems acts as a metonym for “that cruel, violent and racist part of postcolonial Canada” (17). Bannerji’s poem also attests to the way the host society is a potentially terrifying place of exile for women of colour for whom immigrant struggle is compounded by the “multiple” or “converging patriarchies of the community [of] male elite and the Canadian state” as Bannerji states in her seminal study *The Dark Side of the Nation* (169).

In *Tell It to the Trees* snow similarly assumes a pernicious quality that hints at the extreme forms of outsidership—even fatal outsidership—experienced by migrant women who are doubly victimized in situations of domestic violence: “first by the violence perpetrated against them, and then by Canadian society, which often . . . fails to provide the appropriate support and interventions that would empower these women” (Chokshi et al. 151). Suman’s “winter paranoia” thus at once reflects the common condition of a newly arrived immigrant struggling to acclimatize herself to a decidedly alien environment; it also captures the far less examined condition of the sponsored bride rendered invisible in her new-found s/State of

remote outsidership. Where snow functions as a metaphor of isolation and entrapment, then, it does so in the harshest of terms: like a person trapped in a blizzard, Suman's predicament is a potentially fatal one. Indeed, the plot unfolds mysteriously around the opening image of a woman found frozen to death outside the Dharma household. It is at the interface of immigrant subjectivity, race, gender, and patriarchy that the poetics of snow is politicized. Such an interface creates the basis of a more active denunciation of the systemic forms of inequality that govern the lives of immigrants, and immigrant women in particular.

However, in *Tell It to the Trees* the northern winter is also imbued with a complex palette of imagery and symbol, such that nature's "monstrous" aspect⁷ points as much to the internal "geograph[ies] of the mind" (Atwood 18) as to the external landscapes of a seemingly inhospitable climate. Badami unsettles the negatively encoded "immigrant" poetics of snow in her provision of multiple perspectives, which bring to view a more diverse range of immigrant experiences than Suman's story of acute disenfranchisement will allow. Thus, the snow is a polysemic signifier that engenders a figurative continuum along which we are witness to different "states" of "at-homeness" in the "wintry world." As Suman confesses, her son Hem, who is named "for winter, the season in which he was born . . . sees beauty where I see only misery, he is at home in this wintry world whereas I forever remain a stranger to it" (Badami, *Tell It* 91). Though Suman is terrorized by the elements within and without, her son Hemant and stepdaughter Varsha look to nature as a place of refuge and recovery outside the father's abuse. Indeed, the title evokes the children's habit of telling their "secrets" to the trees since betrayal of the family secret to outsiders will almost certainly incite their father's violent reprisal. For Varsha, then, snow "floats down like flowers from a low grey sky" (75), whereas for Suman it is a harbinger of the "terrible" months of the "cruel" isolation to come (174).

That Suman, as a sponsored bride, inhabits the most extreme and thus potentially fatal form of outsidership is brought home in the foil character of Anu, an Indo-Canadian woman who takes up temporary residence at the Dharma property in a romantic bid to escape the city's distractions. Anu only starts to see winter as a menacing force over the course of her developing friendship with Suman. Thus, while she faces her first rural winter with casual indifference ("Winter has arrived without much notice" [174]), and is amused by Suman's antipathy for the cold, her attitude changes once she is privy to the harsh realities of Suman's predicament. In a comment

that foreshadows her own tragic demise as a victim of hypothermia, a fate precipitated by the savage elements that govern the Dharma household, Anu declares, “[t]he silence which seemed so idyllic in summer is now a nightmare. And the friggling cold—I don’t remember cold being *this* cold!” (216).

In contrast, for Suman the cruel isolation of winter is an all-consuming reality matched only by the indifference of her social environment. Indeed, the township appears as barren and bereft as the winter landscape, as its members seem wholly desensitized to her and her children’s victimization.⁸ Though Suman is denied contact with the outside world by a controlling husband, Badami subtly draws our attention to the fact that any such form of isolation is a condition created by networks of social complicity. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that in a small, close-knit township such as Merritt’s Point, everybody does not already know everybody else’s business. While the elderly neighbour Mrs. Cooper is said to have spent a lot of time in the Dharma household when it was occupied by Vikram’s first wife (notably also a victim of Vikram’s violence), we are told by Vikram’s daughter that Mrs. Cooper only “wanted company and couldn’t be bothered about what Mom did” (22). Nor do those residents whose positions confer upon them some level of social responsibility as potential advocates for Suman and her children fare any better. When the children clamber onto the school bus after being beaten mercilessly by their father, the bus driver Mr. Wilcox naively accepts the pat explanation that Varsha “fell down the stairs” and Hemant’s contradictory testimony that she “bumped into a wall” (188). This leads the children to contemplate: “Will Mr. Wilcox notice? Will he guess? Does he know? And has he too taken a vow of silence like the rest of our town? . . . All the kids at school know, the teachers too. The whole world knows, but nobody says a thing” (188-89). The children’s statement underscores the extent to which Badami configures the father’s abuse as enabled by the collective inaction and indifference of the community at large.

The township’s inaction stands in ironic contrast to the South Asian women, Akka (Suman’s mother-in-law) and Anu, who attempt to come to Suman’s aid.⁹ Akka’s and Anu’s refusal, within the scope of their respective circumstances, to accept the violence of patriarchal power provides an agential counterpoint to the figurative paralysis of both Suman and the township. Representing an older and younger generation raised in India and Canada respectively, these characters are, to varying degrees, models of female resistance who provide “a countersentence” (Spivak 93) to the Orientalist narrative that over-determines their roles as fragile, hapless

victims of Oriental despots. The contrasting strength of these South Asian women characters with the general apathy of the greater population also challenges the salvationist doctrine underpinning European imperialism, whose duplicity Gayatri Spivak has famously captured in the phrase, “White men saving brown women from brown men” (93).¹⁰ Anu not only offers friendship at the cost of her own safety and, as we learn, her life, but also offers Suman the physical, financial, and legal means of escape. Conversely, though we encounter Akka in a progressively enfeebled physical state, her story of emancipation from an abusive husband serves as the historical antecedent for gendered resistance in the Dharma household. In this instance, the foreign environment facilitates Akka’s release from continued assault, but only in the context of her own resourcefulness: she sees in a blizzard the opportunity to lock her husband out of the house, where he dies of hypothermia. In another narrative turn, Akka’s method is tragically misappropriated by her granddaughter Varsha against Anu, who misguidedly deems Suman’s friendship with Anu to be an act of betrayal. Anu’s death at the hands of a disturbed young girl born and raised, like her father, in Merritt’s Point, sets the stage for cycles of violence that cannot be neatly pathologized in strictly “ethno-cultural” terms. Indeed, as Akka’s story illustrates, Vikram is, himself, an abused child, such that two generations of Dharma children—one male, the other female—are shown to reproduce patterns of violence, thus complicating further the specifically gendered thrust of Orientalist power.

The poetics *and* politics of snow are both fully crystallized in the dual symbolism of Suman’s missing passport and the harsh winter landscape. Throughout the narrative, Suman is plagued by the missing passport; however, when we learn that Varsha hides the passport to prevent her stepmother’s escape, Vikram is once again displaced as the source of domination and power. Varsha’s singular act affirms the view of Suman’s precarious legal identity as a source of disempowerment that is on par with that of her husband’s terrorizing presence. Indeed, both the snow and the missing passport pose barriers to Suman on physical and psychological levels, from the literal entrapment of road blockages and unsafe passages to the mental roadblocks that prevent Suman from breaking free from a condition of victimhood. Both the missing passport and the seemingly indomitable landscape lead Suman to believe that she cannot legally or physically navigate her way out of her predicament as her husband’s dependent.¹¹ Much like her winter paranoia, then, Suman is effectively immobilized as her husband’s dependent; that is,

she remains proverbially frozen within a heightened state of vulnerability without the basic tools of self-representation and self-identity. For Suman, snow is “something you [can] die in or hate” (66), to use Atwood’s phrase, so long as her house, and the State that houses her, is not her own.¹²

De-Orientalizing and Re-Orienting the Terms of Engagement

In *Tell It to the Trees*, the transcontinental arranged marriage is shown to compound, if not produce, conditions for domestic abuse. Sponsored spouses are often openly threatened with the idea that they can be sent “back home” or have any claim to statehood revoked (Indo-Canadian Women’s Association 96). And the threat can be real. As the *Status of Women’s Canada* policy study reveals, “the status of an immigrant woman in Canada depends entirely on the sponsor since he may withdraw his sponsorship undertaking at any time prior to the granting of her permanent residence visa” (Côté et al 30). While Suman’s fear is not in being sent “back home” but rather in being trapped in a “place where nobody cares what happens” (Badami 254), the symbol of the missing passport serves as a sobering reminder that whether or not the sponsored spouse has access to government support in situations of violence, her condition as a stateless subject, be it real or imagined, becomes the most effective weapon at her abusers’ disposal.

Significantly, Suman remains trapped within her domestic and legal confines by the novel’s denouement, such that she has to remind herself of “the thin little word—I” that she left behind “on the roof of an old house in Agra” (143-44). The fact that Suman’s “I”—her claim to selfhood—has been lost in a snow-ridden landscape, forces us to witness Canada differently and to hold it accountable, to some extent, for her tragic situation. To this end, the novel destabilizes Canada or “the West’s” currency as the romanticized site of South Asian female emancipation from Orientalist male despotism. This, as I have suggested, is made particularly evident in the fact that Vikram (a second-generation Canadian)—together with the legal, socio cultural, and other tools for hetero-patriarchal domination with which he *terrorizes* Suman—is an extension of Canadian policy and practice as much as he is an extension of a version of India he hopes to restore and reinvent through his newly imported bride.

Transnational feminists such as Chandra T. Mohanty have helpfully advocated for a critical feminist materialism—that is, the call to apprehend women’s lives within the historical, material, sociocultural, and other factors of which they are a part.¹³ However, such contextual analysis becomes

considerably complicated in relationship to immigrant women's lives in the diaspora. If "context" is the intersection between the host and home society, what aspect of the host society do we address: the world inside or outside the home? What aspect of citizenship do we assess: a woman's relationship—often a dependent one—to spouse or to State? In other words, for diasporic women straddling multiple sites and realities, "context" consists not only of home and host world but also of the various "geograph[ies] of gender" (Handa 116) that inform a woman's subject position. Keeping this in mind, it seems reasonable to conclude that transnational or other feminist engagements with gendered violence must similarly examine the various "scales" of citizenship, to use Walton-Roberts' term, that inform the female diasporic subject's multiple realities, particularly as they generate conditions for exploitation and domestic abuse.

In adopting a new paradigm—a de-Orientalized one, if you will—for reading gendered violence within South Asian communities, I hope to foreground the complex ways in which the domestic and national, spouse and State, are deeply imbricated categories. Gendered violence within the immigrant community is reflective of such complexities, and must be apprehend as such. Such *de-* and *re-*orientation might encourage us to ask, as I believe Badami's novel implicitly does, what other option someone like Suman (or her equally vulnerable children) has but to "tell her secret to the trees"—if, that is, her situation is simply typecast as "an immigrant problem" or an abhorrent foreign practice, rather than treated as a social reality that has something to do with our own proverbial backyards? Surely this is no different than inviting someone into our homes only to cast them out in the cold. Or perhaps it is another act of cultural displacement, to use Zonana's analogy, which defers the harder project of our self-definition as Canadians.

NOTES

- 1 See CBC News "Muslim Community Grapples with Shafia Verdict." See also Stephanie Findlay's "Were the Shafia Murders 'Honour Killings' or Domestic Violence?" The Shafia murders took place in Kingston on 30 June, 2009. The three daughters and first wife of Montreal resident Mohammed Shafia (an affluent Afghani businessman) were drowned in their car in the Rideau Canal. In January 2012, Shafia, his second wife Tooba Yahya, and his son Hamed were each charged with four counts of murder in the first degree. Family violence has also plagued the Punjabi Sikh community. See Navjeevan Gopal, "Father-in-law of Punjabi Girl Killed in Canada Arrested." This case involved the murder of Amandeep Kaur Dhillon by her father-in-law Kamikar Kaur Dhillon in Mississauga on the morning of 1 January, 2009. The murder was also termed an "honour killing." As journalist Sue Montgomery points out, there are as many such grizzly cases of violence

- against women and family murders in “white” Canadian households, but they are not branded as honour killings (n. pag.).
- 2 Sue Montgomery’s article “Attacks on Women Happen All Too Often in Canada” has since been taken down from Canada.com.
 - 3 We can find such themes reproduced in works by South Asian women writers, including Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Divakurani, Meena Alexander, and Nirmala Warriar.
 - 4 See the legal terms and conditions for spousal sponsorship as defined by Citizenship and Immigration Canada: <<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/immigrate/sponsor/spouse-apply-who.asp>> (accessed 3 Aug. 2012). Dependency on the sponsor was first legislated as a ten-year period.
 - 5 See Côté et al. 31. Though a sponsored person suffering domestic abuse can apply for social assistance benefits, such information is rarely made accessible to the sponsored individual by the sponsor, the Indian agency handling the transaction, or the Canadian government who only requires the sponsoring individual to sign and thus be privy to such a document.
 - 6 Writers of fiction have also drawn on this leitmotif, including Cyril Dabydeen, Rabrindanath Maharaj, M. G. Vassanji, and Dionne Brand, to name a few.
 - 7 Badami also refers to winter as the “monster within the covers” of her “snow-ridden novel” (“Afterword”), which is reminiscent of Atwood’s discussion of “Nature the Monster,” where “nature is a monster, perhaps, only if you come to it with unreal expectations or fight its conditions rather than accepting them and learning to live with them” (66).
 - 8 Badami’s depiction of the British Columbian township’s inaction is not a question of poetic license. Canada did not legislate specifically against domestic violence or spousal abuse until 2002, almost two decades after India, even though Statistics Canada reveals that spousal violence itself makes up the “single largest category of convictions involving violent offences in non-specialized adult courts in Canada” whereby “[o]ver 90% of offenders were male.”
 - 9 Indeed, in Canada South Asian women generally act as their own advocates. It took South Asian women’s advocacy groups such as the British Columbia-based Sahara to lobby the Canadian government to reduce the duration of dependency from a ten year to a three year period. (See Noorfarah Merali, “Understandings of Spousal Sponsorship in South Asian International Arranged Marriages.”)
 - 10 Spivak’s phrase arises in the context of her discussion of female voicelessness, in the matter of the Hindu practice of *sati*, or widow burning, which became a site of British India’s legislative “civilizing mission” both in opposition to and, as Spivak illustrates, in collusion with Brahmanical power, each of which effaces the “women’s voice-consciousness” (93).
 - 11 As Noorfarah Merali notes, non-English-speaking women’s interview disclosures suggest that there were four primary barriers to accessing community resources for help in their difficult life situations: (a) their obvious language barriers; (b) lack of knowledge of relevant community services or programs; (c) extensive sponsor control that minimized their contact with people outside of their husbands’ families and that led to intense supervision; and (d) fear of deportation if one was to make an abuse report or seek help (4).
 - 12 Here I am drawing on Margaret Atwood’s poetic concluding statement in the “Appendix on Snow” section of “Nature the Monster”: “Snow isn’t necessarily something you die in or hate. You can also make houses in it” (*Survival* 66).
 - 13 See Chandra T. Mohanty’s *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003).

WORKS CITED

- Álvarez, María Laura Arce. "Too Visible: Race, Gender and Resistance in the Construction of a Canadian Identity in the Poetry of Himani Bannerji." *Miscelánea: Journal of English and American Studies* 36 (2007): 11-23. Print.
- Atwood, Margaret. *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Toronto: Anansi, 1972. Print.
- Badami, Anita Rau. "Afterword: Anita Rau Badami: The Colour of Snow." *National Post*, 15 Sept. 2011. Web. 10 June 2013.
- . *Tell It to the Trees*. Toronto: Knopf, 2011. Print.
- Bannerji, Himani. *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars, 2000. Print.
- . "Paki Go Home." McGifford 5-7.
- CBC News. "Muslim Community Grapples with Shafia Verdict." *CBC News*, 30 Jan. 2012. Web. 1 Aug. 2012.
- Chokshi, Ritu, Sabra Desai, and Andalee Adamali. "Overview of Domestic Violence in the South Asian Community in Canada: Prevalence, Issues, and Recommendations." *Out of the Shadows: Woman Abuse in Ethnic, Immigrant, and Aboriginal Communities*. Ed. Josephine Fong. Toronto: Women's, 2009. 147-70. Print.
- Côté, Michelle, Michele Kérisit, and Marie-Louise Côté. *Sponsorship For Better or Worse: The Impact of Sponsorship on the Equality Rights of Immigrant Women*. Ottawa: Status of Women Canada's Policy Research Fund, 2001. CD-ROM.
- Crusz, Rienzi. "Dark Antonyms in Paradise." McGifford 17-19.
- . "The Geography of Voice." McGifford 24.
- Findlay, Stephanie. "Were the Shafia Murders 'Honour Killings' or Domestic Violence?" *The Star*, 30 Jan. 2012. Web. 3 Aug. 2012.
- Gangoli, Geetanjali. *Indian Feminisms: Law, Patriarchies and Violence in India*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. Print.
- Gifford, Diane, ed. *The Geography of Voice: Canadian Literature of the South Asian Diaspora*. Ed. Diane McGifford. Toronto: TSAR, 1992. Print.
- Gill, Lakshmi. "Out of Canada." McGifford 45.
- Gopal, Navjeevan. "Father-in-law of Punjabi Girl Killed in Canada Arrested." *Indian Express*, 8 Jan. 2009. Web. 3 Aug. 2012.
- Handa, Amita. *Of Silk Saris and Mini Skirts: South Asian Girls Walk the Tightrope of Culture*. Toronto: Women's, 2003. Print.
- Indo-Canadian Women's Association. *International Arranged Marriages*. Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Education Fund: Department of Canadian Heritage, 2005. Print.
- Johnson, Holly. "Measuring Violence Against Women: Statistical Trends 2006." Statistics Canada. 2 Oct. 2006. Web. 2 Aug. 2012.
- Khan, Sheema. "Shafia Trial A Wake Up Call for Canadian Muslims." *Globe and Mail*, 30 Jan. 2012. Web. 3 Aug. 2012.
- Merali, Noorfarah. "Understandings of Spousal Sponsorship in South Asian International Arranged Marriages." Policy Brief. *Research Gate*, n.d. Web. 2 Aug. 2012.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. Print.
- Montgomery, Sue. "Attacks on Women Happen All Too Often in Canada." *Canada.com*, Postmedia News, 30 Jan. 2012. Web. 7 July 2012.

- Pandurang, Mala. "Conceptualizing Emigrant Indian Female Subjectivity: Possible Entry Points." *South Asian Women in the Diaspora*. Ed. Nirmal Puwar and Parvati Raghuram. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003. 87-95. Print.
- Sharma, Kavita. "Indo-Canadian Women Writers: Double Alienation." *Intersexions: Issues of Race and Gender in Canadian Women's Writing* (1996): 156-63. Print.
- Simpson-Housley, Paul, and Glen Norcliffe. *A Few Acres of Snow: Literary and Artistic Images of Canada*. Toronto: Dundurn, 1992. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. Harlow: Pearson, 1994. 66-111. Print.
- Walton-Roberts, Margaret. "Rescaling Citizenship: Gendering Canadian Immigration Policy." *Political Geography* 23 (2004): 265-81. Print.
- Zonana, Joyce. "The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of *Jane Eyre*." *Signs* 18.3 (1993): 592-617. Print.

