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## Coverage of "Bride Burning" in the *Dallas Observer*: A Cultural Analysis of the "Other"

February 17, 1994, Thursday

My feminist theory class met today at the library. I listened to the reference librarian, who was giving us information on feminist sources in the library. She began talking about feminist journals from foreign countries. She picked up the feminist journal *Manushi* from India and said, "I read this two or three times a year, when I feel bad or depressed. After reading this, I feel much better about my own situation. I encourage all of you to read this." I looked at her and felt a strange and inexplicable pain and a feeling of numbness. Undoubtedly, she was trying to be nice. She was doing her bit to motivate students to read about women of other countries. Then, why was I angry?

And what does this incident in my personal life have to do with the coverage of a "bride burning" case in the *Dallas Observer*, the topic of this paper? Plenty. Although I could not name the phenomenon that took place at the library (racism seemed inadequate), later it came to me like a flash, crystal clear. This was what "othering" was all about. What the librarian did openly and overtly was what lurked within the text of the article I analyze in this paper. The reference librarian located Indian women firmly within an oppressive framework and distanced their experiences from her own by viewing them as much more oppressed than women like her who live in the "progressive" Western world.

What are the consequences of identifying the experiences of third world women with patriarchal oppression alone?<sup>1</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, an Indian feminist scholar, explores the production of "third

world woman" in Western feminist discourse and asks what the prevailing image of third world women as victims of oppressive traditional structures does to their agency.<sup>2</sup> She argues that acknowledging difference in terms of oppression may be a step forward from universalizing Western white middle-class women's experiences yet continues the ethnocentrism of postcolonialism. The framework of "traditional oppression" makes Western feminists the only feminist *subjects* and objectifies third world women as victims. It renders their experiences as "exotic" and "different," and allows violence to become a characteristic of "them" (third world societies) and not "us" (Western societies).

It is this same distancing, the same "us" versus "them," that we see recurring throughout the *Dallas Observer's* coverage of the death of Aleyamma Mathew, a member of the Indian diasporic community living in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Although Chandra Mohanty makes her arguments in the context of Western feminist writing on third world women, much of what she has to say is relevant for my critique of Western media discourse and how it chooses to cast Indian women as victims of male violence. The article in the *Dallas Observer* attempts to probe in depth the neglected issue of domestic violence in the Indian community and is therefore in a sense breaking the silence around this issue. However, what is problematic is that we find Indian culture being essentialized and defined as a patriarchal culture that *only* oppresses women. Analyzing the tendency of the media to essentialize the third world, a strategy that ultimately serves to cast the third world as "other," Peter Dahlgren and Sumitra Chakrapani observe: "Incessant glimpses of disorder and violence serve as a reminder that these societies continue to act out their essential character; they are virtually driven by violence. 'We,' on the other hand, the industrialized West, are typified by order and stability, a higher form of civilization."<sup>4</sup> Dahlgren and Chakrapani suggest that the problem is not only that violence in the third world is always the center of attention in the media, but it is also the way in which the media *present* violent situations: "Devoid of social, political, and historical causation, the manifestations of disorder and violence take on the quality of eternal essences which define the nature of these countries. 'That's just the way they are.'"<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, I argue that the *Dallas Observer* constructs Aleyamma Mathew as the "other" by framing her death as the natural and inevitable consequence of oppression stemming from Indian culture and tradition. Discussing the challenge postcolonial scholars pose to "mimetic theories of representation," Keya Ganguly, an Indian feminist scholar, writes:

Among the most important arguments offered from these quarters is the insistence on the need to shift debates on representation from the terrain of truth or transparency to a consideration of "regimes" of representation; that is, to a specification of the machineries and discourses that constitute both the possibility of representing an "other" [my emphasis] and the criteria by which such representations function in the field of knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

Taking the analytical direction pointed out by Keya Ganguly, I focus the discussion in this paper on the *Observer's* exoticization and "othering" of Mathew's death. It is important to critique media representations of non-Western cultures not merely because they may be false or stereotyped, but because "representation as ideology"<sup>7</sup> constitutes and defines the creation and production of knowledge about these cultures.<sup>8</sup> As Sander Gilman says in his book *Seeing the Insane*, "We do not see the world, rather we are taught by representations of the world about us to conceive of it in a culturally acceptable manner."<sup>9</sup> While this paper focuses on dismantling the process by which the *Observer* constructs Aleyamma Mathew as the "other," I also point out instances where more attention and sensitivity could have been paid to differences between Western and Indian cultures. I analyze how the *Observer*, by focusing on the oppression of women as a universal element of Indian culture, objectifies Indian women, including Aleyamma, and produces a seamless, homogenous image of a diverse community. Further, I also briefly examine how the urge to portray her as a victim undermines Aleyamma's struggles and denies her human agency.

The problems with media representations of India or Indians in the United States media are undoubtedly influenced by Western perceptions of India acquired through mainstream media representations. A study of representations of India in the United States print media, conducted in Bloomington, Indiana, shows that in *The New York Times*, *Time*, *National Geographic*, *The Economist*, and local Bloomington papers three themes dominated: "India as over-populated and impoverished, India as exotic and primitive, and India as a land of turmoil."<sup>10</sup> In discussing the United States's media's coverage of violent situations in India, Wes Cecil, Pranav Jani, and Stacy Takacs note that the pervasiveness of reporting on religious riots and political unrest "naturalizes" these events as endemic to India. Further, they also find that the media exacerbate the problem by pathologizing and essentializing violence in India through the indiscriminate use of words and phrases such as "hurricanes of hate," "primal violence," and "born in blood."

The persistence of depictions of India as impoverished, exotic, and violent in the United States mass media serve not only to constitute

India as a “backward” third world country, but also to reinforce the superiority of Western civilization. Chandra Mohanty points out that:

Without the overdetermined discourse that creates the *third* world, there would be no (singular and privileged) first world. Without the “third world woman,” the particular self-presentation of Western women mentioned above [Western women as secular, liberated, having control over their lives] would be problematical. I am suggesting, then, that the one enables and sustains the other.<sup>11</sup>

I suggest, similarly, that media representations of India in the United States cast India as chaotic and primitive not only to exoticize India but also to reify the modernity and stability of Western nations.

The coverage of Aleyamma’s death by the *Dallas Observer* indicates that the problem is twofold: that the media in the United States tend to cover minority communities only when acts of “deviance” take place, and the manner in which the “deviance” is portrayed. As an Indian feminist it is troubling for me to note the rigid framework of “Indian tradition” within which the *Dallas Observer* locates Aleyamma Varughese’s death. Such a framework freezes the image of Indian women into a series of metaphors and renders them solely as victims of Indian culture, thereby distancing Aleyamma’s experiences from the experiences of women of other cultures and preventing an examination of crucial issues common to the lives of most women subjected to violence.

I begin the paper by locating Aleyamma Mathew as a member of the Indian/South Asian diasporic community in the United States, discuss the image of this community, and present the perception of domestic violence in the community. I then identify critical elements in Aleyamma’s life that are neglected due to this focus on the “horrors” of Indian culture and provide some suggestions for culturally sensitive approaches to covering issues related to the Indian community.

### Aleyamma Mathew: A Brief History

Aleyamma Mathew, a registered nurse at Parkland Hospital in Carrollton, Texas, died of burn wounds at her home in the same town on April 5, 1992. Aleyamma was the wife of Mathew Varughese, a machinist at the Texas Instruments Plant in Carrollton. The couple had emigrated to the United States from India two decades previously and by 1992 had three daughters — Dixie, Deepa, and Dimple. Aleyamma and Mathew were both Christians from Kerala, a state in the southernmost part of India. According to the *Dallas Observer*, the couple had

been having marital problems since 1987, when Mathew Varughese began consuming huge quantities of alcohol and often abused his wife verbally and physically. Matters between the couple came to a head on April 5, when Mathew and Aleyamma had a bitter argument at about 11:30 p.m. Minutes later Aleyamma was found by her children, writhing in pain from the flames that engulfed her. She soon succumbed to severe wounds inflicted by the burning flames of ignited gasoline that had been poured over her body.

### **The Indian Diaspora in the United States: A Growing Community**

Aleyamma Mathew and her family are part of the growing Indian diasporic community in the United States, which in the 1990s is one of the fastest growing immigrant groups. According to the Bureau of the Census, there are 815,447 Indian Americans living in the United States, and this group has one of the most rapid growth rates among Asian groups.<sup>12</sup> The Indian population increased by a record 125.6 percent since the 1980 census, surpassed only by the Vietnamese population rise of 134.8 percent.<sup>13</sup> While Indians have been emigrating to the United States since World War I, it was only with the liberalization of the immigration law in 1965 that large numbers of Indians began arriving.<sup>14</sup>

The wave of immigration in the 1960s to countries in the West such as the United States consisted largely of educated and technically qualified people. The exodus of educated Indians from India to the United States has been called "brain drain."<sup>15</sup> Gayatri Spivak, a noted Indian feminist and literary critic, who belongs to the group of Indians who came to the United States during the sixties, points out that "The Indian community in the United States is the only coloured community which came in with the brain drain. This is quite different from Indians and Pakistanis in Britain, and certainly very different from Indians of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora."<sup>16</sup>

For this reason, the Indian community in the United States has been quite visible in universities, corporations, hospitals, computer firms, large manufacturing companies, and other white-collar jobs. Since the 1980s, Indians have also become owners of businesses such as motels, liquor stores, gas stations, and convenience stores, especially in larger cities such as New York, Dallas, and San Francisco. The economic success of the Indian community in the United States, coupled with the low incidence of violence, drug abuse, and other crime in the community, has produced a positive image of Indian Americans as a

fairly successful and productive immigrant population.<sup>17</sup> This positive image of the Indian diasporic community, however, is not seamless, a fact that becomes quite clear from the tragic story of Aleyamma Mathew's life and death.

The Indian diasporic community in the United States is both different from and similar to Indians living in India; while Indian Americans have assimilated in some ways, they have also attempted to retain their cultural identity. Although many Hindu Indian Americans celebrate the holidays of Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, they also maintain contact with Indian culture by building Hindu temples, celebrating Hindu festivals, and learning the Hindu scriptures. Indian Christians in the United States, like many Asian Americans, have their own churches with sermons presented in Indian languages. Some of the ways in which all Indian Americans — Hindu, Christian, and Muslim — maintain their cultural identity is by speaking Indian languages at home, eating Indian food, wearing Indian clothing at home or for special occasions, visiting India periodically, and associating with other Indians.

Aleyamma Mathew was a member of the Indian diasporic community. Her experiences with violence and abuse in her marriage are symptomatic of the looming problem of domestic violence among members of the South Asian community living in the United States. Given the scant media coverage of the issue of domestic violence, the *Dallas Observer's* in-depth story on the murder of Aleyamma Mathew is significant. Responding to the story in the *Observer*, a reader comments in a letter to the editor "Your article was extremely thought-provoking and filled me with many emotions. Sympathy for the victims, rage at the perpetrator, abhorrence at the act, and anger at myself for projecting an unrealistic, idyllic view of the Asian community."<sup>18</sup>

### **The *Dallas Observer* Constructs Aleyamma: The Shaping of the "Other"**

The story in the *Observer* is one of the first attempts made by a publication in the United States to go beyond the cursory few lines accorded to such deaths in the crime news section of mainstream newspapers. Approximately eight months after Aleyamma's death, the *Dallas Morning News*, on January 22, 1993,<sup>19</sup> published a brief article discussing Mathew Varughese's conviction by the court for killing his wife. An even briefer article was published by *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* the following day.<sup>20</sup> The *Dallas Observer's* detailed

treatment of the story, which ran to nine pages, is definitely proof of this weekly's stance as an alternative magazine.

The story behind Aleyamma's death is vividly described by journalist Rebecca Sherman, who avoids the usual dry and detached style of writing and instead constructs, in a very literary and fictional style, the events that led to Aleyamma's death. Congratulating her for her thought-provoking story, one reader, Jorge Pinada, responds in a letter to the editor, "I just wanted to congratulate you [the *Dallas Observer*], or rather compliment you, on your article. Rebecca Sherman's near-invisible presence allowed the story to unfold on its own."<sup>21</sup> Apart from an engaging style, Sherman also takes the trouble to unearth facts and statistics on "bride burning" in India, provide a historical background to Aleyamma's life, and interview a wide range of sources to piece together the complex threads of the story.

What is troubling, however, is that while writing in the third person, especially in a fictional style, allows for greater creativity and imagination in constructing a story, it erases the subjective nature of the interpretation of events and gives the reporter the power to establish objective, "normative" reality.<sup>22</sup> By writing in the third person, Sherman's treatment of Aleyamma's death as an inevitable and logical consequence of her being an Indian gains legitimacy and a sense of "truthness."<sup>23</sup> The third-person narration conceals Sherman's interpretive role and enables the reader to accept more easily her incrimination of Indian culture as the sole motivating factor for Mathew Varughese's criminal action. And it is through this emphasis on Indian culture that the "Other" is constructed as a victim of a non-Western culture, the essence of which is the brutal oppression of women.

The headlines on the cover page of the *Dallas Observer* of April 15, 1993 declare: "Battered by her husband, Parkland Nurse Aleyamma Mathew remained true to her culture. In the end she became its victim." In this construction, Aleyamma's death becomes a synecdoche for Indian culture. By establishing at the outset that Aleyamma's situation is unique to her culture, the story ensures that the reader is given a glimpse of the savage culture of India, a strategy that "exoticizes" Aleyamma's predicament. Roland Barthes identifies the problem inherent in confronting difference and writes, "How can one assimilate the Negro, the Russian? There is here a figure for emergencies: exoticism. The Other becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown."<sup>24</sup>

Such objectification and exoticization of non-Western cultures is not recent; it has a long history dating back to European colonization of Asia. By objectifying Asian peoples and investing them with "savage," "primitive" or child-like qualities, the benevolent colonialists



justified their imperialistic rule for hundreds of years. Peter Dahlgren and Sumitra Chakrapani trace the historical origins of the tendency of Western culture to "other" Asian or African people and observe that "The origins of such perceptions can be traced back to the colonial and imperial legacy which Europe and America imposed on these societies. For centuries, 'the native' has been seen as sorely deficient in civilization. . . . In transforming third world societies, often by force, into instruments to serve their will, Westerners assured themselves of their cultural superiority."<sup>25</sup>

In defining and describing the "other," there is often a tendency to draw on stereotypes, regardless of how irrelevant or erroneous these representations might be for the particular instance. For example, the cover of the *Dallas Observer* depicts a painting of a Hindu woman with a bindi (dot/mark) on her forehead, when in fact Aleyamma, an Indian Christian, featured in the photographs inside, did not wear a bindi.<sup>26</sup> The Indian woman on the cover is also shown wearing white to signify an Indian widow, when in reality it was Mathew, Aleyamma's husband, who was left the widower. Additionally, it is also ironic that the widow is shown wearing the bindi when, in fact, according to the traditional custom in India, widows do not wear a bindi.

The cover also proclaims Aleyamma to be a "Burning Bride" when in reality she had been married for over two decades and hardly qualified as a "bride."<sup>27</sup> The term "burning bride" is a problematic phrase that has been used by Indian media and Indian researchers to discuss "dowry deaths," that is, the deaths of young married women in India who are in many cases suspected to have been killed by husbands and husbands' relatives for bringing insufficient dowry.<sup>28</sup> In a book titled *Brides Are Not For Burning*, Ranjana Kumari analyzes the phenomenon of "dowry deaths" in India; she examines the nature of harassment suffered by young wives from dowry demands that continue after marriage and she traces the history of legislation enacted to curb the problem.<sup>29</sup> Yet another essay, "The Burning Bride: The Dowry Problem in India," by Wanda Teays, studies the religious basis for dowry in India, the historical antecedents for dowry, dowry legislation, and feminist attempts to stop "dowry deaths."<sup>30</sup> Discussing the use of the phrase "burning bride" to describe "dowry deaths," Willigen and Channa write, "The woman is typically burned to death with kerosene, a fuel used in pressurized cook stoves, hence the use of the term 'bride burning' in public discourse."<sup>31</sup> Clearly the term "burning bride" has a specific connection with dowry and with the death of young women who suffer at the hands of mercenary husbands soon after their marriage. The inappropriate association of Aleyamma's

death with "dowry deaths" through the phrase "burning bride" is an example of how Western media use popular phrases without considering the implications and history behind these phrases.<sup>32</sup>

The distortions in the *Observer's* representation of Aleyamma are not merely mistakes committed by oversight but rather manifestations of how different stereotypical images of Indian women overlap and merge in Western media discourse.<sup>33</sup> What influences the collapsing of these different circumstances by the *Observer*? Sander Gilman's insightful observations regarding the psychology behind stereotyping might give us a clue: "Qualities assigned to the Other readily form patterns with little or no relationship to any external reality. Since all of the images of the Other derive from the same deep structure, various signs of difference can be linked without any recognition of inappropriateness, contradictoriness, or even impossibility."<sup>34</sup> Making a similar observation, Wahneema Lubiano, who conducted a textual analysis of media coverage of the Clarence Thomas hearings, finds that in the process of "othering" illogical links are often made.<sup>35</sup> Citing media representations of Anita Hill as both lesbian and spurned woman, Lubiano writes, "That lesbian and spurned woman cannot be rationally linked together simply means that a debased discourse doesn't care whether the terms of "othering" are logical or not."<sup>36</sup> Through the contradictory representations of Aleyamma (bride/widow), her figure becomes a blurred set of metaphors such as "victim," "dot on the forehead," and "burning," all of which mask the facts and concrete realities of her life.

Aleyamma's "Indianness" is subtly reinforced by the beginning of the story: "Aleyamma Mathew's kitchen filled with the pungent scent of curry as she stirred the mixture of chili powder, turmeric, ginger, kariapala leaves, and chicken in hot oil. Her mother in India had taught her how to make curry, and she always added a little extra chili powder to make it spicy . . ." (11). The words "spicy" and "curry" are two terms among a host of others such as "saris," "yoga," "snake charmers," and "Kama Sutra" that have come to stand for India in popular Western discourse.<sup>37</sup> In a survey of freshmen university students at Indiana University, one of the ways in which students characterized India was "a place where the foods are very spicy" and "people wear dots between their eyes."<sup>38</sup> Cecil, Pranav, and Takacs note that media representations of India shape people's perceptions of India in these ways and people's perceptions in turn shape the course of future media representations, in an endless cycle.<sup>39</sup>

It is interesting that the first image of Aleyamma portrayed to the reader is one of a domestic housewife, when the writer could have

begun with a description of her day at the hospital as a professional nurse. Contrasting Aleyamma's personal life with her professional life, Rebecca Sherman writes:

Although Aleyamma earned a good salary — more than \$35,000 a year — and had won the respect of doctors and nurses in a decade of service as a registered nurse at Parkland hospital, when she came home she was a traditional Indian wife. After work she took off her white nurse's tunic and pants and covered her body in a full-length *pabada*, or cotton skirt, over which she slipped a shorter cotton gown. At home, she only spoke Malayalam, the official language in her native state of Kerala. (11)

"Traditional" here is quite clearly equated to wearing traditional Indian attire and speaking one's native language, equations that are made due to Western notions of what constitutes "traditional" and "modern." The possibility that people from non-Western cultures may wear traditional clothing and yet not espouse the traditional patriarchal values of their culture is not even a consideration — in fact such an outlook overlooks the fact that many feminist activists in India today wear saris *and* are committed to fighting oppression against women within traditional patriarchal structures. Pointing out the problems with using Western standards of evaluation in writing about third world women, Chandra Mohanty observes "Legal, economic, religious, and familial structures are treated as phenomena to be judged by Western standards. It is here that ethnocentric universality comes into play."<sup>40</sup>

The urge to stress the cultural aspects of violence in non-Western cultures often leads to sweeping statements that tend to treat people of the culture as homogeneous. It is disturbing that the phrase "Like other Indian immigrants/women . . ." is frequently used in the description of specific characteristics of Aleyamma's life to produce a monolithic concept of the Indian community. Aleyamma, as an Indian Christian, was a member of a minority community among Indians, a majority of whom are Hindus, in India as well as in the United States. Yet the story in the *Observer* suggests that Aleyamma "Like other Indian immigrants [my emphasis] wore her best silk saris to church [my emphasis] on Sundays. . . ." (11). A majority of the Indian immigrants in the United States who are Hindu do not go to church but to Hindu temples — it would have been more appropriate in this case to say, "Like other Christian Indian immigrants . . ."<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Sherman also observes that "Indian women" do not date, "Indian women" never reject marriage proposals, and that "every Indian family" (12) worries about unmarried daughters (all italics are my emphasis). Universalizing

Aleyamma's experiences, the *Observer* casts all Indian women as a homogenous social group characterized by what Chandra Mohanty calls "common dependencies" and "powerlessness."<sup>42</sup> Such a universalization denies "historical specificity" to the experiences of particular Indian women who have different experiences based on the structures of caste, class, geographic location, and religion within which they are located.<sup>43</sup> Sweeping and universalizing statements regarding the social lives of women in India also produce static images of a country; for example, while it is true that dating is not an established social ritual in India as it is the West and that many marriages are arranged, it is also true that the situation has changed over the past two decades.

Apart from attributing universal qualities to the diverse Indian community, the tendency to homogenize also leads to some serious errors. Sherman contends that dowries are not common "among Christians in South India" (14), when in fact the prevalence of the dowry system among certain groups of Christians in South India is quite well known. Christians in South India constitute a heterogeneous group, with wide differences based on class, the caste to which they belonged before conversion, and the region they come from. In a study of Christians in Kerala (the state Aleyamma Mathew came from), Mathew Kurian, who makes a distinction between Syrian Christians and other denominations of Christians, writes that Syrian Christians are those Christians who originally belonged to the Brahmin and other upper castes, while a majority of the other Christians in Kerala belonged to the lower castes.<sup>44</sup> A distinction between these two groups of Christians, Kurian notes, is the strong prevalence of the dowry system among Syrian Christians.<sup>45</sup> Making a similar observation about Syrian Christians in Kerala, another scholar, George Kurian, also notes, "Among Syrian Christians dowry by the parents of the daughters is a custom which is very strong."<sup>46</sup> Thus the practice of dowry varies across Christian denominations in South India. It is therefore critical that writers and reporters specify which groups they are describing when writing about social practices such as dowry in India.

Discussing Aleyamma's familiarity with English, Sherman makes the statement, "*Like other Indian immigrants, she struggled with written English*" (14) (emphasis mine). While this may be true of *some* Indian immigrants who come to the United States to open businesses or to seek employment in manufacturing and technical areas, if Sherman had taken the trouble to get some facts on this issue, she would have learned that a majority of Indians who come to the United States do speak and write English fairly well. When India was a British colony English was established as a medium of instruction and as a consequence, schools

and universities continue to offer English as the language of instruction today.<sup>47</sup> Large numbers of Indians who come to the United States for higher education therefore arrive with previous knowledge of English.<sup>48</sup>

To firmly ground Aleyamma's death within Indian tradition and culture, the practice of Sati is described early on in the story, and a connection is established between Sati and "bride burning." Aleyamma's death is invoked as an inevitable and irreversible conclusion to an Indian woman's life: "Aleyamma Mathew may have been fated to die by fire" (11). Sati, or "widow burning," is identified as an earlier form of wife burning or "bride burning." Sherman suggests an organic and traditional link between Sati and wife burning when she notes that "Sati was outlawed in the late 1800s, and only a handful of cases have been reported in the last two decades. Yet the *tradition* of wife burning continues" (11). Describing Sati, Sakuntala Narasimhan writes, "... sati in popular usage has now come to mean a woman who burns herself along with the body of her deceased husband."<sup>49</sup> "Bride burning," as described earlier in this paper, is a contemporary phenomenon in which young married women are burnt to death for not bringing a large enough dowry to the homes of their husbands. It is difficult to see how Sati and "bride burning" are connected except for the superficial "burning" element — the burning of a widow took place for reasons completely different from the reasons that married women (not widows) are burnt by their husbands today. In addition, it is also important to note that Sati, unlike "dowry death," is an uncommon practice in India today.<sup>50</sup>

Linking Sati, an older practice, to wife burning or "bride burning," a more widely prevalent, contemporary practice, through the use of the word "tradition," locates the murder of Indian women solely within religious discourse and Hindu traditions.<sup>51</sup> Yet dowry deaths, which are on the increase in India today, are much more complex phenomena than merely a continuation of Hindu traditions. Defining the common understanding of dowry, Wanda Teays writes, "In an everyday sense, the term dowry means the property that a bride brings with her at the time of marriage."<sup>52</sup> While the giving of dowry at the time of marriage exists in various forms in South Asia, within the specific context of India where the problem of "dowry deaths" is particularly prevalent, the origin of the system of dowry has been difficult to trace. Attempting to search as far back as possible in Hindu texts, Teays observes "It is not clear how the dowry system evolved, but it reached expression in the early compendium of sacred laws titled Laws of Manu, which described the eight forms of marriage."<sup>53</sup> S. J. Tambiah, an Indian scholar noted for his research on dowry and women's property rights,

explains the traditional Hindu view of dowry as "property given to the daughter to take with her into marriage."<sup>54</sup> While the source of the dowry system in India can be located within Hinduism, it must be noted that after independence the problem of "dowry deaths" has been on the increase. The economic stratification produced by British colonialism that favored the upper classes/castes, the economic devastation left behind after colonialism, and the uneven development of rural and urban areas have all contributed to the increase in the number of dowry deaths. In India, a third world country in which a majority of the population is poor, dowry has come to be seen as a quick and easy way for families to procure money. Wanda Teays suggests that "Ironically, Western values may be partially responsible for the dowry system turning into a violent mutation of consumerism."<sup>55</sup> "Dowry death" must be recognized as a problem that has been exacerbated by India's transition towards a capitalistic economy in which the lower and lower middle classes have been marginalized.

Thus, modernity, capitalism, upward mobility, increasing consumerism, the spread of education among both men and women, unemployment, and the fact that women are joining the workforce in increasing numbers are all factors that have played critical roles in the problem of "dowry deaths."<sup>56</sup> By concentrating on "Indian tradition" alone the story neglects the role of other socioeconomic conditions that contribute to the problem of "dowry deaths" or "bride burning." While the *Observer's* oversimplification of the "bride burning" problem in India is significant, what is more serious is that not only is Aleyamma Mathew's death, which did not involve the issue of dowry, connected to "bride burning" but also that "bride burning" is unproblematically linked to Sati. In the *Observer's* story about Aleyamma, it is quite appropriate to discuss various forms of violence against women in India to show how "burning" is a particular form of violence; however, it is erroneous to conflate these forms of violence and to incorrectly label her as a "burning bride." The practice of Sati has been widely debated and discussed in Western discourse (especially in the media and academia) as a prime example of women's oppression in India. As a result of this focus, all burning becomes Sati and all women in India are constantly trying to escape the clutches of Sati. Geeta Patel, an Indian feminist scholar, describes a conversation with a colleague who was curious whether Geeta had left India for the United States to save herself from being burnt through the practice of Sati.<sup>57</sup> Commenting on the image of the "archetypal victim, the burnt bride," Patel observes:

What I found curious about the figure of the burnt woman (including in my encounter with my colleague) was the tenacious hold she seemed to have on the representational possibilities open to Indian women. But striking at her to dislodge her was like tilting at a medieval straw woman. Like the ghost image from some fantasy, she manifested when someone took aim at her, but disappeared immediately after. At the same time, because she was treated as though she were "real," each time she reappeared she acquired the solidity often possessed by "orientalist" colonial stereotypes.<sup>58</sup>

In the obsessive focus on Sati, the specific context of the violence surrounding Aleyamma's death disappears and is replaced by the all-encompassing figure of the "burnt woman" represented in discourses on Sati. This ensures that Indian women become "not like us" to the non-Indian reader and helps establish a distance between the victim's life and the reader's life.

Because the *Observer* sensationalizes Aleyamma's death as a possible future for *all Indian women* it precludes the possibility of looking at Indian women in other ways. On the first page of the story, where Rebecca Sherman tries to reconstruct the events that took place on the day Aleyamma died, she writes "Aleyamma had to work early the next morning, so she prepared for bed. But before going to sleep this night, Aleyamma would repeat again what *no Indian woman*, even in America, says without repercussions: she would tell her husband no" (11) (Aleyamma had said no to her husband's decision to take the family back to India). In this construction all Indian women are made to appear passive and the consequence of defying men is cast as commonplace and always predictable. After forecasting a dismal future for all Indian women who would "say no" to their husbands, the story briefly describes how Aleyamma died and then goes on to establish the inevitability of "death by fire" for all Indian women. The tendency of Western culture, including the media, to focus on the category of "Indian women" primarily as *victims* of Sati and "bride burning" prevents discussions of them as possessing human agency. For instance, toward the end of the story, Sherman writes that Aleyamma's Indian co-workers had spotted a brief story in the *MetroCrest News* on Aleyamma's death (20). The story in the *MetroCrest News* reported that police investigators were considering the possibility of "arson" as a reason for her death. Aleyamma's co-workers, who were familiar with Mathew Varughese's history of wife abuse, were worried that he would get away scott free; they sent a copy of the article to the *MetroCrest News* reporter with a message that urged him to investigate Mathew Varughese as the person responsible for Aleyamma's death

(20). These Indian women, Aleyamma's co-workers and friends, were determined that Mathew Varughese should face retribution for his crime. The story of Aleyamma's death would have taken on a different "frame" had it begun by discussing the actions of these women and the support they extended to Aleyamma during difficult times when Mathew Varughese abused her.<sup>59</sup>

Lata Mani, an Indian feminist scholar who analyzes British colonial accounts of Sati in India, discusses the construction of Indian woman as victims of certain cultural practices in Western discourse. She discusses reductive representations of Indian women within accounts of Sati and articulates the consequences of such representations:

Such a constrained and reductive notion of agency discursively positions women as objects to be saved — never as subjects who act, even if within extremely constraining social conditions. This representation of Indian women has been fertile ground for the elaboration of discourses of salvation, in the context of colonialism, nationalism, and more recently, Western feminism.<sup>60</sup>

The *Dallas Observer* portrays Aleyamma Mathew as the helpless victim of a patriarchal Indian culture that annihilates women. The overwhelming focus on this depiction fails to bring into the foreground the efforts she made to be economically independent, her struggles to escape her abusive situation, and her courageous attempts to protect her children from their father's abuse.<sup>61</sup>

Aleyamma left her husband several times and even consulted a lawyer about getting a divorce — actions that are hard to take for Indian women far away from the familial ties and support structures available to them in India. Describing the situations of women from South Asia in the United States, Sayantani Dasgupta writes, "Bereft of this supportive network in the unfamiliar culture of the U.S., immigrant women are too often alone and resourceless in the face of adversity. Furthermore, fear of social sanction and family shame ensnare South Asian women facing violence."<sup>62</sup> Given that the stigma of divorce still remains very strong in the Indian community, Aleyamma's act is noteworthy, despite the fact that she returned to her husband. Instead of viewing Aleyamma's struggles within the specific context of her situation as a South Asian woman, the *Observer* chooses to look at divorce as it takes place within Western culture and fails to understand the courage it takes for immigrant Asian women in the United States to divorce their husbands. The *Observer* describes Aleyamma as "losing her nerve" about getting a divorce and minimizes her struggles: "Despite it all — despite years of drunken threats



and vicious beatings — Aleyamma had resolved once again to preserve the traditions of her ancestors and her homeland, whatever the personal cost" (17).<sup>63</sup>

The *Observer* subtly portrays the Varughese children also as victims of "tradition" in describing the children's refusal to testify against their father; "Like their mother before them, they are willing to suffer for their father" (21). The Varughese children had just lost their mother and were soon going to lose their only remaining parent. Overlooking the obvious anxiety of these confused children who were desperately clinging to their only hope of support and love, the *Observer* prefers instead to see their behavior as an extension of their mother's suffering as an Indian woman. By emphasizing the cultural aspects of Aleyamma's murder, the *Observer* fails to bring forth other issues that may have been as relevant to her murder as the dark side of Indian culture. It also fails to provide information that could be of critical use to Indian women trapped in abusive relationships.

#### Consequences of Othering: The *Observer* Neglects Critical Issues

Throughout the story of Aleyamma's married life in the *Dallas Observer* there are recurring references to Mathew Varughese's alcoholism. Even before their marriage twenty years previously, Mathew Varughese had a reputation for drinking, and the problem only worsened after he came to the United States. The *Dallas Observer* graphically describes Varughese's drinking habits and the violence that ensued after heavy bouts of alcohol consumption. In one particularly grisly incident that took place in October 1988, when Aleyamma's nephew came to her rescue after the children phoned him, the description of Aleyamma's condition is particularly moving: "Blood streamed from a gash on her nose and from a bald patch on her head where hair had been ripped out. Her three daughters surrounded her. . . . Reiji could smell the alcohol on his uncle's breath from several feet away. Varughese sat in a stupor on the living-room sofa, and there were glasses of whiskey on the coffee table in front of him" (14). In 1988 and 1989, Aleyamma's work in the hospital began suffering and she sometimes came to work with gashes and bruises on her body (16). Mathew's problem became so acute that he even began physically abusing his daughters. His drinking, as his daughter's diary indicates, continued until the day of Aleyamma's death in April 1992 (17). From the *Observer's* account it is obvious that Mathew became violent under the

influence of alcohol and at the time of Aleyamma's death the police found him intoxicated.

In the *Observer's* treatment of Mathew's alcoholism, his drinking problem is emphasized and described in fair amount of detail but as a parallel story and not as an *integral* part of Aleyamma's life or as a factor that may have exacerbated existing problems in their relationship. The *Observer* briefly discusses Mathew's pursuit of wealth and his desire to acquire possessions; Mathew and his wife clearly disagreed on matters of how they should spend their money (16). In 1988, when Mathew wanted to buy a bigger house, Aleyamma wanted to save the money for their daughters' education. When Mathew decided to buy a new car it was Aleyamma who went into considerable debt to help him. Toward the end of the story, Sherman quotes Mathew complaining about Aleyamma's role as a wife and mother: "She worked all the time. That's all she had time for. She didn't take care of me or the children so good anymore" (21). In addition to his complaints about Aleyamma not spending sufficient time with him, Mathew also felt dissatisfied with his sexual relationship with Aleyamma: "She used to like to go to the bedroom with me, you know, but she didn't like it so much anymore" (21). Thus, there were several issues related to financial matters, work pressures, and personal/sexual matters that led to a rift between Aleyamma and her husband. These issues may have influenced Mathew's increased consumption of alcohol; his alcoholism in turn affected his relationship with his wife.

In spite of the overwhelming evidence regarding the influence of alcohol on Mathew's violent behavior, the *Dallas Observer* chose to let this issue slip to the background and preferred to put "Sati" and "Indian culture" on stage. The headlines on the cover page say in large type, "Battered by her husband, Parkland Nurse Aleyamma Mathew remained *true to her culture*. In the end she became *its* victim" (my emphasis). On the first page of the story, across Aleyamma Mathew's face in even larger type are the words, "By the measure of *Indian tradition*, Mathew Varughese's wife made two mistakes: she gave him only daughters and she dared to tell him no. She paid for it with her life" (my emphasis). Spread across the first two pages of the story are the words "Aleyamma's Pyre," which invoke a strong association with Sati. The first boxed statement (white letters in a black box) in the story, featured on the third page, reads, "There is still a concept of woman having to suffer in order to keep our home traditions alive." The article also begins with descriptions of Aleyamma cooking "curry" and being a "traditional Indian wife" when she came home after work. The text on the first page of the story, right after a brief description of

Aleyamma's death, describes Sati and "bride burning" in India in a very problematic way. The three headlines that announce the story and the way the story itself begins highlight the role of Indian culture in perpetrating Aleyamma's murder and thus render Varughese's alcoholism marginal.

The problem of alcoholism, one of the most important factors in the battering of many women in the United States by husbands or boyfriends,<sup>64</sup> obviously could not be a factor in Aleyamma's death — the choice of "exoticizing" her death proved irresistible. Research on the link between domestic violence and alcoholism shows that while alcoholism does not cause violence, "a strong link between alcohol use and physical abuse of wives does exist."<sup>65</sup> Murray Straus and Glenda Kantor's research indicates that in one out of four cases of wife abuse, alcohol was consumed immediately before the violent act,<sup>66</sup> and they point out that while alcohol does not cause violence, heavy drinking allows men to be violent in order to assert power and control.<sup>67</sup> Ann Jones and Susan Schechter also maintain that alcohol and drugs can be used by men as an excuse to attack women without feeling "guilt or remorse."<sup>68</sup>

I am not proposing here that the *Observer* should have laid the blame for Aleyamma's death on alcoholism instead of on Indian culture. Instead, I would like to suggest that the *Observer* could have problematized Mathew's alcoholism and looked for its embeddedness within other financial and interpersonal problems the couple was facing. It is both troubling and painful that in the urge to make Aleyamma's death exotic, the *Observer* did not examine Mathew's alcoholism as a symptom of problems that had been simmering in the relationship for many years.

The *Observer's* portrayal of Aleyamma's death becomes intelligible only by portraying her as (1) the victim of a blatantly patriarchal culture where wives who say no to husbands are burnt, and (2) as the victim of the practice of Sati. Such a framing of Aleyamma's death enables the *Observer* to sensationalize the event and to portray it as out of the ordinary and deviant.

Media critic Todd Gitlin explains the concept of "media framing" and writes that these frames are unavoidable because they "enable journalists to process large amounts of information quickly and routinely: to recognize it as information, to assign to it cognitive categories, and to package it for efficient relay to their audiences."<sup>69</sup> He also adds that stories that do not fit neatly into the accepted reality can be channeled into frames that convey some sort of deviance. Standard news values tend to skew the coverage of minorities whose "difference" can

be attributed to culture and exploited to provoke "horror" in readers. It is not surprising, therefore, that mainstream newspapers like the *Dallas Morning News* do not even mention Varughese's alcoholism and instead focus only on the "Indian culture" aspect of the death. The *Morning News* writes that prosecutors made a point of attributing the cause of Aleyamma's death to the dispute between the couple over going back to India.<sup>70</sup> Discussing the defense, the newspaper observes: "Defense attorneys at one point suggested that the woman's death might have been suicide, based on the ancient Indian custom of immolation, which is now outlawed in that country. Immolation required widows to throw themselves on their dead husbands' burning funeral pyres."<sup>71</sup> Once again, Aleyamma's death unquestioningly becomes one more event in the pageant of Sati. The *Observer* gives us additional information about the prosecutors: "Convinced that Varughese's native culture played a key role in his decision . . . the prosecution summoned an expert in Indian culture to testify about the prevalence of wife burning in India" (20). The prosecution, the defense, and the *Observer* all invoke culture as the cause of Aleyamma's death and thus there is overwhelming consensus among the media and the courts regarding the role of Indian tradition in Varughese's murder of Aleyamma.

One question stayed with me after I finished reading the story of Aleyamma's death in the *Observer*: Could Aleyamma have sought professional help or support for her problems? Although Aleyamma had close relatives living in the area, the stigma of separation or divorce often makes women suffer in private. Sayantani Dasgupta discusses the different problems faced by South Asian women in the United States and comments, "Furthermore, fear of social sanction and family shame ensnare South Asian women facing violence in a web of silent suffering."<sup>72</sup> Aleyamma's situation thus raises an extremely important issue of practical significance for women who may be victims of domestic violence, an issue that is not even discussed by the *Observer*: Where can South Asian women in Aleyamma's situation seek help? Are there any support groups or women's groups that can address her needs, which may be different from those of Western women? It is the omission of such critical information in an otherwise in-depth article that I find indicative of the *Observer's* superficial interest in Aleyamma's death. Although the story contains a brief quote from Anannya Bhattacharjee, who works with Sakhi, a South Asian women's organization, there is no description of the efforts of this organization to help immigrant South Asian women in abusive situations.<sup>73</sup> Even though these organizations are located far from Dallas, some services may still be obtained by phone or mail: personal counseling, job

counseling, legal assistance, and advice on immigration.<sup>74</sup> Describing these organizations and their activities would probably have destroyed the image of Indian women as helpless submissive victims, an image that the *Observer* is so bent on portraying.

Sakhi in New York and Manavi in New Jersey were the first organizations to break the silence surrounding the issue of domestic violence in the South Asian community. Describing the goals of their organization, Sakhi's mission statement says "Our main concern is domestic violence within our community. Our aim is to support and empower battered women."<sup>75</sup> Manavi's mission is to "empower women of South Asian descent through awareness of social rights and bringing about social changes" and it is also committed to eliminating violence against women.<sup>76</sup> An indication of the success of their efforts is the help Sakhi gave to an Indian woman who tried to escape from a husband who physically and mentally tormented her for not bringing a good dowry.<sup>77</sup> This woman sought help from Sakhi on the advice of her sister who had seen a flier advertising the organization. She praises their efforts and comments, "They really understood what I'm going through. Their being Indian really helped."<sup>78</sup>

Omitting useful information about organizations that offer help to South Asian women has unintended consequences. An Indian woman (an acquaintance of mine) who happened to read about Aleyamma's death in the *Observer*, when asked to react to it, said, "Oh, that's terrible, but what could she do? She has nowhere to go and nobody could have helped her — it's such a disgrace to ask people you know for help in this situation." It is precisely this problem that the *Dallas Observer* could address if it were even the slightest bit interested in assisting other women who might be facing Aleyamma's problems rather than merely increasing its circulation.

The *Observer*, like most media organizations, is not genuinely interested in helping women — if it were, it undoubtedly would have at least discussed these women's groups and their efforts to help women in Aleyamma's situation. The media, in their coverage of the third world, prefer to highlight and sensationalize disaster and death rather than provide positive information. As we have seen, this tendency influences the coverage of diasporic peoples from third world countries living in the United States.

### Conclusion

The *Dallas Observer*, in covering the murder of Aleyamma Mathew, a person from a non-Western culture, failed to adopt a culturally sensitive attitude that would have led to a story that was less stereotyped, less "Orientalist," and a more accurate portrayal of Aleyamma's situation.<sup>79</sup> To enable readers to process information easily, the printed media sensationalize problematic incidents and often revert to stereotypical representations. Frequently, this results in distortion, factual errors, and, more seriously, the suppression or marginalization of some critical aspects that may be relevant to the problem.

As a feminist, media coverage of domestic violence is particularly disturbing to me because it can often cause further problems for South Asian women. When the media trace the causes of domestic violence to certain practices in a culture, without looking at other factors, the community is often offended and may even ostracize the woman for talking to journalists. Blaming the culture and not paying enough attention to other issues can only encourage apathy toward these problems. The media also fail to be socially responsible in their urge to exoticize these incidents of domestic violence and to portray women like Aleyamma as archetypal victims of their culture. As a consequence they often do not provide practical information that can be useful to other women who may find themselves in Aleyamma's situation.

The media should also be careful in attributing violence in the family only to cultural practices that exist within the community. The *Observer* could have taken the trouble to verify the exact definitions of Sati, "bride burning," and wife burning before it associated Aleyamma's death with these practices. An in-depth story like the one analyzed in this paper also warrants much more careful research to ascertain facts regarding the Indian community on religious practices, language, and regional differences.

In writing about people from a country/subcontinent as diverse as India, which is characterized by very complex caste, class, regional, and religious differences, journalists must tread very carefully when they use the adjective "Indian" to produce a homogenous image. The frequent use of this word is no doubt unavoidable, but it would probably not hurt to verify if the use is indeed appropriate. It would also be advisable to avoid slipping into easy generalizations. As far as possible, if specific information can be found about people, events or phenomena, specifics should be preferred over generalizations.

Geeta Patel proposes one strategy to question or problematize generalizations that homogenize and create a distance between readers

and the subjects of discussion.<sup>80</sup> Taking a paragraph from a story in the *New York Times* on abuse of women,<sup>81</sup> specifically “dowry deaths” in India, she suggests a reading strategy that could turn us “from readers positioned as outsiders pruriently perusing tales of horror from other cultures, to readers who begin to ‘reverse the gaze.’”<sup>82</sup> The paragraph she examines in *The New York Times* reads: “In India’s system of arranged marriages, the bride is often regarded as a source of dowry income and in some cases little more than a servant in her husband’s family home.”<sup>83</sup> Suggesting that we momentarily imagine this to be a story about the United States in the Indian media, Patel asks us to substitute “U.S.” for “India” in the first paragraph. With a few additional word changes, it would then read, “In the U.S. system of marriages, the bride is often regarded as a source of income and is in some cases little more than a servant in her husband’s home.”<sup>84</sup> This substitution, she argues, would then produce a generic statement about all women in the United States, a statement that would devalue all women in this country in a frozen and static manner. Patel also analyzes a second paragraph in the same story, which reads: “Mothers-in-law often put the most pressure on the young woman, who has no protector in a marriage contracted without love. Indian husbands and wives do not meet until the wedding day, and . . .”<sup>85</sup> Here she points out that operative phrases such as “India’s system of arranged marriages,” “marriage contracted without love,” and “Indian husbands and wives,” serve to subtly “create and reinforce the chasm between India and other countries/cultures.”<sup>86</sup> Patel’s reading strategy, if judiciously used, illustrates one way that writers and journalists can turn questions back on themselves to challenge generalizations that homogenize and distance cultures.

The issue of representing non-Western cultures in media discourses of the West brings up certain problems that need to be addressed: exoticizing, producing essentialist notions of a culture, homogenizing diverse and specific experiences, and rendering non-Western people as passive, among others. It is difficult to point out quick and formulaic ways of achieving that fine balance between acknowledging cultural specificities and stereotyping in various forms of writing on non-Western cultures. To consider the example of covering domestic violence in the media, it is important to remember that while certain “traditions” within cultures do play a role in perpetrating violence against women, one must also examine how relevant these traditions are for each specific case. It is not wrong to describe the violence inflicted on women in the name of “tradition” but it is a colonialist move to cast “culture” and “tradition” as primarily responsible for such

violence and to ignore other factors. Chandra Mohanty raises the issue of the problematic manner in which cultural explanations for third world women's oppression are found in Western feminist writing. She suggests that one way of avoiding reductionistic analyses of third world women's oppression is through "careful, politically focused, local analyses."<sup>87</sup> Praising Maria Mies's work on the lacemakers of Narapur in India,<sup>88</sup> Mohanty observes that Mies avoids the simplification of the lacemakers' situation by resisting cultural explanations as the sole factors for women's oppression as "women," as "housewives," and as "laborers," and instead examines how sociocultural elements are harnessed by a hegemonic, exploitative world market.

In the case of the story covering Aleyamma's death in the *Observer*, the writer's move to frame violence against Indian women within the family setting as originating from "Sati" or "bride burning" — regardless of the precise relevance of these forms of violence for Aleyamma's death — is an exoticizing and ahistoric rhetorical gesture. Generalizing from Aleyamma's situation by using phrases such as "Indian women," "like other Indian women," and "no Indian woman," produces images of Indian women as a "homogeneous sociological grouping characterized by common dependencies and powerlessness."<sup>89</sup> Just as it is critical to not seek "Indian culture" alone as the primary reason for the violence suffered by Aleyamma, it is also crucial to avoid being ethnocentric when interpreting the actions/customs/clothing of people from other cultures. Both the focus on culture as an "exoticizing" move and the dismissal of genuine cultural differences are problems that can be addressed only by giving up the notion of Western culture and Western ways as superior and as the "normative" basis of human society.

Given the pressures of deadlines at media institutions it is undoubtedly difficult for reporters to find the time to do thorough research and to carefully edit their stories. The problem of finding time is particularly difficult for reporters who cover events on a daily basis. In the case of feature stories, such as the story on Aleyamma's death in the *Observer*, which appeared a year after Aleyamma's death, writers have a little more time because they are not bound by hourly and daily deadlines. The problem of biased media coverage of non-Western cultures is not one that will disappear overnight. A long-term approach to this problem will have to take into account the way journalists are being trained in classrooms, especially regarding the coverage of issues related to minorities in the United States and the third world. An awareness of the West's colonial history — in the economic and social spheres — and of the ways in which non-Western cultures were



rendered “primitive” and “barbaric” in order to justify colonialism would help to make future journalists wary of stereotyping as well as ethnocentrism. Exposure to the writings of third world scholars such as Chandra Mohanty, who has systematically dismantled the construction of “third world woman” in Western feminist discourse, will go a long way in pointing out to students ways in which writers unconsciously and subtly produce binary oppositions between Western culture and other cultures, oppositions that serve to reinforce the superiority of the West. It is also important to stress that once students graduate and go on to take up jobs as reporters and editors, they do not really leave the classroom since continuous learning is a very important part of being a journalist. Such learning after leaving the classroom means continuing the process of remaining up-to-date with critiques of the media that are generated within the academy. It is in this realm that academic scholars can take an active part; they can enable journalists to be familiar with some of the useful critiques of media representations and also provide opportunities for dialogue and conversation between media critics and journalists through workshops and conferences.<sup>90</sup>

It was with this purpose in mind that I shared my thoughts on this story in the *Dallas Observer* with Rebecca Sherman, the journalist who wrote the story for the *Observer*. I also sent her a copy of an earlier version of this paper. My conversation with Sherman gave me the feeling that it is only through dialogues between feminist scholars and other institutions, even if such dialogues are only micropolitical forms of intervention, that we can even hope to provoke reflection on issues related to women. However, it is important to remember that criticizing the media alone for contributing to the problem of “othering” is not sufficient; rather it is the presence of “othering” in all forms of discourse, including academic discourse, that must also be critiqued.

In addressing domestic violence in the media, in the academy, or in support groups, it is important to remember that it is a problem that affects women all over the world, of every race, culture, and class. Going back to the incident in my life that took place at the library, I would like to suggest that framing the oppression of Indian women within the parameters of primitive cultural practices alone or suggesting that their victimization is much more horrific only distances their experiences from the experiences of other women. In doing this there is an implicit assumption that such problems are invisible in the West. The “othering” of the situation of Indian women facilitates turning away from the problem of domestic violence in the United States by projecting it on Indian women. As Anannya Bhattacharjee of *Sakhi*

said in an interview, "The story was written by a person looking down from above at the Indian community."<sup>91</sup> Looking "down" from above does not help to alleviate the problem of "othering." What is needed is to look "at" with sensitivity to the specifics of the situation whatever race, class, gender, or ethnicity issues may be involved.

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### Notes

1. I am fully aware of the problems associated with using the term "third world." It has been contested as hierarchical and derogatory. However, people from postcolonial and developing nations continue to be classified as "third world people" within dominant discourses such as reports of the United Nations and the World Bank. I use the term self-consciously; Chandra Mohanty points out that it not only makes concrete the economic relationship between the first world and the third world, but it also takes into account our history of colonization and relationships of dominance between first and third world peoples. See Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Western Discourses," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
2. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes."
3. Rebecca Sherman, "Aleyamma's Pyre," *Dallas Observer*, 15 April 1993, 10-21. All further references to this story will be cited in text.
4. Peter Dahlgren and Sumitra Chakrapani, "The Third World on TV News: Western Ways of Seeing the 'Other,'" in *Television Coverage of International Affairs*, ed. William C. Adams (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1982), 53.
5. Dahlgren and Chakrapani, "The Third World on TV News," 53.
6. Keya Ganguly, "Accounting for Others: Feminism and Representation," in *Women Making Meaning: New Feminist Directions in Communication*, ed. Lana Rakow (New York: Routledge, 1992), 71.
7. Carl Bybee suggests that the news-as-ideology position forces recognition of the intersection of power and knowledge. His assertion that domination may be "exercised not simply as coercive force but as through the creation of a 'reality' that naturalizes the reasonableness and the inevitability of oppression" is particularly

relevant to this paper. See Carl Bybee, "Constructing Women as Authorities: Local Journalism and the Microphysics of Power," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 7:3 (1990): 199.

8. Nancy Lays Stepan writes about the role metaphors and analogies played in linking race and gender (particularly in linking women with "lower races") in scientific research in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She argues that human variation and difference were experienced through a metaphorical system that "structured the experience and understanding of difference and that in essence created the objects of difference." Analyzing how metaphors directed and constituted the parameters of research or knowledge production on race and gender, Stepan looks at how metaphors organized reality and constructed signs of inferiority. See Nancy L. Stepan, "Race and Gender: The Role of Analogy in Science," *ISIS* 77 (1986): 265.
9. Sander Gilman, *Seeing the Insane* (New York: Wiley, 1982), xi.
10. Wes Cecil, Pranav Jani, and Stacy Takacs, "India Is(n't): Misrepresentations of India in the United States Media," *Samar* (Summer 1994): 4.
11. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 74.
12. Sonali Vepa, "New Growth, New Challenges: Indians Form One of America's Fastest Growing Immigrant Communities," *India Currents*, 31 October 1992, M19.
13. Vepa, "New Growth, New Challenges."
14. Discussing the flood of Indian immigration to the United States in the sixties, Mahesh Mehta writes, "In 1965 when the discriminatory laws based on national origin quotas that had blocked Asian immigration for half a century were abolished, the large number of Indian immigrants started arriving. . . ." See Mahesh Mehta, "Indian Immigration to U.S.," in *Mother India: Children Abroad*, ed. Vidya Sagar and Manohar Puri (New Delhi: International Publishers, 1986), 126. See also Rahul Singh, "A Great Indian Wave: Indians Abroad Decide to Document Their Diaspora," *Far Eastern Economic Review* 146 (October 19, 1989): 36, for a discussion of Indian immigration to the United States in the sixties.
15. Singh, "A Great Indian Wave," 36.
16. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Questions of Multiculturalism," in *The Post-Colonial Critic*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), 61-62.
17. Prem Vora, "South Asian Women's Social Realities: Sakhi and Manavi Organize a Conference at Columbia," *India Currents*, 31 August 1993, 5.
18. Curt Clemson, "Burning Bride," Letter to the Editor, *Dallas Observer*, 29 April 1993, 3.
19. Nita Thurman, "Man Gets 75 Years in Killing," *Dallas Morning News*, 22 January 1993, 25A.
20. *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, "Nation in Brief" (see section on Texas), 23 January 1993, 4.
21. Jorge Pinada, "Till Death Do Us Part," Letter to the Editor, *Dallas Observer*, 5 May 1993, 3.
22. Bybee, "Constructing Women as Authorities," 209.
23. For a discussion of how writing in the third person helps to establish authority and "truthness," see Bybee, "Constructing Women as Authorities," 209.

24. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972), 152.
25. Dahlgren and Chakrapani, "The Third World on TV News," 54.
26. Some Indian Christian women who belong to certain denominations do wear "bindis" on their foreheads. However, Aleyamma, in all the photographs featured in the story, did not wear it. The painting of the woman with a "bindi" on her forehead to represent Aleyamma, an Indian Christian, is problematic because to a Western audience this automatically signals someone who belongs to the Hindu faith.
27. In a personal discussion on June 3, 1994, with Patricia Gaston (assistant Foreign desk editor) who supervised the series on violence against women in the world in the *Dallas Morning News*, she agreed with me that headlines for stories on non-Western peoples often draw on existing stereotypes regardless of the appropriateness of the headline for a particular story. Gaston also pointed out to me that inappropriate headlines could also be due to the fact that frequently the people who write headlines are not the same as the people who write the stories.
28. John Willigen and V. C. Channa, "Law, Custom, and Crimes Against Women: The Problem of Dowry Death in India," *Human Organization* 50:4 (1991): 369. The legal definition of a dowry death is, "where the death of a woman is caused by any burns or bodily injury or occurs otherwise than under normal circumstances within seven years of her marriage and it is shown that soon before her death she was subjected to cruelty or harassment by her husband or any other relative of her husband for, or in connection with, any demand for dowry, such death shall be called 'dowry death,' and such husband or relative shall be deemed to have caused her death." See Government of India, *India 1986: A Reference Manual* (Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1987), 4.
29. Ranjana Kumari, *Brides are Not for Burning: Dowry Victims in India* (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1989).
30. Wanda Teays, "The Burning Bride: The Dowry Problem in India," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7:2 (1991): 29-52. For more information and analysis of dowry deaths see also Rehana Ghadially and Pramod Kumar, "Bride Burning: The Psycho-Social Dynamics of Dowry Deaths," in *Women in Indian Society: A Reader*, ed. Rehana Ghadially (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1988).
31. Willigen and Channa, "Law, Custom, and Crimes Against Women," 369.
32. Within the story itself, Rebecca Sherman briefly explains the connection between "burning bride" and "dowry deaths" and then writes, "Clearly, Aleyamma Mathew and Rachel Kalluvilayil were not burned for their dowries" (12). One wonders why, despite her awareness, the misleading term "burning bride" was used in large type on the cover.
33. For further details of how stereotypes in mass media work, see Ellen Seiter, "Stereotypes and the Media: A Re-Evaluation," *Journal of Communication* 36:2 (1986): 14-26. Seiter calls for more detailed analyses of stereotypes that would take into account how they arise out of certain historical and social structures. Seiter suggests that rather than just documenting stereotypes we must also study the content of stereotypes and their relationship to one another.
34. Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 20.

35. Wahneema Lubiano, "Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels: Ideological War by Narrative Means," in *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992).
36. Lubiano, "Black Ladies," 342.
37. The words "spicy" and "curry" are often associated with Indians due to popular cultural notions of Indian food. Frequently when I have been introduced to people in the United States for the first time, I have been asked, "Wow, do you eat all that spicy curry every day?" Of course, there are also other icebreakers such as yoga, meditation, the Hare Krishna movement, etc.
38. Cecil Jani, and Takacs, "India Is(n't): Misrepresentations of India in the United States Media," 5.
39. Cecil Jani, and Takacs, "India Is(n't): Misrepresentations of India in the United States Media." An Oprah Winfrey talk show aired in March 1994 featured Indian immigrants in the United States. Predictably, the show featured an "exotic" element — arranged marriages among the Indian immigrant community. For an analysis of this talk show see Caitrin Lynch, "Arranged Marriages on the Oprah Winfrey Show: What Difference Does it Make?" presented at the 23rd Annual Conference on South Asia (University of Wisconsin-Madison, November 4–6, 1994).
40. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 72.
41. Statistics on the number of Indian Christian immigrants in the United States are not available. However, the fact that Hindus, who form the overwhelming majority in India, constitute 83 percent of India's population and Christians only 2.43 percent gives us a strong indication of the composition of the Indian immigrant population in the United States. Statistics on the Indian population, which were compiled in 1993, are cited from *Britannica Book of Year* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 1994).
42. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 59.
43. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 59.
44. Mathew Kurian, *The Caste-Class Formations: A Case Study of Kerala* (New Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1986), 1–6.
45. Kurian, *The Caste-Class Formations*, 65–66.
46. See George Kurian, *The Indian Family in Transition: A Case Study of Kerala Syrian Christians* (s' Gravenhage, Holland: Mouton & Co, 1961), 76. Lionel Caplan also writes about the practice of dowry among Christians in Madras, the capital of Tamilnadu, a state in South India. Caplan, who did his fieldwork in Madras from 1974 to 1975, documents the rapidly spreading practice of dowry among Christians in Madras. See Lionel Caplan, "Bridegroom Price in Urban India: Class, Caste, and 'Dowry' Evil among Christians in Madras," *Man* 19:2 (1984): 216–233.
47. See Kamal K. Sridhar, "The Development of English as an Elite Language in the Multi-lingual Context of India" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1977) for information on the introduction and establishment of English as a medium of education in India.
48. Sonia Ahuja writes that the Western media persist even today in presenting only negative information about India. She points out that one of the reasons for these negative depictions is that in the West very little is known about the history of Asia.

Specifically discussing the ability of many Indians to speak English fluently, she writes, "... some Americans find it hard to understand why many Indians speak English fluently. This suggests that many are not even aware that India was once part of the British empire for about 200 years. Also, because of the long British presence in India, India's educational system is modeled after the British one." See Sonia Ahuja, "Media Misses other Side of India," *The International Indian*, March 1995, 8.

49. Sakuntala Narasimhan, *Sati: A Study of Widow Burning in India* (New York: Viking, 1990), 12. For more information on Sati, see Kanta Grover, *Burning Flesh* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1990) and Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, "The Subject of Sati," in *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, ed. Tejaswini Niranjana, Vivek Dhareshwar, and P. Sudhir (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1993).
50. Five thousand one hundred and fifty-seven dowry murders were reported for the year 1992 ("Indian National Crime Records' Bureau 1992," *World Factbook* [New York: Kaleidoscope, 1993]). Sati, on the other hand, does not occur on this scale. Since India achieved independence, a few incidents of Sati have been reported. Citing the reported cases of Sati, Santosh Singh writes, "After 1955 every year at least one or two instances have been taking place here and there even though it is believed that the custom has completely died out because of social and legislative measures taken in this regard. The well-known instance is of Roop Kanwar who performed Sati on 4th September 1987 at village Deorala in Rajasthan." See Santosh Singh, *A Passion for Flames* (Jaipur, India: RBSA Publishers, 1989), 24.
51. Although I have not documented this, I have noticed that words like "tradition," "ancient," "custom," and "culture" are used frequently in the media with reference to practices and events in non-Western societies. The frequent use of such words conveys the impression of static, tribal societies untouched by time.
52. Teays, "The Burning Bride," 29.
53. Teays, "The Burning Bride," 31.
54. S. J. Tambiah, "Dowry, Bridewealth, and Women's Property Rights," in *Bridewealth and Dowry*, ed. Jack Goody and S. J. Tambiah (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 69.
55. Teays, "The Burning Bride," 51.
56. Teays, "The Burning Bride," 51.
57. Geeta Patel, "Killing the Other Off," unpublished paper (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1993).
58. Patel, "Killing the Other Off," 3.
59. Here I must thank one of my students in class who, in a classroom exercise with this article in the *Dallas Observer*, pointed out that she would begin her own version of the story with a discussion of Aleyamma's relationship with her Indian women friends at work and describe their efforts to help her cope with Mathew Varughese's abuse. She said that she would then write about their message to the police detective and explore the concerns underlying their message. My student felt that such a beginning would move towards portraying third world women as not only victims of patriarchy but also as women who critique patriarchy and recognize their own oppression within this system.

60. Lata Mani, "Reading Eyewitness Accounts of Widow Burning," in *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*.
61. The media in the United States persistently portray third world women as "victims" of tradition and culture. While this problem cannot be alleviated by merely including more positive stories (that is, stories where third world women have mobilized against their oppression), one wonders still why the actions of third world women to combat oppression remain invisible or are marginalized in the Western media. A brief story in the *Washington Post* discusses the successful protest of rural women from hundreds of villages in Andhra Pradesh, India, to ban the sale of cheap liquor. See Molly Moore, "Indian Village Women Fight State, Husbands to Ban Liquor," *Washington Post*, 19 December 1993, A33. The movement to ban cheap liquor was launched by rural women who were subjected to violence from their alcoholic husbands; these poor, rural men would spend their money on alcohol sold by the Indian government on their way home from work, and abuse their wives in their drunken state in the evenings. Discussing the success of their campaign, Molly Moore writes, "The odds seemed overwhelming from the start; poor, illiterate village women taking on one of India's most powerful political lobbies and generations of rigid social codes. But in a campaign hailed by many as India's first major grass-roots women's movement, some of the country's most destitute women have forced a large Indian state to ban the sale of cheap, government-produced liquor." Such stories inevitably remain tucked away in the inside pages of newspapers and magazines and never hit the front pages or become cover stories. One of the top priorities of the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women (held at Beijing from September 4 to September 15, 1995) is to encourage the media to move away from depicting women only as victims and to begin covering women's efforts to change their situation so that their struggles become apparent to the public. See official handout of the Secretariat of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Division for the Advancement of Women, 7 (1995). Covering third world women's struggles along with their oppression is important if they are to be viewed as "subjects" and not as objects all the time.
62. Sayantani Dasgupta, "Breaking the Silence: Women Helping Women is the Goal of Manavi, the Pioneering Women's Group," *India Currents*, 30 June 1993, 17.
63. Note once again the use of words like "traditions," "ancestors," and "homeland" to describe Aleyamma's decision to stay with her husband.
64. Anson Shupe, William Stacey, and Lonnie Hazelwood, *Violent Men, Violent Couples: The Dynamics of Domestic Violence* (Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1987), 113-114. See table on page 114 for factors that contribute to violence among couples in the United States. From the percentages in the table one can see that alcohol is the second most important factor next to financial pressures, conflict over children, and jealousy, all of which are equally important (carry the same percentage).
65. Glenda Kantor and Murray Straus, "The 'Drunken Bum' Theory of Wife Beating," *Social Problems* 34:3 (1987): 223.
66. Kantor and Straus, "The 'Drunken Bum' Theory of Wife Beating," 224.
67. Kantor and Straus, "The 'Drunken Bum' Theory of Wife Beating," 224.
68. Ann Jones and Susan Schechter, *When Love Goes Wrong* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 56.

69. Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press, 1980), 7.
70. Thurman, "Man Gets 75 Years in Killing," 25A.
71. Thurman, "Man Gets 75 Years in Killing."
72. Dasgupta, "Breaking the Silence," 17.
73. Rebecca Sherman explained that in an earlier version of the story information on the shelters was included. However, in the final version, the names and activities of these shelters were edited out. The exclusion of positive information in the media cannot be seen as the result of the actions of individual journalists alone, but as the consequence of a combination of factors such as the philosophy of journalism, the definitions of newsworthiness, and the structures of media organizations and media practices.
74. See Sakhi's newsletter of January 1994 for details of their services. Information can also be obtained by writing to:

Sakhi  
P. O. Box 20208  
Greeley Square Station  
New York, NY 10001-0006  
(212) 695-5447

75. See informational flyer put out by Sakhi. This particular flyer, titled "Sakhi — Break the Silence: Domestic Violence is a Crime," lists services provided by Sakhi, some additional resources to go to for help with domestic violence, and specific suggestions for identifying abuse and taking action to end abuse.
76. Dasgupta, "Breaking the Silence," 17.
77. Constance Hays, "Ending Violence in a New Home," *The New York Times*, 6 December 1993, B3.
78. Constance Hays, "Ending Violence."
79. "Orientalist" is an adjective drawn from the work of Edward Said (*Orientalism* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978]). Citing Said's work, Keya Ganguly writes, "Orientalism, in this usage, refers to the discursive apparatus by means of which the Orient is actively produced, fixed, and objectified in Western imagery and imaginations." See Ganguly, "Accounting for Others," 73.
80. Patel, "Killing the Other Off."
81. Barbara Crossette, "Indian Women's Group Takes on Abuse Cases That Government Neglects," *The New York Times*, 3 May 1991, 8.
82. Patel, "Killing the Other Off," 7-8.
83. Crossette, "Indian Women's Group Takes on Abuse Cases That Government Neglects," 8.
84. Patel, "Killing the Other Off," 8.
85. Crossette, "Indian Women's Group Takes on Abuse Cases That Government Neglects," 8.
86. Patel, "Killing the Other Off," 7.



87. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 65.
88. Maria Mies, *The Lacemakers of Narsapur: Indian Housewives Produce for the World Market* (London: Zed Press, 1982).
89. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 59.
90. The "World, Women, and Media Workshop," which was held at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Iowa from March 23 to March 26, 1995, is a good example of a conference where United States journalists, Chinese journalists, and media scholars convened to discuss better ways of covering the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. One of the issues that generated much discussion at this workshop was the representation of third world women in the media.
91. Anannya Bhattacharjee, telephone interview, April 3, 1994.