



REVIEWS

***Speaking the Unspeakable: Marital Violence among South Asian Immigrants in the United States.* By Margaret Abraham. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000.**

Margaret Abraham begins her book with the story of Syeda Sufian, a young Bangladeshi woman living in Jamaica, New York, who was doused with gasoline and set on fire by her husband, Mohammed Mohsin, in 1995. Sufian survived her ordeal, and with the help of Sakhi for South Asian Women, brought public attention to the violence in an immigrant community.

In her book, Abraham breaks silences by challenging the model minority myth of Asian Americans, in this case of South Asian immigrants, by focusing on how marital violence can be supported by families and communities that choose to ignore its existence or, even worse, contribute to the continued abuse of the women. Her work captures micro-level analysis of the lives and voices of the women who are abused as well as their relationship with their abusers, their relatives in the United States and abroad, and the larger ethnic community. She shows how macro-level social, political, economic, and cultural factors contribute and exacerbate the conditions of marital violence. Her study is a revealing examination of how citizenship, language, ethnicity, religion, and class factor into the oppression of a group of women.

One of the strengths of Abraham's book is her weaving together the narratives of these women's experiences before their marriages, how their relationships became abusive, how the women responded to the abuse, and what resources they had to escape these unions. Her original research was conducted in 1991-94 and includes in-depth interviews of twenty-five South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi) women who experienced marital abuse from their co-ethnic husbands and who are from various religious backgrounds (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Sikh) in the New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago areas. They are

from different class backgrounds with diverse levels of education and work experiences. The interviews were conducted in English, Hindi, Malayalam, and Bengali—showing the complexity of research with this socially constructed ethnic group.

Many of the women in Abraham's study participated in transnational arranged marriages, with some women in their homelands marrying men in the United States and other women already in the United States marrying men from abroad. In some cases, women chose their own partners in "love marriages." Abraham traces how the traditional South Asian concepts of gender roles, the institution of marriage, and family preservation is transplanted to the United States. Mainstream research on domestic violence often has ignored Asian American women, particularly immigrant women who constitute the majority of these victims in the contemporary period. Abraham's perspective focuses on the conditions faced by a racialized group of women who are immigrants, which makes her study timely and useful because it argues for a more complex understanding of, and theorizing on, domestic violence.

Abraham analyzes the ways in social, psychological, and economic isolation at the interpersonal, community, and institutional level contributes to marital violence. Their isolation in a new environment and their separation from family and friends, along with their cultural and linguistic adjustments, contribute to their disempowerment while increasing the control their husbands have over them. Chapter five examines the physical and sexual abuse that is used to oppress and control these women by their husbands. These deeply moving narratives describe how sexuality is constructed for South Asian immigrant women and the kinds of violence the women experience by their abusers. The author argues that parents, in-laws, extended kin, friends, and South Asian community institutions deliberately or inadvertently contribute further to the sexual harassment of the women. These individuals and groups do not want to threaten the image of their family or community, undermine traditional male authority, or rupture the sense of ethnic communality, and, in effect, respond by silencing or suppressing marital violence and preventing women from seeking support services. However, Abraham cautions against using only cultural factors as explanation of or justification for sexual violence; rather her argument is that cultural components work in combination with structural conditions.

In doing so, Abraham explains how capitalist-oriented immigration laws, racialized naturalization policies, and limited social service programs in the historical and contemporary period have impacted female immigrant spouses negatively. As spouses of U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents, the women

are vulnerable because abusive husbands control the citizenship status of their alien spouses. For example, Abraham points out the benefits and weaknesses of the Violence Against Women Act passed in 1994. It allowed abused alien spouses to “self-petition” for citizenship rather than face loss of her legal status or possible deportation when their husbands failed to file on their behalf. However, it has class biases and stipulates that the women must be married for at least three years, creating extreme hardships for women who experience abuse in the early stages of marriage. Abraham also examines other external barriers that further disadvantage these women, such as the police, courts, and health care providers who have negative views about immigrants or fail to provide culturally sensitive outreach programs or services for immigrant populations. Immigrants themselves may have negative perceptions or experiences with these external groups, which can be compounded by linguistic barriers, that make them less likely to seek external assistance.

In the last section of the book, Abraham discusses how immigrant women employ varying strategies of resistance to contest their oppression — depending on the resources they possess and the support services available to them. Additionally, she addresses the emergence of South Asian organizations in the United States during the 1980s, and the strategies they employ in making a “private problem” a “public issue.” These organizers use interventionist strategies, defined by varying ideologies, to assist women in abusive relationships and educational strategies to prevent domestic violence. Abraham’s discussion in this section is informative because she interviews the organizers about the challenges they face in providing legal, monetary, housing, and counseling services for these women and their children, and we also hear from the women receiving this assistance.

In the last chapter, Abraham presents a pragmatic discussion of building and sustaining community organizations for a new immigrant population. This section addresses the heterogeneity of the population, the varying levels of political consciousness, and differences over strategies — all factors that divide activists and can destroy coalitions. The commentary is incisive and direct, making it useful for scholars studying mobilization and activists working with immigrant communities on social problems. A slight disjuncture occurs between this chapter and the previous one in which South Asian women’s organizations (SAWOs) are portrayed quite positively. The reader is left wondering how friction within the organizations affected the abused women and their ability to seek assistance from them. Although Abraham briefly mentions it, particularly in the last chapter, it would have added to her analysis if she included more explicitly how her activist work with SAWOs impacted her research project. More detail of her ethnographic

observations and possibly interviews, even informal ones, of husbands, children, relatives, and even of social workers, the police, and lawyers would have strengthened her book.

Overall this is a significant book that causes us to rethink how race, class, and gender intersect and marks an important contribution to the field of Asian American studies. Abraham intends for the book to be read by the scholarly community, but also by women who face abuse and their families, as well as by community workers and public policy makers who work with them.

linda trinh vō

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE
