

Three /

Cross-Cultural Connections, Border-Crossings, and “Death by Culture”

Thinking About Dowry-Murders
in India and Domestic-Violence
Murders in the United States

Introduction /

Dowry-murder is a topic that has surfaced more than a few times during the years I have lived in the United States. The topic's manner of surfacing in social contexts has sometimes left me nonplussed. I remember being disconcerted at a social event, when an American woman I had just met (having learned that I was a graduate student with an interest in feminist issues) said, "I have heard that many Indian women are burned by their families for dowry." I really do not remember how I responded to that particular conversational gambit.¹ I do however remember thinking about it later, and wryly wondering what an appropriate response would be to "I have heard that many Indian women are burned by their families for dowry" in a cocktail situation. I have turned over in my mind the possibilities of a taciturn "Yes," a tart "I'll bet you have," the disconcerting potential of "I've heard about it too," and the quick reprieve that would be made possible by "Nice to have met you. I think I need another drink!"

When the topic of dowry-murder comes up in academic settings, it is, of course, impossible to avoid a sense of pedagogic obligation to engage with the topic. I am, however, often torn between my desire, both as an academic and as a feminist, to answer questions and respond to work on the topic in "informative" ways, and my apprehension that there are a number of problematic assumptions and understandings about the phenomenon in the minds of those I am engaging with on the issue. It often feels impossible to address succinctly the problems I sense behind the very framing of the questions and the discussion, and behind the ubiquitous surfacing of this topic. I have in the last few years come across two unrelated papers on dowry-murder that began, "Women are being burned to death everyday in India."² While this sentence has buzzed in my head each time like a bad headache, I have also realized that it is far from simple to describe the problems I have with that introductory sentence.

In these academic encounters with such topics, I have learned how difficult it is to call attention to misconceptions and to alert people to connections that I suspect are not being made. There are several factors that contribute to this difficulty. In cases where misconceptions have not been explicitly articulated, but where one senses their presence, it is not always clear that there are tactful ways of calling attention to them with-

out striking a presumptuous note of, "I know what you are thinking." Even where misconceptions are explicitly articulated, it is not always clear how best to address them. There are the problems of making others defensive; of making them feel "accused" of problematic understandings; of oneself taking on a tone of pompous pedagogic self-righteousness. In trying to shift attention from the content of a conversation or a piece of written work to its underlying assumptions and modes of framing, one risks sounding evasive and "unwilling to engage with the issue," and even defensive in a "culturally chauvinistic" mode that makes one come across as an "Indian woman unwilling to deal with the problems of women in Indian culture."

I have come to the conclusion that there are certain types of problems that are not best addressed in "dialogue" but by trying to write about them more impersonally, and at a distance. Writing about such issues has the virtue of leaving it open to particular members of one's audience to judge for themselves whether the misconceptions and problems addressed seem familiar, whether they were misconceptions they subscribed to as individuals, and whether the analyses and re-descriptions I attempt in order to counter such misconceptions and problems serve to facilitate a better understanding of the issues.

While this essay calls attention to problems I have with the ways in which the issue of dowry-murder is framed and understood in my encounters with the topic in the United States, this essay is not primarily about the issue of dowry-murder. Rather, the central objective of this essay is to call attention to two sorts of problems that often beset the general project of "learning about Other cultures." I am specifically interested in how these problems affect the *feminist* commitment to attend to the problems of women in a variety of cultural contexts, and to "learning about the problems of women in Other cultures." The first cluster of problems has to do with the "effects" that national contexts have on the "construction" of feminist issues and the ways in which understandings of issues are then affected by their "border-crossings" across national boundaries. This first set of problems has to do with features of context that "bring" particular issues onto feminist agendas, mold the information that is available on the issue, and shape as well as distort the ways in which they are understood when the issue "crosses borders." The second problem I am concerned with has to do with the ways in which "culture" is invoked in explanations of forms of violence against Third-World women, while it is not similarly invoked in explanations of forms of violence that affect mainstream Western women. I intend to argue that when such "cultural explanations" are given for *fatal* forms of violence against Third-World women, the effect is to suggest that Third-World women suffer "death by culture." I shall try to show that fatal forms of violence

against mainstream Western women seem interestingly resistant to such "cultural explanations," leaving Western women seemingly more immune to "death by culture." I believe that such asymmetries in "cultural explanation" result in pictures of Third-World women as "victims of their culture" in ways that are interestingly different from the way in which victimization of mainstream Western women is understood.

Let me begin with an example that helps illuminate both of the sorts of problems I am interested in—problems of "border-crossing" and problems of "cultural explanation." I have referred in a previous essay to the prevalent confusion in Western national contexts between dowry-murders and *sati*.³ This confusion was evident in a dialogue I came across on the Internet, which began with an American man stating that "suttee is the practice of 'bride-burning' or wives being burned in cooking oil fires . . . for having insufficient dowry." This contribution was followed by a man of Indian background attempting to explain the differences between *sati* and dowry-murder, describing *sati* as a traditional, but now rare, practice of voluntary self-immolation on the husband's funeral pyre by widows, and dowry-murders as a recent phenomenon of "burning a bride for insufficient dowry."

While I had problems with many details of this explanation, such as its unproblematic construction of *sati* as "voluntary" and its description of dowry-murders as results of *insufficient* dowry, my biggest worry was that both *sati* and dowry-murders were to a large degree unexplained even after this "explanation," remaining fairly mysterious and arbitrary practices that seemed to "happen" to Indian women as a result of "Indian culture." This conversation helped me see how conversations describing and distinguishing between institutions and practices that are "culturally unfamiliar" might result, often unintentionally, in an understanding of forms of violence against women "specific" to Third-World contexts as instances of "death by culture."

This conversation also brought home to me the ways in which understandings of issues are shaped by "border-crossings." The conversation illuminated the ways in which recent Indian feminist engagement with the issue of *sati* seems to have "filtered through" to many members of the American public. It suggested that what often gets edited out when such information engages in "world-traveling" are "facts" well known to many in the Indian context—such as that *sati* is a virtually extinct practice, that the recent feminist protest was provoked by a single incident and was centrally part of an ongoing political struggle against Hindu fundamentalism. The "information" that does "filter through" into the American context often seems to result merely in a vague awareness that "women are being burned to death every day in India," amalgamating *sati* to dowry-murders in a construction of "Indian culture" as one beset with a

"cultural habit" of burning its women! This Internet conversation thus struck me as capturing both sets of problems pertaining to "understanding issues affecting women in Other cultures" that concern me in this essay.

The first two sections of this essay both explore the ways in which "national contexts" shape feminist issues, and the implications of such shaping for "cross-cultural understanding." The first section of this essay attempts to show how national contexts shape feminist agendas by exploring the differences between the U.S. and Indian feminist agendas around issues of domestic violence. It argues that failures to understand the effects of national contexts on feminist agendas around domestic violence result in failures to connect dowry-murders in India to the general U.S. category of "domestic violence," and in failures to understand the nature of contextual asymmetries in U.S. and Indian feminist engagements with fatal forms of domestic violence.

The second section of the essay attempts to call attention to another, perhaps less obvious, way in which "cross-cultural understanding" of issues is complicated. I wish to argue that the ways in which "issues" emerge in various national contexts, and the contextual factors that shape the specific issues that are named and addressed, *affect the information that is readily available for such connection-making* and hence our abilities to make connections across these contexts. I use the issues of dowry-murders in India and domestic-violence murders in the United States to argue that the project of understanding "cultural similarities and differences" may founder on what phenomena are "visible" and what information is "available" as elements for such "comparative understanding." This section draws attention to the ways in which the very constitution of cultural "similarities" and "differences" is a politically complicated project.

The third section of the essay explores the effects that traveling across national borders has on the understanding of specific issues. It raises questions about the *sorts* of issues pertaining to Third-World women that predominantly cross national borders, and points to the adverse effects that "decontextualized information" has on the understanding of these issues in Western contexts. While the first two sections argue that failing to understand the effects of national contexts on the construction of feminist issues impedes "cross-cultural understanding," this section argues that information on these issues is significantly "decontextualized" when it crosses borders. It explores the misunderstandings that such decontextualization facilitates, and suggests that problematic "cultural explanations" of culturally alien phenomena are encouraged by such decontextualization.

The last two sections explore "death by culture" and attempt to think

critically about *how* "culture" is invoked in accounts of violence against women in Third-World contexts. The fourth section analyzes problematic "cultural explanations" of dowry-murders, showing what is wrong with them and how they perpetuate the tendency to suggest that Third-World women suffer "death by culture." It attempts to outline a different form of explanation for dowry-murders that, while it clearly attends to features of the Indian context, does not suggest that Indian women are "killed by culture." The fifth and final section explores the ways in which domestic-violence murders in the United States seem resistant to problematic "cultural explanations" of the "death by culture" variety. By calling attention to the difficulties in giving "cultural explanations" for violence against mainstream Western women, I attempt to think about the political implications of the fact that "cultural explanations" seem more plausible with respect to violence that affects Third-World women.

There are some important questions that lie beyond the borders of this essay.⁴ I focus on only one example of a "border-crossing" issue, namely dowry-murder. I also focus on just one "border" that this issue crosses, attending only to the shaping of this issue in India and to its "reframing" in the United States. While I attend to how the issue emerges in the "general public understanding" that results from its border-crossing into the United States, I do not specifically explore how this impacts on understandings of, and responses to, the issue among members of the diasporic Indian community in the United States. I do not explore how this issue has fared in crossing the borders of other Western nation-states. And while I believe it would be very illuminating to see how particular "Third-World women's issues" are represented in Third World national contexts *other than their own*, and ways in which such border-crossing might be mediated by "Western" and "local" media, I do not attempt to do so in this essay. Another interesting question I do not discuss has to do with the effects of "international circuits of knowledge"—whereby discussion of a Third-World issue in mainstream Western media or scholarship may "travel back" to its original Third-World national context, affecting understandings of, and responses to, the issue in complex ways.

The final limitation of this essay that I would like to mention has to do with the fact that I am focusing on issues crossing national borders. In so doing, I do not examine internal borders between communities within a single nation-state, even though I am aware that such internal borders are often salient to the issues of "cultural explanation" I discuss. To put it bluntly, there is a marked tendency to proffer "cultural explanations" for problems within communities of color within Western contexts more readily than there is to proffer "cultural explanations" for similar problems within mainstream Western communities. For instance, female-headed households, teenage motherhood, and welfare dependency have

been attributed to "cultural pathologies" within the African American community,⁵ while "white culture" is seldom indicted for these same problems when they occur in white communities.

This essay is strongly motivated by my sense that feminists need to think about the ways in which feminist issues are shaped by national contexts, and further affected by crossing national boundaries and entering the terrain of what Lata Mani calls the "multiple mediations" of an "age of multinational reception."⁶ Such issues increasingly cross national borders as a result of at least two different factors. The first is increasing global migration, whereby an issue such as dowry-murder becomes not only an issue for communities in India, but also an issue for immigrant Indian communities in countries such as Britain or the United States. The second is the growing transnational "exchange" of feminist scholarship and information, which seems connected as both cause and effect to increasing academic and pedagogic efforts to "learn about Other cultures" and women's issues within them. While I believe this increasing "multinational reception" of feminist issues is both inevitable and important, these border-crossings are often marked by problematic "mediations." I believe it is important for all feminists to think about the general structures that mediate such "border-crossings" and to critically address the specific problems that arise when particular issues cross particular "borders." This essay is motivated by my belief that transnational cooperation and solidarity among feminists depends on all of us better understanding such issues of "context" and "comparative understanding," as well as on attending to asymmetries in "cultural explanation" that contribute to problematic pictures of "our similarities and differences." I try to address these various issues in a manageable way by talking about dowry-murders in India and about domestic violence in the United States.

Feminist Movements, National Contexts, and the "Making" of Feminist Issues /

The juxtaposition of domestic violence in Western contexts and dowry-murders in India will likely seem odd to some readers, or at least a juxtaposition that is not self-evident. It is precisely the fact that the significance of this juxtaposition will not be self-evident to many that prompts me to start with this "joining together" of two phenomena that are taken by many Westerners to be "unconnected." I know they are often taken to be unconnected because I have had several conversations in which Americans seemed to have been startled by my matter-of-fact claim that dowry-murders are not only often preceded by domestic vio-

lence but that they also constitute one extreme form of domestic violence. I no longer make this claim matter-of-factly, since I have become aware of its oddly polemical weight. I have, in turn, been startled by the fact that the proposition that dowry-murders were a form of domestic violence was "news" to members of my audience here. What follows is an attempt to make sense of *why* the connection between dowry-murders and domestic violence is not "visible" to many Americans, as well as an attempt to "make" the connection.

Most Americans that I have talked to about dowry-murder know that many U.S. women are killed by their partners as a result of domestic violence. Given that many members of the U.S. public know that domestic violence has fatal forms, why is it that they make no connection between the "foreign" phenomenon of dowry-murder and the "familiar" phenomenon of domestic violence? What are the difficulties that stand in the way of this connection being made? I believe that part of the answer to this question lies in the ways in which domestic violence agendas have developed in the United States, and their effects on the ways in which the term "domestic violence" is widely understood. Let me explain what I mean.

When I began looking through the articles in my files, and through several books that either wholly or partly address issues of domestic violence in the U.S., I did not come across any book or article that *centrally focused* on U.S. women *murdered* as a result of domestic violence (even though I found a fair amount of writing on legal issues pertaining to women who killed their batterers). In all of the American "domestic-violence" readings I initially went through as I began writing this piece, I found no data about the number of women who are annually *killed* as a result of domestic violence, though I found plenty of other kinds of data on facets of domestic violence such as injuries and homelessness. None of several American feminist friends I called knew off-hand roughly how many women were killed by their partners each year in the United States. Nor could they find this figure easily when they went through their collections of books and articles on the subject. We were all struck by the fact that it was quite difficult for any one of us to find this particular piece of data, and also struck by the degree to which deaths resulting from domestic violence have *not* been much focused upon in U.S. literature on domestic violence.⁷ A friend who participated in my search for the numbers of U.S. women annually killed by their partners commented that she was surprised at the difference between the "disappearing dead women" in U.S. accounts of domestic violence and the "spectacular visibility" of women murdered over dowry in India.

Discussions of domestic violence in the U.S. contexts are not lacking in mention of grievous injury to women. Although fatalities are often mentioned along with injuries, most discussions do not centrally focus on

the most "extreme cases" where the woman dies as a result of domestic violence. There is a striking contrast between the lack of focus on fatal cases that enters into the construction of the category "domestic violence" in the United States context, and the focus on deadly cases of domestic violence in the Indian context that has given visibility to the category "dowry-murder." I believe that this "asymmetry in focus" contributes to the lack of perceived connection between dowry-murders and domestic violence in the minds of many Americans.

How is this "asymmetry in focus" to be explained? I think these differences in focus are connected to the different ways in which issues of violence against women emerged within, and were taken up by, feminist movements in India and in the United States. In many areas of U.S. feminist effort around domestic violence, such as challenging police nonresponsiveness to domestic-violence complaints, and countering various laws and legal attitudes that trivialized domestic violence or dismissed it as a "private quarrel," there was little reason to single out cases of domestic violence that resulted in death. Rather, the focus was on generating legal and institutional responses that addressed a *wide spectrum* of domestic violence cases, ranging from the fairly minor to the potentially lethal. As a result of U.S. feminist efforts around issues of domestic violence, public attention was certainly drawn to the various ways in which women were often brutally and repeatedly injured in domestic violence attacks, terrorized and stalked, and often additionally endangered if they tried to leave violent relationships. But the bulk of the U.S. feminist responses to domestic violence, quite understandably, seem to have focused on victims who were still alive, who needed either shelters, counseling and assistance, or various forms of legal redress.

While the much publicized trial of O.J. Simpson for his wife's murder has put more of a spotlight on the fact that U.S. women are *killed* as a result of relationships plagued by domestic violence,⁸ such deaths have not necessarily been portrayed as the "typical" or "paradigmatic" outcomes of domestic-violence situations. The fact that domestic-violence situations *can* end in death seems to be used as an indicia of its potential seriousness and danger, rather than as an emblem. Let me reiterate that I believe this makes sense, given that there seem few reasons, in the U.S. context, to focus specifically on women *killed* in acts of domestic violence with respect to legal and institutional attempts to address the problem. If anything, feminist efforts on the issue may have had good reason to move in the other direction, away from a focus on domestic-violence-related homicides, since homicides are likely, by dint of their seriousness, to receive police and legal attention where less drastic forms of domestic violence do not. Feminist efforts in the U.S. seem to have moved in the direction of *widening* the scope of what is understood to constitute

"domestic violence," pointing out that verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse often constitute components of domestic violence.

If we are to understand the "asymmetry" between feminist engagement with domestic violence in the U.S. and Indian contexts, we also need to understand why the Indian feminist movement focused on domestic violence in the extreme form of "dowry-murder" and did not focus on general issues of domestic violence to the same degree as in the United States. In what follows, I will attempt to provide an answer by giving a brief sketch of the history of contemporary Indian feminist engagement with issues of violence against women. In an article on the Indian women's movement, Mary Fainsod Katzenstein points out that a report on Indian women, commissioned by the government of India in 1974 in anticipation of the International Women's Year declared by the United Nations in 1975, played a "catalytic role in the emergence of the contemporary women's movement in India."⁹ Katzenstein adds:

The report dramatically called attention to existing gender inequality with its documentation of a declining sex ratio (read as an indicator of differential female mortality) and its presentation of evidence of inequalities in education, income, access to health care and political representation. The report galvanized both academics and activists. Not only did it cite patterns of inequality that had not been widely recognized but no less important, the process of preparing the report caused several women members of the commission to redirect their scholarly and activist energies entirely.¹⁰

Although the report sparked an interest in organizing around gender issues, issues of sexual violence were given little attention at the start, as the movement initially focused largely on economic and demographic issues. Members of committee that wrote the 1974 report have, in retrospect, acknowledged their inattention to issues of violence against women. As one member puts it:

I realise now that there were other things which we should have investigated. We did not include rape in our inquiry. We took some note of suicides when they were brought to our notice, but no one mentioned a single case of dowry-murder. Harassment, even torture was reported but never a murder. Today I realize that the issue of violence of crimes against women did not feature in our report as we had not investigated it. Even the practice of dowry was not in our initial questionnaire—it was forced on us by the women we met.¹¹

However, by the late 1970s issues of violence against women began to move to the forefront of the feminist agenda. Katzenstein remarks that "it was the focus on violence against women, beginning in the late 1970s, that

propelled the movement forward and endowed it with much of its strength.¹² The two most "visible" issues initially addressed by women's groups were the issue of dowry-murder and that of rape, especially police rape of poor women held in custody.¹³ Many women's groups that addressed the issue of dowry-murders did not address the issue in isolation from the general issue of domestic violence, which was also addressed quite apart from dowry-related contexts. For instance, a number of women's groups addressed wife-beating in the context of male drinking and alcoholism.¹⁴

Although the issue of dowry-murder was hardly the only issue pertaining to violence against women that was addressed by the Indian women's movement, it has probably had the most widespread impact on public attention in India and received the most sustained media coverage, resulting in dowry-murders being reported in a more ongoing way than many other issues affecting Indian women. I believe that there are a number of reasons for the public attention that dowry-murders have received. While issues such as that of police rape of women in custody primarily affected poorer women, dowry-murders were predominantly a middle-class phenomenon. And although the political energies of the women's movement were crucial in calling a number of issues of violence against women to public attention and to underlining their prevalence, I suspect that issues such as police rape, or domestic violence as a general problem, were not "surprising" to many Indians, while dowry-murders were.

Let me attempt to clarify what I mean by talking about my own experience around these issues. Like many Indians, I was aware of the existence of domestic violence, and of dowry-related harassment of women, long before these became public issues that women's groups organized around. And even before it elicited organized protest, I suspect that there was a fair degree of general awareness that poor and lower-caste women were vulnerable to rape and sexual exploitation. My sense of this is confirmed by one of the members of the commission that wrote the 1974 report on Indian women, who acknowledges retrospective shock at the fact that the commission did not look into the issue of rape, and adds, "I cannot say that I was not aware of rape as an instrument in subjugating the lower classes and lower castes."¹⁵

In my own case, which I think was not uncharacteristic, one of the two "issues" that I was completely unaware of until they were named, articulated, and publicized by women's groups was the issue of dowry-murder.¹⁶ It took the activism and intervention of women's groups to facilitate the recognition that what lay behind occasional newspaper reports of women dying in "kitchen accidents" or "committing suicide by burning themselves to death" was a quite different and increasing phenomenon—the burning to death of women for dowry-related reasons.

Before women's groups named this issue, demonstrated against it, and drew media attention to it, I believe few Indians were aware that there was a growing pattern of women being burnt to death for dowry-related reasons in "respectable middle-class Indian families." I believe that public unfamiliarity with this issue combined with its heinousness and its predominantly middle-class occurrence to make dowry-murder one of the most publicly visible issues of those addressed by women's groups in India.

There also seem to be contextual reasons as to why some other aspects of domestic violence received less organizational attention and effort from women's groups in India than they did in the United States. A significant proportion of feminist efforts around domestic violence in the United States seems to have focused on publicizing the need for shelters for battered women and in setting up and organizing such shelters. While there have been some attempts by women's groups in India to organize shelters for battered women, there are considerably *fewer* efforts in this direction than has been the case in the United States. Understanding the reasons for this difference is, I think, interesting in its capacity to illuminate the degree to which specific feminist policies and solutions are dependent on the background social, economic, and institutional features of the national landscapes within which feminist groups operate.

Why did organizing battered women's shelters not have a central place in Indian feminist agendas? The answer is not, as some Western feminists seem to have assumed, that the Indian women's movement is "less developed." Madhu Kishwar alludes to these assumptions when she says:

Over the last decade, innumerable western feminists have asked us: "Do you have battered women's homes in India?" The assumption is that not to have such homes is to be at a lower stage of development in the struggle against violence on women, and that such homes will be one inevitable outcome of the movement's development.¹⁷

Kishwar goes on to provide a very different kind of account for this difference, pointing to a number of factors that help make battered women's shelters a feasible strategy for affording assistance to battered women in countries like the United States, factors that play out differently in India. Kishwar says:

Battered women's homes in the west . . . seemed to act as a useful type of short term intervention because of (a) the existence of a welfare system which includes some, even though inadequate, provisions for public assistance, unemployment, benefits, subsidized housing, and free schooling for children; (b) the overall employment situation being very different from that in India; (c) the lower stigma on women living on

their own and moving around on their own; and (d) the existence of certain avenues of employment that are not considered permissible for middle class women here.¹⁸

Although the situation is far from rosy in countries like the United States, and might conceivably get much worse if current attacks on state provisions such as welfare are successful, it is still feasible for U.S. battered women's shelters to help at least some women leave abusive domestic relationships. Enabling some battered women to secure welfare for themselves or their children, assisting others in securing paid employment, state-funded medical care, and legal aid around custody issues, are all ways in which U.S. battered women's shelters can offer more than temporary refuge. The provision of such services enables at least some women to leave relationships they would not otherwise be in a position to leave. The virtual absence in India of state-provided welfare, education, and medical care, the unavailability of state-provided legal services to deal with custody, and far greater levels of unemployment, render it very difficult for feminists to help generate structures that would enable Indian women to leave the family contexts where they are victims of violence. With the exception of the relatively small group of women who earn enough on their own to support themselves and their children, few women are materially in a position to leave abusive relationships. In addition, as Kishwar suggests, there is much greater stigma in India around issues such as divorce, separation from one's husband, and "women living on their own," factors that might well deter even women who could economically support themselves. Kishwar points out that groups attempting to help battered women often have no resources but to try and persuade the women's marital families to take them back on "slightly improved terms."¹⁹

In the Indian context, organizing around issues such as shelters for battered women, which require a variety of state and institutional structures that are not readily available, is not highly feasible.²⁰ In contrast, dowry-murder was an issue around which Indian women's groups *could* effectively organize in a number of ways. Women's groups in India had the resources to publicize cases of dowry-murders and hold public demonstrations and protests, often in the neighborhood where "suspicious burnings" had occurred. Such public efforts to call the phenomenon of dowry-murder to national attention had the important function of alerting Indian families to the potentially lethal situations in which marriage placed some of their daughters. Such efforts also provoked a considerable amount of public "consciousness raising" on the institution of dowry, led to calls-for people to pledge not to give or take dowries, and for people to boycott marriages where dowry was involved. Women's groups in India also en-

gaged in pushing for a variety of legal changes that would enable more efficient prosecution of the family members responsible for these murders, and generated debates on possible changes in property and inheritance laws that might ameliorate the problem of dowry-murders.

The preceding account helps explain why general issues of domestic violence have played a bigger role in Western national contexts than in India, and why dowry-murders were the aspect of domestic violence most widely addressed in the Indian context. I believe such explanations are useful in accounting for "asymmetries" in the development of feminist issues in different national contexts. They call attention to economic, social, and institutional features that make certain policies and strategies feasible in some contexts but not in others, features that might be "taken for granted" and remain less visible prior to attempts to account for such differences. They help to make feminists in various national contexts more "contextually self-conscious" about the features of their national landscapes that might shape their engagements with issues of violence against women, and help clarify why "similar problems" might sometimes not permit "similar answers."

The preceding analysis helps call attention to some of the complexities inherent in the project of "learning about issues of women in Other cultures." It challenges the unreflective and naively optimistic view that sees this project primarily in terms of "information retrieval"—as a simple matter of acquiring information and learning "the facts" that illuminate these "problems of women in Other cultures," and then perhaps going on to understand our "commonalities and differences." It suggests that we need to understand the ways in which feminist agendas are shaped by the different conditions that obtain within different national contexts if we are to understand the connections between the "visibility" of dowry-murders in India and the relative "invisibility" of the issue of domestic-violence murder in the United States.

In the absence of such an understanding, it is not surprising that many Americans fail to connect the unfamiliar phenomenon of dowry-murder to the more familiar category of "domestic violence." I have suggested that there were good reasons for feminist organizations in the United States not focusing on domestic-violence fatalities, and good reasons for feminist organizations in India devoting a fair amount of organizational and public effort to the fatal form of domestic violence that is dowry-murder. One "effect" of these contextual differences is that there is a *visible category* of "dowry-murder" that picks out a lethal form of domestic violence in the Indian context, while there is no similar, readily available category that specifically picks out *lethal instances* of domestic violence in the United States. In contrast to "dowry-murder," *fatal* forms of domestic violence in the United States are a problem lacking a term that "specifi-

cally picks them out" from the general category of "domestic violence." I believe that this "absence" operates to impede Americans from making the connections that would facilitate their seeing dowry-murder as a form of domestic violence.

The Effects of "Absences" on Projects of Cross-Cultural Understanding /

The preceding analysis suggests that the project of "understanding Other cultures" is made difficult by the problems one often has in "seeing" features of one's "own context" that might be relevant to this project, features that might make a difference to the sense of "similarities and differences" one develops. I think it is quite difficult to "notice" that a term like "domestic-violence murders" is "absent" in the U.S. context, and to perceive how this "lack" contributes to the phenomenon lacking specificity of a sort it might have had if a term had "picked it out" and made the underlying issue the focused subject of public and political concern. The absence in the U.S. context of a term such as "domestic-violence murders," and the lack of focus on this issue in U.S. feminist agendas on domestic violence, only forcibly struck me when I began working on this essay. I believe that the effects of this "absence" go beyond its functioning as an impediment to many Americans making connections between dowry-murders and domestic violence. I would like, in this section, to go on to explore some of the less obvious ways in which this absence works to complicate "cross-cultural understanding" of "similarities and differences" between forms of violence that affect women in Third-World nations and violence against women in Western national contexts.

One of the things I hoped to do when I began this essay was to work on making a stronger connection between Indian dowry-deaths and domestic violence in the United States by comparing the number of women annually killed in dowry-murders in India to the numbers of U.S. women annually killed by their partners. I wanted to make this comparison to see if data would support my suspicion that the incidence of "domestic-violence murders" in the United States was "numerically similar" to the incidence of dowry-murders in India. If I found the incidence of the two phenomena to be "numerically similar," I hoped to argue that, given their relatively equal seriousness as "social problems," it was even more interesting that one phenomenon had a specific name and activist focus and that the other did not. What I completely failed to realize was the degree to which the absence of a term that conferred "specificity" on the phenomenon of "domestic-violence murders" in the United States

would affect my very attempt to make this comparison. Let me clarify what I mean.

Setting out on this task, I found it easy to locate recent data on the annual numbers of dowry-murders in India. I discovered the numbers quickly after I started looking, and came across them fairly often. I even found tabulated data on dowry-murders, assembled by the National Crimes Bureau of the Government of India, that not only had figures for the years 1987 to 1994 but also showed the geographical distribution of dowry-murders across various regional states within India. The recent numbers suggest that roughly 5,000 Indian women are killed each year over dowry. On the other hand, in noticeable contrast to information on domestic violence in the United States, I discovered very little national data on other aspects of domestic violence in India. This is not surprising given the lack of infrastructures such as shelters that facilitate in the gathering of such data in the U.S. As a result, I did not find national data on the general incidence of domestic violence, on the numbers of women seriously injured in such incidents, or on how many Indian women are believed to be killed annually for *non-dowry-related* reasons. The conclusion I arrived at was that the construction of "dowry-murder" as a specific public issue had had institutional effects, such as the generation of "official national data" on the phenomenon. On the other hand, the contextual features that work in India to make general issues of "domestic violence" much harder to address institutionally also impede the ability to generate "official data" on the broader facets of domestic violence. One result is that it is easy to find Indian figures for "dowry-murders" but not for the presumably wider category "domestic-violence murders."

Moving on to the "other side" of my attempted comparison, finding the statistics for "domestic-violence murders" in the U.S. was not easy, as I have previously mentioned. In many of the places I searched for this figure, I found a good deal of data on numerous aspects of domestic violence, but not the particular figure for "domestic-violence murders" that I was looking for. There was readily available data on the overall annual number of domestic-violence cases, on the numbers of battered women seeking assistance from shelters, on the numbers of women seriously injured as a result of domestic violence, and on the numbers of women and children who were homeless as a result of domestic violence, but it was difficult to locate the U.S. figure for "domestic-violence murders." I came to the conclusion that the same lack of organizational focus on "domestic-violence murders" that leaves it a "phenomenon with no specific name" in the U.S. also works to make it a phenomenon that is not focused on widely in fact sheets and other public information on domestic violence.

In my search, I first arrived at a "ball-park figure" for U.S. "domestic-

violence murders" indirectly rather than finding the figure stated outright. I worked it out through looking at the FBI's Crime Index, which reports the overall number of U.S. homicides for 1994, and states that 79 percent of murder victims were men. I worked out that the 21 percent of murder victims who were women came to roughly 5,000 women. The FBI statistics also said that 28 percent of female murder victims were "slain by husbands or boyfriends," although they did not go on to specify the number.²¹ I worked out from the figures that roughly 1,400 U.S. women annually were victims of "domestic-violence murder." When I did begin to find direct information on "domestic-violence deaths" in other sources, the numbers I found varied quite widely.²²

I decided to work with the FBI figure, a figure eventually confirmed by a couple of other sources, that suggested that roughly 1,400 U.S. women annually were victims of "domestic-violence murder."²³ However, I began to realize that there were all sorts of problems in attempting what I wished to do next—which was to argue for the "comparative numerical seriousness" of U.S. "domestic-violence murders" and Indian dowry-murders. The most obvious problem was that the Indian figures available were for the *narrower* category of "dowry-murder" and not for "domestic-violence murders in India," while the U.S. figures I had worked out were for the *inclusive* category of "domestic-violence murders." However, on closer examination, it also turned out that the scope of the U.S. figure for "domestic-violence murders" might be, in another respect, *narrower* than the scope of the Indian figures for "dowry-murders."

The Indian statistics on dowry-murders, including those put out by the government of India, reflect the number of deaths *suspected* to be dowry-murders, rather than those that have been "proven" to be dowry-murders through the criminal justice process. The "official definition" of a dowry-murder is "any instance where the death of a woman is caused by any burns or bodily injury or occurs otherwise than under normal circumstances within 7 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 relative of her husband for, or in connection with, any demand for dowry."²⁴ Some of the incidents that are counted as "dowry-murders" might in fact be the "accidents" or "suicides" or "illnesses" they are inevitably claimed to be, though there is no real way of telling how many. There are also likely to be a number of dowry-murders that do not evoke "suspicion" and fail to be counted in the statistics on dowry-murders, though again it is impossible to know how many.

On the other hand, the U.S. FBI statistics on "domestic-violence murders," I believe, reflect only those cases where the partner is *convicted* of the crime.²⁵ I found out, in addition, that roughly 40 percent of all U.S.

homicide cases remained legally "unsolved," though I did not find any data that specified the percentage of murders involving female victims that remained unsolved. One problem, then, with trying to argue that U.S. "domestic-violence murders" are comparatively as "numerically serious" as dowry-murders in India is that the Indian figures seem to reflect "suspicions" rather than "legal convictions," while the U.S. figures seem to reflect the opposite. While the activism around dowry-murders in India has undoubtedly contributed to the collection of official national data on "suspected dowry-murders," it might well be that the lack of focus on "domestic-violence murders" in the United States has resulted in there being no widely available official data on *suspected* domestic-violence murders, even though domestic-violence activism might well account for FBI statistics now specifying how many female homicides resulted in the convictions of the women's partners.

I am arguing that the complicated factors that have shaped different national agendas on issues of domestic violence seem to exert a considerable amount of influence on the kinds of "official data" that are generated on various aspects of the phenomenon. Given that very different kinds of domestic-violence data seem to be available in the Indian and U.S. contexts, any attempts to "compare" the figures on "domestic-violence murders in the U.S." and "dowry-murders in India" more than hint at comparing apples and oranges. However, working on the principle that there may be a point to comparing apples and oranges if one is interested in understanding some aspects of fruit, I will press on with the "comparison."

The population of India is roughly four times that of the United States. Given that roughly 1,400 U.S. women annually are (known to be) victims of "domestic-violence murder" and that roughly 5,000 Indian women annually are (suspected to be) victims of dowry-murders, it seems as if one could at least safely say that the proportion of the women in the U.S. population who are victims of "domestic-violence murder" seems *roughly similar* to the proportion of women in the Indian population murdered over dowry. These figures at least make plausible the claim that "death by domestic violence" in the U.S. seems to be numerically as significant a social problem as "dowry-murders" are in India. Given that roughly the same proportion of women in the U.S. population are possible victims of "domestic-violence murder" as women in the Indian population are possible victims of "dowry-murder," it is interesting that one of these phenomena is named, noted, and made into a "specific social issue" while the other is not.

I have already given an account of the reasons that may have shaped the U.S. domestic-violence agenda away from a focus on fatalities, and of the factors that led to the Indian feminist focus on dowry-murders. What

I have pointed out in this section is how **different** kinds of "focus" and 'lacks of focus,, on various aspects of domestic violence in India and the United States also shape the kinds of data that are readily available in the two contexts. Such differences of data as well as "absences of data,, are, by their nature, **difficult** to see and to make sense of. However, the ability to see them and make sense of them seems to me to be crucial to attempts to better understand "**similarities** and differences,, between problems women confront in different national contexts.

Border-Crossings, Lacks of Context, and the Construction of "Death by Culture" /

My previous analysis pointed to how some of the ways in which issues are "shaped" within different national contexts might affect the project of "cross-cultural understanding.' In this section, I will attempt to explore the effects of "border-crossings,, on issues affecting Third-World women, and the distortions that accompany such issues in their travels across national borders. I believe that Western feminists interested in the "problems of women in Other **cultures**" need to think about: (1) the kinds of Third-World women's issues that cross Western borders more frequently than others; and about (2) the effects of the "editing" and "**re-framing**" such issues undergo when they do cross borders. I will try to address these issues by focusing on dowry-murder.

In thinking about issues of "violence against Third-World women,, that "cross borders" into Western national contexts, it strikes me that phenomena that seem "**Different**," "Alien,,, and "Other,, cross these borders with considerably more frequency than problems that seem "similar,' to those that affect mainstream Western women. Thus, clitoridectomy and **infibulation** have become virtually an "icon" of "African women's problems,, in Western contexts, while a host of other "more familiar,, problems that different groups of **African** women face are held up at the border. In a similar vein, the abandonment and infanticide of female infants appears to be the one gender issue pertaining to China that receives coverage. These issues then become "common topics,, for academics and feminists, and also cross over to a larger public audience that becomes "familiar" with these issues. It is **difficult** not to conclude that there is a premium On "Third-World difference,, that results in greater interest being accorded those issues that seem strikingly "**different**" from those affecting mainstream Western women. The issues that "cross borders" then become the "Third-World gender issues" that are taught about and studied "across the border,, reinforcing their "**iconic**" and "representative" status as issues.

My analysisin the **first** section of this essay suggested that the issue of

dowry-murder has "crossed Western borders" in part because this issue occupied an early and visible place on the agendas of Indian women's groups and remains an ongoing Indian feminist issue today. While that is part of the explanation, I believe it can only be a very *partial explanation*, since many other issues that have received sustained attention from Indian women's groups have not acquired the same sort of "familiarity" to many Westerners. Thus, I believe that features of dowry-murder that mark it as "Other" also partly account for its "border-crossing." These features of "Otherness" simultaneously operate to cause the phenomenon to receive "notice" and to distort understandings of the phenomenon.

One factor that I believe helps dowry-murders receive Western attention is the history of Western fascination with "the Indian tradition" of *sati* or widow-immolation. This historic association of *sati* and "Indian culture" and "Indian women" results today in a metonymic blurring of *sati* with dowry-murder, generating a confused composite of "burnt Indian women" variously going up in flames as a result of "their Culture." "Women being burnt" thus becomes constituted as a "paradigmatic," "iconic," and "familiar" form of "violence suffered by Indian women." The terms "*sati*" and "dowry-murder" come to have a vaguely familiar ring, even though their exact referents are often not well understood. What is "understood," however, is their "Indianness," their status as "things that happen elsewhere," which in turn suggests that they are unlike "things that happen here."

This effect is only compounded by the fact that there is little "coverage" or information in the United States about the general issue of domestic violence as it affects women in India, and by the fact that reports about dowry-deaths are seldom framed in terms of the general issue of domestic violence.²⁶ Given that dowry-related domestic *harassment* is far more widespread in India than dowry-murder, and that non-dowry-related forms of domestic violence are likely the most widespread of all, this focus on dowry-murders as a paradigmatic case of "violence suffered by Indian women" is one that centers on the most "extreme" and "spectacular" forms of domestic violence suffered by Indian women. Domestic violence against Indian women thus becomes most widely known in Western contexts in its most *extreme incarnation*, underlining its "Otherness."

The "alien" features of "burning" and "dowry" help to further code the phenomenon as "Indian" and "Other" and intersect to expunge any trace of the phenomenon's connection to the more "familiar" domestic category of "domestic violence." Consider the possible effects on Western understandings of dowry-murder of the "lurid exoticism" of fire and of women being burnt to death. Given the lack of contextual information, Indian women's murder-by-fire seems mysterious, possibly ritualistic, and

one of those factors that is assumed to have something to do with "Indian culture." While the use of fire as the preferred instrument of dowry-murder does have much to do with details of the Indian context, these details are less "cultural" and "exotic," and more mundane and material, than they are often assumed to be.

Pointing out that fire is chiefly chosen for "the forensic advantage" it has over other methods of killing a wife, Veena Talwar Oldenburg goes on to say:

It virtually destroys the evidence of murder along with the victim and can easily be made to look like an accident. It is also relatively simple to commit. It occurs in the kitchen, where the middle-class housewife spends a large amount of time each day. Pressurized kerosene stoves are in common use in such homes; a tin of fuel is always kept in reserve. This can be quickly poured over the intended victim and a lighted match will do the rest. It is easy to pass off the event as an accident because these stoves are prone to explode (consumer reports confirm this), and the now ubiquitous but highly inflammable nylon sari easily catches fire and engulfs the wearer in flames. Signs of a struggle simply do not show up on bodies with 90 or more percent third-degree burns.²⁷

Oldenburg's account underlines the fact that the use of fire as a murder weapon is far more a matter of expedience than it is a matter of exoticism. Burning a woman to death in the Indian context is no more "exotic" than shooting her to death is in the U.S. context. Conversely, death by shooting in a middle-class domestic context would be rather "exotic" in India, where firearms are not freely available and widely owned, and where widespread ownership of firearms and the prevalence of gun-related violence is often perceived of as "typically American."

I believe that the "exoticizing" features I have mentioned above have both contributed to dowry-murder's popularity as a border-crossing issue and have contributed to popular misunderstandings of the issue. In addition, I also believe that such misunderstandings are facilitated by the fact that certain kinds of "contextual information" are often left behind when issues cross national borders. For example, many Indians have sufficient "contextual information" to know that dowry-murders are just one extreme and specific form of domestic violence directed against Indian women. They are likely to know that mistreatment and harassment of Indian daughters-in-law by their marital families is widespread, that many women are harassed over dowry-related reasons even when they are not murdered, and that Indian women are also abused and mistreated for a range of reasons that have nothing to do with dowry. They are also likely to know that dowry-murders seem to be a fairly recent phenome-

non that seem to have come into "systematic" existence in the last three decades, and that seem to be on the increase.

When the issue of dowry-murders "crosses national borders" and becomes "known" in Western national contexts as an "issue affecting Indian women," it becomes known "out of context" because many Westerners lack these forms of "contextual information." In traveling across national borders unaccompanied by such contextual information, "dowry-murder" loses its links to the category of "domestic violence" and becomes transmuted into some sort of bizarre "Indian ritual," a form of violence against women that surely must be "caused by Indian culture." The category "Indian culture" then becomes the diffuse culprit responsible for "women being burned to death everyday in India," producing the effect that I call "death by culture."

My analysis suggests that a variety of factors, ranging from the innocuous to the problematic, work together to engender distortions and misrepresentations as "Third-World women's issues" travel across Western national borders. It is understandable for Western media to report on social issues that are receiving attention in other national contexts. But the sorts of contextual information that get "left out" in this process often leave the issue vulnerable to misrepresentation. Cultural and ethnic stereotypes, as well as prevalent limitations in Western understandings of Third-World communities, then add to the ways in which the issue is misframed and misunderstood.

There is often no vantage point from which many members of the American public can "see" some of these factors that contribute to information distortion. To understand, for instance, the different ways in which feminist agendas have shaped the issue of domestic violence in the U.S. and Indian contexts would require historical and political knowledge about India and the Indian women's movement, which is often precisely the kind of knowledge that does not readily travel across borders. The fact that Western reports on "Third-World issues" often refer to these issues being matters of public concern and political engagement within Third-World nations often only serves to enhance these issues' status as "authentic Third-World issues." Thus, "Women are burned to death everyday in India, victims of their culture" appears to Western audiences as simple, solid, incontrovertible information, whereby the real *factual weight* of Indian women being murdered for dowry operates to eclipse critical attention to the ways in which the border-crossing information on the issue is *framed*.

While the factual weight of the information testifies to the "reality of the problem," the references to "culture" commonplace in these reports serves to "render intelligible" everything that might otherwise remain "puzzling" to the audience. Thus, while many Western readers might not

know exactly what dowry is, or the factors that lead to dowry-murders, or the exact nature of the relationship of either dowry or dowry-murder to "Indian culture," the presence of references to "Indian culture" can provide a swift and convenient "explanation" for what they do not understand. The references to "culture" in these reports can then combine with more "free-floating" ideas of "Third-World backwardness" and the tendency to think of Third-World contexts as realms of "Very Other Cultures" to make "foreign phenomenon" seem comfortingly intelligible while preserving their "foreignness." Members of the Western audience are often left "feeling solidly informed," with nothing "in the picture" that suggests any need to re-examine the picture.

I am suggesting that the "distortions" that occur when "Third-World issues" cross over into Western national contexts are not reducible to "ethnocentrism" or "racism." While forms of ethnocentric and stereotypic thinking about "the Third World" do play a part in the perpetuation of such "distortions," there are also other different factors at work. One has to attend to the "multiple mediations" that occur between: (1) the ways in which "related" issues have been shaped in Western national contexts; (2) the "life" these issues have in Third-World national contexts, where their coverage and reception occur in a space where members of the national public have a variety of contextual information that puts such issues "in perspective"; and (3) the decontextualization and recontextualization that accompanies these issues on their travels across national borders.

Critical attention to the complexities of the "multiple mediations" that work to "shape" issues in different national contexts, and to "filter" the information that crosses national borders, is vital to all of us who are participants in the project of making both academic curricula and feminist agendas more responsive to "Third-World issues" or problems affecting "Other women." Multicultural education cannot be seen as a simple task of replacing "ignorance about Other cultures" with "knowledge," since problems of the sort I am talking about are precisely not problems of "ignorance" *per se*, but problems related to understanding the "effects" of contexts on issues, and of decontextualized, refracted, and reframed "knowledge." These features of "context" as well as of decontextualization and refraction are, by their very nature, difficult to see and to call attention to, as are their "effects."

Such difficulties complicate the project of "understanding Other cultures." I would like to insist that they cannot be "solved" by simply "deploying" Third-World subjects familiar with the articulation of these issues in specific Third-World contexts to "point out" the distortions and problems that occur as a result of these border-crossing "mediations." While Third-World subjects who are familiar with the representations of an issue in both a Third-World and a Western national context might well

have a sense of some of the distortions and misrepresentations that occur as a result of "border-crossing," it is hardly *easy* for them to develop a fine-grained sense of the ways in which various "mediations" on particular issues collaborate and cohere to create the widely shared misunderstandings that shape the understanding of the issue in a Western national context.

It has not been a simple task for me to figure out exactly what many Americans "don't seem to get" about dowry-murders, or the structures that might facilitate such "not getting." And this sort of task of "figuring out" what isn't "getting across" seems inevitably a messy, provisional, and uncertain business. One relies on particular encounters and conversations, the impressions and hunches one develops as a result, and a strange assortment of information, impression, and speculation. And, as I mentioned earlier, there is a variety of difficulties in trying to figure out how to "get across" what particular individuals may not "be getting." In short, I am fairly pessimistic about any "quick fixes" for these sorts of problems of informational "border-crossings."

Dowry-Murders and the Limits and Limitations of "Cultural" Explanations /

In this section, I would like to move on to exploring the ways in which "culture" is deployed in explanations of dowry-murders in India and to point out the problems with some of these attempts at "cultural explanation." In doing so, I wish to lead up to thinking about why "Indian culture" is invoked in explanations for dowry-murders in ways in which "American culture" is not usually invoked in explanations for either U.S. domestic violence, in general, or for "domestic-violence murders" in the United States.

What I am calling "cultural explanations" of dowry-murders all too frequently invoke "Hindu religious views on women." I shall begin with an example that helps vividly underline what is problematic about such religious "cultural explanations" of dowry-murder. The example I shall use is a chapter from Elizabeth Bumiller's book, *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons: A Journey Among the Women of India*. I choose this example not because this text is uniquely problematic, but because this is a book whose covers carry glowing review blurbs from *Newsweek*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, all indicating that the book was a "national bestseller." It is a book I have seen in several bookstores, including the bookstore of the college where I teach, and it is a book that a friend of Indian background reports having several copies of, presented to her by friends. In short, I pick it only because it

seems to have had a more significant public presence and influence than most "academic" writing, and not because there are no "scholarly" examples of these same problems.

The third chapter in Bumiller's book is (alas all too predictably) entitled "Flames: A Bride Burning and a *Sati*." Opening with the line, "When Hindus look at fire, they see many things beyond flames," Bumiller's first paragraph goes on to describe the use of fire in several Hindu ceremonies and rites of passage.²⁸ The second paragraph opens with the line, "Fire is also a special presence in the lives of Hindu women" and launches into a narration of the mythological story of Sita throwing herself into a fire to prove her chastity to her husband Rama, in the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*, a story that is continued and concluded in the third paragraph.²⁹

The fourth paragraph goes on to say:

Sita's ordeal has left an indelible mark on the relationship of women to fire, which remains a major feature of their spiritual lives, a cause of their death and a symbol, in the end, of one of the most shocking forms of oppression. What follows is the story of two Indian women, Surinder Kaur and Roop Kanwar, both of them victims of fire and Hindu tradition.³⁰

Let me briefly point to several problems with this "framing" of Bumiller's chapter. The mythological story of Sita, which has occupied two paragraphs, is a story about Sita *proving her chastity through an ordeal by fire*, and its deployment in this chapter is completely gratuitous, given that the Sita story is an instance of neither *sati* nor dowry-murder. Further, given that one of the two Indian women mentioned in the quote above, Roop Kanwar, was a victim of *sati*, and that the other, Surinder Kaur, is a survivor of an attempted *dowry-murder*, they are hardly victims of "one" form of oppression, as Bumiller claims. Bumiller's failure to make a clear distinction between *sati* and dowry-murder operates as yet one more example of the tedious "metonymic blurring" of completely unrelated phenomena having to do with "burning Indian women" I have previously discussed, a blurring whose ubiquitousness accounts for the headache that sets in when I read essays that start with sentences like "Women are being burnt to death everyday in India."

Bumiller also characterizes both women as "victims of Hindu tradition," a characterization that creates different kinds of problems with respect to *sati* and to dowry-murder. *Sati*, the immolation of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre, used to be a "traditional practice" in *some* Indian communities, and was the "exceptional" rather than the "routine" fate of widows even in these communities. Its endorsement by "Hinduism" has been a matter of debate for centuries, and incidents of *sati*

have occurred only very rarely in the last half-century. Bumiller terms *sati* a "Hindu tradition" without specifying its contested and tenuous status qua "Hindu tradition," and her subsequent discussion of feminist protests triggered by the Roop Kanwar incident fails to emphasize the degree to which *sati*'s alleged status as a "Hindu tradition" was itself an important site of feminist contestation. Dowry-murder is, in contrast, neither Hindu nor a tradition, even in the "qualified" sense in which *sati* might be so characterized. Even in cases where it is Hindu women who are murdered for dowry, Hinduism neither endorses or condones such murders, allusions to Sita notwithstanding. Dowry-murder can hardly amount to the victimization of Indian women by "Hindu tradition" when there is no such tradition of burning women to death for dowry. In addition, the institution of dowry is not a Hindu institution in at least two important ways. Dowry is not a pan-Hindu practice, given that there are Hindu communities, such as the matrilineal Nair community of Kerala, where dowry was traditionally unknown. It is also a practice that exists within some non-Hindu Indian communities, as Surinder Kaur's case reveals.

Surinder Kaur, who is first invoked by Bumiller as a woman who survived an alleged attempted burning by her husband and sister-in-law, is a Sikh, and not a Hindu. While Bumiller mentions that Surinder Kaur is a Sikh, in the very next paragraph and several times later in the chapter, she seems not to notice its implications. None of the fire-related Hindu ceremonies and rituals that Bumiller thinks testify to the "special relationship" that Hindus and Hindu women have to fire, nor the Hindu mythological story of Sita that Bumiller uses to frame her discussion, are related to Surinder Kaur's own religious background. While Surinder Kaur may have been the victim of fire, she could hardly have been the victim of a Hindu tradition as Bumiller insists, given that she is a Sikh! Few Western readers are likely to unravel themselves from the trail of confusion whereby, in two pages, references to Hindu ceremonies, Sita, and *sati* collaborate to construct dowry-murder as "Indian women's victimization by Hindu tradition" to register the oddity of a Sikh woman being victimized by Hindu tradition, or to register the fact that dowry-murder is neither Hindu nor a tradition!

Quite apart from Bumiller's chapter, I would argue that references to Hindu religion, mythology, and "tradition" make very poor explanations for dowry-murders, since dowry-murders have not been a widespread social phenomenon before the late 1970s. Hindu myths and traditions have been around considerably longer. It is therefore hard to see that they have serious explanatory value with respect to the contemporary phenomenon of dowry-murders. Notwithstanding the contemporary nature of dowry-murders, many discussions on the subject besides Bumiller's tend to be replete with references to Hindu mythology and to texts such

as the *Vedas* and the Laws of Manu, which are separated by centuries from the problem they are used to "explain."³¹ The tendency to explain contemporary Indian women's problems by reference to religious views is by no means a tendency exclusive to Western writers, but crops up quite frequently in writings by contemporary Indians. In a context where she is talking about both dowry and dowry-murders, Sushila Mehta asserts, "If the scriptures propound that a woman is a man's property, it is axiomatic that a woman has less value than a man. To compensate she must, therefore, bring something of value along with herself for her husband and his people taking the trouble of marrying her!"³²

Mehta's discussion exemplifies a common tendency to muddle together discussions of dowry (a traditional practice in some Indian communities) with discussions of dowry-murders (neither a traditional practice nor a historical phenomenon of long standing.) Such muddling frequently results in a failure to register that what the scriptures propound may have little explanatory power with respect to the more contemporary of the two phenomenon, dowry-murders, even where they have some connection to the traditional practice of dowry. (I also believe that Mehta misrepresents the institution of dowry, a point I will return to.) I wish to argue that Mehta's discussion is only a very mild example of a "problematic genre" of work on India and Indian culture, written by Indians. Such work frequently equates Indian culture to Hindu culture, Hindu culture to Hindu religious views, and Hindu religious views to views propounded in various Hindu scriptures, without any registering of how extremely problematic every step in this equation is.³³

I believe that the historical genealogy of these several equations lies in the pictures of "Indian culture" generated by both British colonial and Indian nationalist writings of the nineteenth century. Failures to be self-conscious about the existence of such problematic "genres of writing" often result in less-than-lucid explanations of contemporary Third-World problems and institutions by Third-World subjects themselves. In addition, failing to be aware of the existence of such problematic modes of writing about "Third-World cultures" by "native subjects" is an additional handicap to the project of mainstream Westerners "understanding Other cultures" given that such writing then tends to be uncritically quoted, referenced, and "assimilated" by some Western scholars.

Given that dowry-murders are a *contemporary* phenomenon, it seems fairly obvious that explanations for the phenomenon must be sought in the ways in which the "traditional institution of dowry" has changed in recent times. Invoking the "Indian tradition of dowry" does not by itself provide a plausible explanation for dowry-murder, since the "tradition of dowry" has been around a great deal longer than have dowry-murders. I believe that a plausible explanation for dowry-murders must refer to the

significant changes that the institution of dowry has undergone in recent decades, changes that have rendered it murderous.

Let me suggest a brief sketch of what this sort of explanation might amount to. I will begin by setting out what appear to be the three major explanations of the traditional institution of dowry: dowry as "gift," dowry as "compensation," and dowry as "premortem inheritance." The first explanation regards dowry as the material accompaniments of the symbolic "supergift" of the virgin daughter in marriage (*Kanyadaan*), where the giving of these conjoined "gifts" is read as an attempt to convert material wealth into spiritual wealth.³⁴ The explanations of dowry as "compensation" either take an "economic" form, explaining dowry as compensation paid to the groom's family for taking on the economic burden of a wife whose contribution to the family income is negligible,³⁵ or a "religious" form, such as is found in Mehta's view of dowry as an institution that compensates a man and his family for marrying a creature to whom the scriptures have assigned "less intrinsic value."³⁶ The third explanation sees dowry as a form of premortem inheritance, reflecting daughters' rights to a share of family property.

Leaving aside the question of whether any of these three explanations adequately accounts for the traditional institution of dowry,³⁷ I will argue that none of these explanations seem to account for important features of the contemporary institution of dowry. In contemporary dowry, there seems to be little sense of attempting to "convert material wealth into spiritual wealth." The "satisfactions" provided by the contemporary giving of dowry seem entirely "this-wordly"—such as maintaining the family's social standing and securing a "good match" for one's daughter. Views of dowry as "economic compensation" fail to account for the fact that daughters with professional qualifications and jobs are not exempt from expectations that their family will provide dowry on the occasion of their marriage. Mehta's view of dowry as "compensation" for women's scripturally assigned inferiority cannot account for changes in contemporary dowry, since the scriptural views are not of recent vintage, while the changes in dowry are.

I find the explanation of dowry as a form of premortem inheritance that gives daughters a share of family property to be the most plausible explanation of dowry, both traditional and contemporary, even as I think it is only a *partial* account. This explanation regards dowry as an institution that gave daughters a share of the paternal estate at the time of their marriage in the form of "movable property" consisting of gold jewelry and household items, while it simultaneously foreclosed them from inheriting "immovable property" such as land. Oldenburg endorses the view that traditional dowry was a form of premortem inheritance, adding:

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, dowry was not the enemy but rather an ally of women, acting as an economic safety net in a setting where women always married outside their natal villages . . . and where they did not normally inherit land . . . the resources that were given to women were substantially under their direct control. . . . The dowry was the only independent material resource over which women had partial, if not total, control.³⁸

I think the view of traditional dowry as premortem inheritance is only a *partial* explanation, since it accounts for what was given to the woman, but does not account for that part of dowry that consisted of gifts to members of the groom's family. And while I believe Oldenburg is correct in pointing out that significant components of traditional dowry remained substantially under the control of women, it was also not property that was theirs to alienate or dispose of *at will*. There were strong normative expectations that women preserve their dowry assets such as jewelry for their own daughters' dowries, and that such assets not be alienated except in case of serious financial emergencies.

I would like to briefly mention a number of changes that the institution of dowry has undergone as it has come to exist within an increasingly market-dominated modern economy and become increasingly "commercialized." Where dowry used to be something whose components and worth were largely left to the discretion of the woman's parents and their own sense of their social status, these components are increasingly matters of *explicit bargaining* by the parents of bridegrooms.³⁹ Traditional dowry consisted of three broad sorts of components—clothes and household items for the use of the daughter, household items for the *common use* of the household into which the daughter married, and assets mostly in the form of gold jewelry that belonged exclusively to the daughter. Contemporary "demands" for the latter two components of dowry have escalated due to the emergence of "dowry-bargaining." A huge array of consumer items, ranging from televisions and refrigerators to scooters and cars, items that are significantly expensive in the middle-class Indian context, are increasingly "expected" to be among the items the bride "contributes to the husband's household." Demands for large amounts of expensive jewelry and, increasingly, large sums of outright cash, are part of the new "commercial face" of dowry.⁴⁰ If cash is given, it seldom remains in the daughter's control. The jewelry component of dowry, which traditionally used to be understood to be something the daughter retained control of, to be sold only in dire emergencies, now functions virtually as another form of cash, often taken away from the woman with little say-so. Paradoxically, the cash and gold jewelry in women's dowries seem to have become a more "versatile" form of capital than the land and

immovable properties traditionally inherited by men. Gold jewelry can often be more easily converted to cash than land, and gold and cash can be more expeditiously used as collateral for commercial or agriculture-related loans and mortgages, providing a variety of "new" reasons for expropriating them from the women who receive them as dowry. In short, as dowry has become "commercialized," both traditional norms pertaining to women retaining control over their dowry assets, and norms that prescribed that these assets be alienated only in financial emergencies, seem to have significantly eroded.

In addition, where dowry traditionally used to be more or less a "one-shot deal," it seems to be changing into something more like "dowry on the installment plan." Demands for goods and cash nowadays seem to continue for several years after the marriage has taken place, the wife's harassment providing her with an "incentive" to pressure her parents to meet continuing dowry demands by her husband and in-laws. Families that are under pressure to provide large dowries for the marriages of their own daughters have additional incentives to "exploit the daughter-in-law," since the cash and jewelry they obtain from her parents could be used as components for the dowries of their own daughters. If a woman's parents are unwilling or unable to meet these ongoing demands, the woman's "utility" is reduced, making it expeditious to murder her. I am arguing that dowry-murders are, in large measure, the killing of women for outright economic gain. Having expropriated as much money and material goods as they can from the woman's parents, the husband and his family murder the daughter-in-law to facilitate the son remarrying and securing yet another dowry.

The sort of explanation for dowry-murders I have sketched refers to the "traditional institution" of dowry, but recognizes that the changing modern context of this institution must help account for its contemporary murderous effects. While it makes reference to several features of the Indian context, it is not a "cultural explanation" of the sort that alludes to Hinduism, Sita, *sati*, or the Laws of Manu, none of which strike me as adding illumination to the sort of explanation I have offered. I can therefore only note with irritation the tendency of many discussions of dowry-murders, both by Westerners and Indians, to be sprinkled with such "religio-cultural explanations" *even when they go on to also provide the sorts of social and economic explanations* I have sketched. There seems to be a fairly widespread tendency in discussions of "Third-World issues" to engage in what I increasingly think of as a "schizophrenic analysis," where religious and mythological "explanations" must be woven in willy-nilly, even if they do no real "explanatory work."

It is precisely this sort of "schizophrenic analysis" that enables Bumiller to start her chapter with a disquisition about the special rela-

tionship that Hindus and Hindu women have to fire, while acknowledging a few pages later the mundane material reasons for the choice of fire as a means of dowry-murder. Later in the same chapter Bumiller suggests an understanding similar to Oldenburg's when she says:

Bride burning is also grimly expedient . . . kerosene exists in every Indian household and rarely leaves a trail of solid evidence. Prosecutors find it hard to disprove the usual argument made by the in-laws, who testify that the burning was a stove accident or a suicide. Since it has taken place behind closed doors, there are no witnesses.⁴¹

However, the effect of this subsequent analysis is highly attenuated, if not completely effaced, by the beginning of the chapter where religion, ritual, fire, Hinduism, and burning Indian women are all woven into a very "special" relationship. What I find fascinating and puzzling is the persistence of "exoticising" and "ritualistic" and "religious" elements in accounts where the author knows and acknowledges the quotidian expediencies involved in the use of fire for dowry-murder. Attempts at "cultural explanation" that "weave together" the mundane reasons for the use of fire as a murder weapon with the "spiritual significance of fire to Hindus" end up as "explanations" that need more explanation than the issues they are trying to address. I suspect that Bumiller's ability to remain unaware of the significant tensions between the opening frame of the chapter and her subsequent explanation for the use of fire in the commission of dowry-murders is connected to the widespread tendency to see Third-World women as suffering "death by culture" or "victimization by culture."⁴²

In the "explanations" that generate "death by culture," religious views or "traditional values" often become virtually synonymous with "culture." While the institution of dowry can certainly be meaningfully connected to "Indian culture" it is not, I think, given a satisfactory "explanation" by references to "religion." The fact that, for instance, the Laws of Manu (dating to the turn of the Christian era) endorse marriage involving dowry over other forms of marriage, such as marriage by capture or marriage involving bride-price, does little to illuminate the varying considerations about property and inheritance that have undoubtedly contributed to the continuous historical life of this institution.

I do think there are interesting questions (which I am not in the least equipped to answer) about why the institution of dowry has existed in some Indian communities and not in others, and as to why it has persisted in Indian communities when it has disappeared from those Western contexts where it historically existed. While I believe answers to these questions would make reference to many material, social, and cultural aspects of the Indian context, "religious views" alone would hardly

suffice as explanation. In addition, while explanations for Indian women's vulnerability to dowry-murder might meaningfully refer to some aspects of "culture," such as underlying marriage and family arrangements that contribute to women's powerlessness, neither dowry-murders nor women's vulnerability to dowry-murder seem explainable as simply the outcome of adherence to a specific set of "religious" views.⁴³

My goal here has been to show the significant difference between "death by culture" accounts of the phenomenon of dowry-murder and alternative accounts. One can only speculate about who reads Bumiller-type texts about "women in Other cultures" and the diffuse "effects" of these readings in promoting understandings of "Third-World women's problems" as "victimization by culture." Though Bumiller's book makes no claim to be a "scholarly" work, the book has clearly "functioned" as an academic text, since I have seen it in my college bookstore and in the footnotes of papers, including perhaps those that began with, "Women are being burnt to death everyday in India." I am not sure what to make of the uncanny similarities between the "problematic framing" of Bumiller's chapter on *sati* and bride-burning and the "problematic framing" in a *Dallas Observer*'s story about an Indian woman living in Texas who was murdered by being set on fire by her husband.⁴⁴ Radhika Parameswaran describes the article as framed by references to *sati* and dowry-murder even though the woman's murder had no connection with either phenomena, and even though, as a Christian, the murdered woman had no "cultural connection" to *sati*, and may well have belonged to a community where marriages did not involve dowry! Reading Parameswaran, one of the first things that came to mind was the thought (wholly unfounded) that the reporter who wrote the *Dallas Observer* article that Parameswaran critiques had read Bumiller's book, even though I know that the ubiquitous "cultural construction" of "burnt Indian women" cannot be explained quite so simply.

Differences of "Culture" and Differences in "Culture as Explanation" /

I would like to end by considering an interesting asymmetry that exists between explanations of violence against women in "mainstream Western culture" and such "death by culture" explanations of violence against women specific to "Third-World cultural contexts." The best way I can think of to point to this asymmetry is the following kind of "thought experiment," which is also a kind of wicked fantasy whose "fantastical" elements are actually more interesting than its wickedness. Imagine yourself meeting a young Indian woman journalist

who, after reading Bumiller's book, has decided to retaliate by working on a book entitled, *May You Be the Loser of A Hundred Pounds: A Journey Among the Women of the United States*. The young journalist plans to travel throughout the United States talking to an assortment of American women, trying to learn about "American women and American culture." The chapters she hopes to include in her book include vignettes on American women suffering from eating disorders; American women in weight-loss programs; American women who have undergone liposuctions, breast implants, and other types of cosmetic surgery; American women victims of domestic violence; American women in politics, and American women media stars.⁴⁵

Ask yourself, "What are the structures of knowledge-production and information-circulation that make this book as difficult to imagine as it is impossible to find?" What are the factors that make it unlikely for a young Indian woman to conceive of such a project?⁴⁶ What is the likelihood of such a project being taken seriously enough to warrant the various forms of interest that are necessary to enable such a book to be written and published (in the United States or in India)? How likely is this book to be considered a serious source of information on "American culture" by the general public, or to appear on the reading list of any course on American culture? How likely is the book to receive reviews that credit the author with having "made the United States new and immediate again" and with being an "Eastern writer who has actually discovered the United States"?⁴⁷ What are the factors that make this imaginary book implausible and allow us to feel quite certain that there is no such book?

Pursuing my point about "cultural explanation," I shall continue with my fantasy, and go on to imagine how some of the contours of this Indian journalist's book on "women in American culture" would differ from Bumiller's Indian counterpart. I shall concentrate on her attempts to write the chapter linking domestic violence to American culture. Our intrepid Indian journalist would find it difficult, if not impossible, to account for many "American cultural phenomena" by references to Christian doctrines, myths, and practices. While "Christian values" have probably coexisted with domestic violence, fatal and nonfatal, in the United States much longer than "Hinduism" has coexisted with dowry-murder, one doubts that our journalist would be inclined, either on her own or as a result of her conversations with most Americans, to explain contemporary domestic violence in terms of Christian views about women's sinful nature, Eve's role in the Fall, the sanctity of marriage and the family, or the like.

Permit me to imagine the interesting difficulties that would confront our imaginary journalist as she attempted to write this chapter on "domestic violence and American culture." It just doesn't seem plausible,

she has realized, to attempt an explanatory link between the two terms “domestic violence” and “American culture” through references to Christianity. How else, she wonders, is she to link the two terms, enabling her discussion of domestic violence in the United States to illuminate “American culture?” Much of the U.S. literature on domestic violence turns out not very helpful for her particular project, since most of the accounts they give explain the phenomenon in terms of a “non-nation-specific, secularized, general patriarchy,” that seems no more distinctively “American” than it is “Christian.”

She will find criticisms, most notably by U.S. feminists of color, that the underlying picture of “patriarchy” at work in many U.S. accounts of domestic-violence is often overly generalized. She may find the article where Kimberle Crenshaw argues that strands in U.S. domestic violence discourse have “transformed the message that battering is not *exclusively* a problem of poor or minority communities into a claim that it *equally* affects all classes and races,”⁴⁸ and that such views impede attention to the specific needs of battered women of color.⁴⁹ She will find that Crenshaw argues that women of color suffer disproportionately higher unemployment, lack of job skills, and discriminatory employment and housing practices, that make it harder for them to leave abusive relationships.⁵⁰ She will learn that factors such as being non-English speaking and having an immigration status that is dependent on marriage to the abuser further work to disempower a number of battered women of color in the United States.⁵¹ Through such work, the journalist may develop a better understanding of how American class and race structures, and the outcomes of U.S. immigration policies, affect victims of domestic violence in the United States. She will recognize, however, that such references to features of the American context seem quite different from the sorts of “religious” references to “Indian culture” Bumiller’s chapter introduction uses to explain *sati* and dowry-murders.

Among the things she will learn in her readings and conversations are that American men batter their partners for “reasons” that range from sexual jealousy, alcoholism, stress, and pure unmitigated rage, to the desire to control the woman or to “prevent her leaving.” She will learn that economic dependency, worries about the custody and welfare of children, low self-esteem due to abuse, and the threats and violence that have followed upon previous attempts at leaving are often given as reasons for American women staying in abusive relationships. With the possible exception of “low self-esteem,”⁵² these sorts of reasons will seem similar to those that work to keep Indian women in abusive marriages, though they are often eclipsed in explanations that rely on elements such as Hindu mythology or the status of women in the Laws of Manu. She will notice that in U.S. accounts of domestic violence the sorts of reasons

mentioned above appear to provide explanation enough, and that there is no felt need to explain why domestic violence in America is "American." None of this, she realizes, is helping her write a chapter that easily links U.S. domestic violence to "American culture."

Suddenly, she has a flash of inspiration! "Guns," she exclaims to herself, "gun-related domestic violence against women is what my chapter should be about. That will provide the tie into 'American culture' I have been looking for, since guns are so quintessentially 'American.' I need to find out how many women are injured annually by guns and how seriously, and how many of these injuries are inflicted by domestic partners. I need to find out how many domestic shooting incidents are claimed to be 'accidents' and how often there is good reason to doubt that they are. I need to find out how many American women are murdered annually by guns, and how many of them by their partners. Finding this information might help me depict guns as an 'icon' of violence against U.S. women, just as 'fire' seems to have become an icon of violence against Indian women."

What our imaginary Indian journalist might run up against as she tries to write this improbable chapter is revealing. Guns and lack of gun control, she will find in her conversations with Americans, are often acknowledged to be fairly distinctively "American" problems. However, in her attempts to relate gun-related violence to women and domestic violence, she will find that gun control and gun-related violence have not widely emerged specifically as "women's issues" or "domestic-violence issues." The journalist will run into difficulties as she tries to find "official data" on the "numbers of U.S. women killed and/or injured by guns in acts of domestic violence." If she starts with sources that have data on domestic violence, she will find figures for the numbers of U.S. women killed and for women injured in acts of domestic violence, but she will find that the sources do not specify how many of these deaths or injuries were gun-related. She will discover that it is not easy to figure out how many of the roughly 1,400 American women known to be killed annually by their partners were killed by guns. When she turns to data on gun-related violence, she will find similar problems. While it is fairly easy to find out that seven out of every ten American murders involved guns, it is less easy to find out whether seven out of ten murders of *women* involved guns. Figures for gun-related murders, she will find, do not often specify how many of these murders were domestic-violence related. While the data on the "handgun victimization rate" (which excludes murder and manslaughter) are broken down by sex, race, and age, they do not often specify how much of the "handgun victimization" suffered by U.S. women is domestic-violence related.⁵³

In short, she will predominantly find that figures pertaining to U.S.

domestic violence do not specifically focus on guns, and that data on gun-related violence in the U.S. lacks specific attention to domestic violence. The intersection between "domestic violence suffered by U.S. women" and "American gun-related violence"—which would be the space of "domestic violence against American women mediated by the use of guns"—seems not to be well marked either as an "American" or as a "women's" issue. If she eventually finds the data, she will be struck by the fact that although the majority of women murdered by partners are in fact murdered with firearms, gun control has not emerged strongly as a U.S. feminist issue or even as a "visible" issue in much of the literature on domestic violence.⁵⁴ The journalist will discover that her idea about linking "domestic violence" to "American culture" by focusing on gun-related violence against women is not a project easy to carry out, since the two issues seem not to be frequently connected by those engaged with gun-control issues or domestic-violence agendas. She might, however, acquire some interesting "cross-cultural insights" as a result of her frustrations. She might come to see that while Indian women repeatedly suffer "death by culture" in a range of scholarly and popular works, even as the elements of "culture" proffered do little to explain their deaths, American women seem relatively immune to such analyses of "death or injury by culture" even as they are victimized by the fairly distinctively American phenomenon of wide-spread gun-related violence.

Given these difficulties, it is perhaps for the best that this is an imaginary chapter in an improbable book. I would like to end with the suggestion that books that cannot be written and chapters that are oddly difficult to write might have more to teach us about particular cultures and their relationships to "Other cultures" than many books and chapters that face few difficulties in being either imagined or written.

tural tradition; and (2) an admirable practice that should inspire respect and reverence from Indians. While feminists attacked both of the fundamentalist premises, as it was politically vital that they do, they did *not* imply that if it had been an Indian tradition it would have been morally acceptable.

85. Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita, "The Burning of Roop Kanwar," *Manushi*, No. 42.

86. Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "The Roop Kanwar Case: Feminist Responses," p. 116.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

88. This might be part of the point Gayatri Spivak makes when she expresses skepticism about the subaltern's speech in "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice," *Wedge* (Winter/Spring 1985), pp. 120-130.

89. Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "The Roop Kanwar Case: Feminist Responses," p. 125.

90. Lata Mani, "Multiple Mediations," *Feminist Review* (1990), p. 37.

91. Indira Jaising, "Women, Religion and the Law," *The Lawyers Collective* 2, II.

92. Of course both *sati* and the "ideal of femininity" embodied in *sati* also deserve to be challenged apart from their status as "traditions." The focus of recent contestation on *sati*'s status as tradition should not be taken as a sign that Indian feminists would find it any less objectionable if it had in fact been less problematically a "longstanding Indian tradition."

93. Kumkum Sangari, "Perpetuating the Myth," *Seminar* 342, February 1988, reprinted in *Sati*, Mulk Raj Anand, ed. (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1989), pp. 104-105.

94. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan make an important point when they argue that "we need to examine fundamentalisms around the world and seek to understand why Muslim fundamentalism appears in the media today as the primary progenitor of oppressive conditions for women when Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Confucian, and other forms of extreme fundamentalisms exert profound controls over women's lives." See their "Introduction: Transnational Feminist Practices and Questions of Postmodernity," in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 19.

95. This is a term used by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso Books, 1983), p. 15.

Three / Cross-Cultural Connections, Border-Crossings, and "Death by Culture"

1. Quite contingently, most of the Americans with whom I have discussed this topic are not of Indian background. I do not know whether the misconceptions about *sati* and dowry-murders that I discuss are widely shared by members of the diasporic Indian community in the United States. It would not necessarily surprise me if that were the case, but I have little to go on. As a result, when I discuss "American" responses and understandings, I refer to the responses of Americans who are not of Indian background.

2. I have reasons for preferring not to cite either of them.

3. "Restoring History and Politics to 'Third World Traditions': Contrasting the Colonialist Stance and Contemporary Contestations of *Sati*" in this volume. Also

dowry-murders. See "Organizing Against Violence," *Pacific Affairs* (1989) pp. 56-57.

14. For details, see Mary Fainsod Katzenstein, "Organizing Against Violence," pp. 57-58.

15. From "Discussion Forum" in *Samya Shakti* 2, 1 (1985), p. 98.

16. The other was the issue of the "deficit of women" in the Indian population. Although cause for concern, there are several features that make this issue difficult to organize around. Unlike dowry-murders, this was not a phenomenon whose "causes" were readily clear. It was also less clear how groups might "organize" around this issue.

17. Madhu Kishwar, "Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist," *Manushi* 61 (Nov./Dec. 1990).

18. Madhu Kishwar, "Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist," p. 5.

19. Ibid., p. 6.

20. It is interesting to note that feminist groups in many diasporic South Asian communities in Western national contexts have organized shelters for battered women in their communities. For instance, there are shelters organized and operated by South Asian women in New Jersey and in Chicago.

21. Statistics were for 1994 and found in a *Crime Index* based on reports to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting Program. The data appear in the FBI's annual publication, *Crime in the United States*. The data I obtained were on the Internet, dated November 19, 1995, and reported some "highlights of the 1994 edition" of the FBI publication.

22. Here are a few examples of the variations I found. The FBI data says, "Forty seven percent of murder victims were related to (12 percent) or acquainted with (35 percent) their assailants" (a statement that neither specifies the gender of the victims, nor the precise nature of their relationship to or acquaintance with their assailants) and that "among all female murder victims in 1994, 28 percent were slain by husbands or boyfriends." On the other hand, I found the information that, "In the U.S., 9 out of 10 women murdered are murdered by men, half at the hands of a male partner," in Lori Heise, *Gender Violence as Health Issue*, fact sheet, Violence, Health and Development Project, Center for Women's Global Leadership, Rutgers University, 1992. While the first part of the above information corresponds to FBI statistics, the second half gives a figure almost twice that of the FBI statistics.

A second example: I found, "In the U.S. 4 women are killed every day by their husbands or boyfriends," in "Facts on Domestic Violence," courtesy Lynne Synder, Y Care, Chicago, reprinted in *WAC Stats* ("The Facts About Women" put out by the Women's Action Coalition, The New Press, New York, 1993). This corresponds to the 1,400 number I worked out from FBI data. However, I also found in *WAC Stats* the information that "every 11 days in the U.S. a woman is murdered by her husband, boyfriend or live-in lover," attributed to "Statistics 1988, 1989" by National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women, Philadelphia. This latter information suggests a much lower number of women annually killed by their partners (under forty) than the FBI statistics.

23. The number of women killed by *intimates* (defined as spouses, ex-spouses or boyfriends) rose from 1,396 in 1977 to 1,510 in 1992, according to "Violence between Intimates," *Bureau of Justice Statistics*, U.S. Department of Justice, November 1994. These figures seemed close enough to the 1,400 figure I am using, at least for my purposes.

24. Quoted in a resolution on Dowry-Deaths in India by the Committee on Human Rights that I found on the Internet. It attributes the definition to the Indian Penal Code.

25. I was not at all sure what the FBI's 28 percent statistic did reflect. I wondered whether it reflected criminal convictions, or cases where there had been sufficient evidence for criminal prosecution, or cases where the partner was simply suspected of the murder. My hunch that the FBI statistics reflected criminal convictions was reinforced by the fact that another source cited figures similar to the FBI's and said "28 percent of women murdered were *known* to be murdered by their partners." I am grateful to my sociologist colleague Marque Miringoff confirming that the FBI statistics reflected criminal convictions.

26. While the Indian journal *Manushi* does cover general issues of domestic violence in India, I do not think it makes much difference at the level of popular U.S. public understanding.

27. Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Dowry Murders in India: A Preliminary Examination of the Historical Evidence," in *Women's Lives and Public Policy: The International Experience*, Meredith Turshen and Briavel Holcomb, eds. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), p. 146.

28. Elizabeth Bumiller, *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons: A Journey Among the Women of India* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1990), p. 44.

29. Bumiller, *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons*, p. 45.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Some of these works are "general discussions of women in Indian culture" that situate "Hindu religious doctrines" at the center of their "analysis of Indian culture" and mention dowry and dowry-murders "in passing," more or less as "examples of the effects of Hindu religious views on women's well-being." Others center their discussions on dowry and dowry-murder, and then deploy very many of the same elements of "Hindu religious doctrine" in ways that suggest they are "explanations" for dowry-murders.

32. Sushila Mehta, *Revolution and the Status of Women in India* (New Delhi: Metropolitan Book Co., 1982), p. 208.

33. Arguing that "there has been an overemphasis on the mystical and religious aspects of Indian society," Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen go on to add: "The image of the 'mystical East,' and specifically India, is not a matter only of popular conception but has a good deal of following in the typical Indologist's summary view of Indian intellectual history. In this respect there is also no real gulf between the things that the Western scholars have typically tended to emphasize in Indian culture and what Indian Indologists have themselves most often highlighted. This close correspondence may not, however, be particularly remarkable, since approaches to 'cultural summarizing' are generally quite 'infectious,' and, no less importantly, modern Indian scholarship is greatly derivative from the West." Martha C. Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, "Internal Criticism and Indian Rationalist Traditions," in *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*, Michael Krauz, ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), pp. 301-303. I argue that the "general picture" of "Indian culture" they point to seems to have problematic effects on social science explanations of Indian phenomena. I would also add that writings by Indians on "Indian culture" tend, in turn, to be assimilated into "Western scholarship" on India—whereby, for instance, Sushila Mehta's views

on dowry and dowry-murder "reappear" in works by Western feminists on "Indian women's issues."

34. See Louis Dumont, "Dowry in Hindu Marriage: As a Social Scientist Sees It," *Economic Weekly*, April 11, 1959.

35. See Indira Rajaraman, "Economics of Bride Price and Dowry," *Economic And Political Weekly*, February 19, 1983.

36. Sushila Mehta, *Revolution and the Status of Women in India*, p. 208.

37. I admit that I tend to be wary about "general explanations for dowry" since I suspect that the understandings of dowry as well as its functions have differed across specific communities at various periods of historical time. In the case of dowry, as in the case of *sati*, I think that a number of "social explanations" tend to treat these phenomena as more "unitary" than they actually are, constructing them as "unified phenomenon" in that very process.

38. Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Dowry Murders in India: A Preliminary Examination of the Historical Evidence," in *Women's Lives and Public Policy: The International Experience*, by Meredith Turshen and Briavel Holcomb, eds. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), p. 148.

39. Contemporary dowry also seems to be becoming a "postnuptial" rather than a "prenuptial" exchange. A recent study of 150 women victimized and harassed over dowry found that in 60 percent of the cases, dowry was only demanded *after* the marriage had taken place, a point at which the bride's parents are vulnerable to pressures to "save the marriage at any cost" and where the husband's family can exert the threat of "desertion." In roughly two-thirds of the cases where dowry was in fact demanded before marriage, it was demanded very shortly before the marriage was solemnized, at a time when arrangements for the marriage had been finalized, and when the women's family feared social stigma in calling off the wedding. See Ranjana Kumari, *Brides Are Not For Burning*, pp. 44-45.

40. Consumer goods and cash seem to be the two most common components of dowry demands. In about 15 percent of the cases studied by Kumari, there were also demands that the daughter be given a share of her parents' estate, forms of property that women were not traditionally expected to inherit and for which dowry was regarded as a "substitute." Kumari notes that these families are willing to "flout this tradition when it comes to their wives and daughters-in-law" while insisting on tradition when it comes to their own daughters' and sisters' claims to family property! See *Brides Are Not For Burning*, p. 48.

41. Bumiller, *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1990), p. 47.

42. It is interesting to consider the "authenticating" or "authorizing" function that "personal encounters" clearly tend to have in the production of "knowledge about Other cultures," a function underlined by the fact that *A Journey Among the Women of India* is a subtitle of Bumiller's book. One of the lessons I learned from reading this book was how complicated this matter of "authorization" was. To be fair to Bumiller, she does not position herself as an "authority" on India or on Indian women, but as a "foreigner" encountering a context she knows little about. But the fact of her "having been there" and the fact that all the "Indian women's issues" she addresses are mediated by narratives of her encounters with an assortment of "real Indian women" work to convey a sense of verisimilitude, that in turn

works to deflect attention from the "issues of framing" I have tried to call attention to.

43. I also have problems with a different kind of "cultural explanation," quite common in Indian discussions of these issues, that sees the institution of dowry as the "central culprit" in dowry-murders. Let me try to explain my problem. Dowry has been illegal since the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961. The Act outlaws dowry, defined as "the property a woman brings to her husband at marriage," and coercive demands for dowry. It does not prohibit either "gifts to the groom's family" that are of a "customary nature," or the giving of property to the daughter herself, thereby providing two clear loopholes that make the Act virtually impossible to apply. I am increasingly unsure whether the inefficacy of this law in prohibiting dowry is entirely a bad thing. If successful, it might prevent a great many women from receiving their "traditional" share of parental property, without necessarily ensuring that they get any share at all. Even if dowry prohibition was combined with a law that gave women rights to a full postmortem share of parental property, there is little guarantee that many women might not be cheated out of it by brothers and male kin. Besides, while a successful prohibition of dowry would certainly prevent some women being killed, it may also leave many others without the margin of economic security dowry provides during their marriage. Dowryless women may be safe from dowry-murder but may be less empowered in having no assets of their own until their parents' death, leaving them more vulnerable when they confront other forms of harassment during those years.

44. Radhika Parameswaran, "Coverage of 'Bride-Burning' in the Dallas Observer," *Frontiers* (1996).

45. Yes, this roughly approximates the range of topics on "Indian women" found in Bumiller's book.

46. I leave these questions unanswered in part because I think the answers are complicated and would require a great deal more thought and reflection than I can give them at this time.

47. Yes, Bumiller's book *did* receive reviews corresponding to these quotes!

48. Kimberle Crenshaw, "Intersectionality and Identity Politics: Learning from Violence Against Women of Color," in *Reconstructing Political Theory: Feminist Perspectives*, Mary L. Shanley and Uma Narayan, eds., forthcoming from Polity Press.

49. She may also find mention of a different problem, whereby greater incidence of wife assault among blue-collar workers, the unemployed, and the partially employed, as well as among African Americans and Hispanic Americans, results in "the popular explanation that these subcultures have proviolence norms." Daniel G. Saunders, "Husbands Who Assault: Multiple Profiles Requiring Multiple Responses," in *Legal Responses to Wife Assault: Current Trends and Evaluation*, edited by N. Zoe Hilton (Newbury Park, Cal.: Sage Publications, 1993), p. 12. Saunders goes on to argue against this view. However, it does point out the degree to which problems within minority racial or ethnic communities in the United States are more likely to receive explanations in terms of specific "cultural pathologies" that differ from the kinds of "general explanations" given for domestic violence.

50. Crenshaw, "Intersectionality and Identity Politics."

51. See both Crenshaw and Nancy Hirschman's "The Theory and Practice of