

## **TRAILS OF MURDER, TEARS OF GRIEF: UNDERSTANDING VIOLENT CRIMES AGAINST SECOND-GENERATION COCONUTS**

### **ABSTRACT**

Canada is a country of ethnically and racially diverse immigrants who have contributed in many ways toward the process of nation building. As of 2011, the country had a population of 5,702,700 second-generation immigrant people, representing 17.4% of the total Canadian population.<sup>6</sup> Many of these fall under the “visible minority” category,<sup>7</sup> with 3 in every 10 second-generation immigrants belonging to this group.<sup>8</sup> As visible minorities, most racialized immigrants face multiple exclusions (social, economic, cultural, ethnic, racial, gender-based, and religious) in their effort to integrate into the society. These multiple exclusions are linked to and generate multiple vulnerabilities for the second-generation immigrant population. I believe that within the category of second-generation immigrants, it is youth who are most vulnerable to certain things including bullying, drug abuse, gang membership, physical and sexual abuse, and even death resulting from hate crimes. It was also discovered that the median age of second-generation immigrants was younger (31.9 years) when compared to the rest of the general Canadian population (40.1 years).<sup>9</sup> My concentration therefore lies on second-generation South Asian Canadian youth within the age bracket of 12-30 years. The primary concern of this paper is to analyze different case studies of violence against this population and extrapolate the various reasons behind such violence.

### **SECOND-GENERATION *COCONUTS* – LOST IN TWO WORLDS**

Statistics Canada defines second-generation people as “individuals who were born in Canada and had at least one parent born outside Canada.” In the context of this study, I will use the term “South Asian” to mean individuals coming from countries like India,

---

<sup>6</sup> This data is taken from Statistics Canada’s 2011 National Household Survey (NHS), which provided an analysis of the Canadian population in terms of generation status. “Generation status” identifies whether an individual or his/her parents were born in Canada, classifying people as first-, second-, and third- or more generation.

<sup>7</sup> The Employment Equity Act defines visible minority groups as “persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour.” This includes South Asian, Black, Chinese Arab, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Southeast Asian, West Asian, and Latin American people.

<sup>8</sup> This data is taken from Statistics Canada’s 2011 National Household Survey (NHS).

<sup>9</sup> This data is taken from Statistics Canada’s 2011 National Household Survey (NHS).

Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives (Bannerji-Stevens, 2009; Bhatia & Ram, 2004; Ghosh, 2013) and I will employ the term “second-generation” or “hyphenated” youth (Calgar, 1997; James, 2003; Mahtani, 2004) to refer to youth who have spent a major part of their lives growing up in Canada and have straddled and been influenced by two extremely different worlds at the same time. One of these worlds is created by the specific ethnic, religious, historical, and cultural background of their first-generation South Asian parents, while the other is formed by their individual/personal experiences of living in Canada.

Identity formation and acquiring a sense of belonging are two very complex processes for these youth. I find it very interesting that many self-identify as the fruit “coconuts” to symbolize how they feel brown on the outside but white on the inside. They find themselves trying to fit/merge into two radically disparate cultures and are accepted in neither completely. They face exclusion from the dominant Canadian culture due to their brown skin, which becomes an obvious marker of difference and makes them stand out in comparison to the mainstream white Canadian population. At the same time, they face alienation from their South Asian heritage because a) they don’t necessarily subscribe to the same cultural and traditional values as their parents and b) despite making efforts to merge in their South Asian ancestry, their practices might be viewed as “white washed.” Many scholars such as Dwine Plaza, Omari Hisako, Amarnath Amarasingam, and Mary Goitam have pointed out that the complicated process of identity formation for these youth is influenced by interactions with their family, community, and external environment and thus is constantly renegotiated and reformulated in nuanced ways. On certain occasions and during certain human interactions, they go through a dynamic process of identity formation where they make deliberate decisions to “brown it up” or “bring down the brown” after assessing which strategy will work best (Sundar, 2008). For instance, they will take their brownness up a notch when they find themselves among South Asian people to take advantage of their cultural connections, whereas at a formal office event surrounded by white colleagues, they will act more like “Canadians” so as not to feel excluded. This multidimensional and flexible aspect of their identity formation provides them the space to challenge the institutional barriers and oppressive situations that they otherwise encounter as racialized youth (Sundar, 2008). Despite some amount of agency in this area, however, these youth experience much ambiguity surrounding their identities while growing up and find themselves trapped in various worlds at the same time, which increases their vulnerability to violence.

#### TALES OF VIOLENCE, TEARS OF GRIEF

It is my contention that having no group/community where they can feel fully integrated and lacking a strong sense of identity increases the vulnerability of second-generation South Asian Canadian youth to abuse and violence because in their desperate bid to seek acceptance from their parents, peers, friends, and boyfriends/girlfriends in either culture (South Asian or Canadian), they may be willing to go to extreme lengths and are therefore prone to manipulation and exploitation. This paper will undertake an analysis of three different case studies of violence against

second-generation South Asian Canadian youth: the first will consider inter-racial group violence perpetrated by young girls, the second will discuss intra-community crime by an individual male, and the third will examine honour killing. Each case will bring out crucial points about the discourse of violence against these coconuts.

#### REENA VIRK

The tragic murder of 14-year-old Reena Virk sent shockwaves across the country as it brought to the fore the extent of brutality, anger, and hatred that teenage girls can display. Virk's parents were first-generation immigrants from India living in Saanich, BC. They belonged to a "minority within a minority," being Jehovah's witnesses<sup>10</sup> in a South Asian community that was predominantly Sikh. Reena tried very hard to fit in with her female peers, but they ostracised her from their subculture which was heavily influenced by LA street gangs. Virk's ethno-racially different body was no match for this climate. She was brutally and repeatedly punched, kicked in the head, and burned with cigarettes on November 14, 1997 at a party she'd been invited to near the Craigflower Bridge. The attackers were a group of teenagers—six girls collectively called the "Shoreline Six"—and a boy. Though she somehow managed to escape after this first horrific beating, she was followed by two teenagers—Kelly Ellard and Warren Glowatski—who beat her again, smashed her face into a tree, and ultimately drowned her. Her scantily clad body was found in the water almost a week after her murder. Ellard and Glowatski were convicted of second-degree murder and given life sentences (Dickson & Burgmann, 2016).

Scholars such as Yasmin Jiwani (2005) point our attention toward a very important aspect of Reena's story that is deliberately left out by the Canadian media and public discourse. She highlights the complex intersecting and interlocking impact of race, gender, and violence as they shape the Canadian public imagination and in particular influence the everyday lives of immigrant girls and women of colour (Jiwani, 2006), and argues that public discourses hand out recognition of one kind of violence while belittling or ignoring another kind (Jiwani, 1999). In Reena's case, emphasis was put on a cultural explanation for her death. Her murder was carefully portrayed as a result of general bullying and girl-on-girl violence, erasing the issue of inequalities and violence arising from systemic and institutional racism. The problem of heightened girl-on-girl violence in Canada has been couched in the argument that "girls have become as violent as boys" (Jiwani, 2000). However, the reality for young women of colour is far from being summed up by this simple explanation, as these girls are more vulnerable due to their social location in a society which is hierarchically racialized and gendered. Racism is naturalized in Canadian society and interacts with widely prevalent sexism to constitute the lived realities for these racialized girls (Jiwani, 2005). As Patricia Hill Collins explains,

---

<sup>10</sup> Jehovah's witnesses come from diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. They are united by one main goal, that of honouring Jehovah—the God of the Bible and the creator of the world. They are known as Jehovah's witnesses as they talk about or witness Jehovah and his kingdom. They believe in imitating Christ to the best of their ability and helping people understand the Bible and God's kingdom.

“viewing the very definition of violence as lying outside hierarchical power relations of race and gender ignores how the power to define what counts as violence is constitutive of these same power relations” (as cited in Jiwani, 2006, p. 3).

#### MAPLE BATALIA

An aspiring actress, a part-time model, and a health sciences student at SFU's Surrey campus, Maple Batalia was just 19 years old when she was brutally stabbed and gunned down by her ex-boyfriend Gary Dhaliwal in the parking lot right outside her university campus. They had been dating for several years, and being from the same South Asian Canadian community, their families knew each other extremely well. Maple's decision to call off the relationship with Gary was reportedly a consequence of his repeated infidelity and aggressive, possessive, and controlling behaviour. In the weeks before the killing, he sent her thousands of messages, threatened her male friends, and ultimately lay in wait to confront and kill her. He was sentenced to life in prison for first-degree murder 5 years after committing the crime (Omand, 2016).

This tragic tale highlights the risk of violence that young racialized women are exposed to from within their own community. It also sheds light on the issue of dating and relationship abuse that is very common among teenagers. Many times, youngsters from the South Asian community are unable to tell their parents that they are seeing someone or discuss issues or abuse they might be experiencing in the relationship. Parents and children within this community don't share the same open bond as many western families, and certain topics like relationships and sexual activities are considered a taboo. There are two conflicting and intersecting dynamics at play for women of colour, who deal with a confluence of patriarchal values outside as well as within their communities (Jiwani, 2005). It has been noted by the UN-based Working Group on Girls (WGG)<sup>11</sup> that refugee and immigrant women endure increased rates of violence as they face sexism from inside their community and sexism plus racism from the outside society (Friedman & Cook, 1995). A partnership between these “scattered hegemonies” adds to the violence of racism and sexism (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994).

#### AQSA PARVEZ

Aqsa Parvez was a 16-year-old student at Apple Woods Heights High School in Mississauga, Ontario. Her family had immigrated to Canada from Pakistan and were strict followers of Islam. This was a bone of contention between Aqsa and her family because she didn't subscribe to the same religious values as they did. She was forced to wear a *hijab*<sup>12</sup> by her family, which she didn't like doing, so she would change her

---

<sup>11</sup> The Working Group on Girls (WGG) is a coalition of over 40 national and international non-governmental organizations with representation at the United Nations dedicated to promoting the human rights of the girl child in all areas and stages of her life, advancing the inclusion and status of girls and assisting them to develop their full potential as women.

<sup>12</sup> A hijab is typically a veil worn by some Muslim women to protect themselves from the male gaze outside of their immediate family in the public sphere. The term can be used for any face,

clothes when she reached school and vice versa when she was heading back home. A week before her death, she had moved in with another family in the neighbourhood to avoid tensions within her family. Her father had threatened her many times and she wanted to run away from her family. On the day of her death, December 10th, 2007, she was strangled by her brother (Waqas Parvez) out of rage for not wearing a *hijab*. Her father (Muhammad Parvez) took the fall for her murder in order to protect his son. Later, the truth came out and her brother was charged with first-degree murder (“Aqsa Parvez’s Father,” 2010).

As horrible and sad this case was, it was important in raising the issue of honour killings.<sup>13</sup> Patriarchy, sexism, gender, and religion play important roles in such cases. According to Aqsa’s father and brother, it was their responsibility to save the family pride and honour. When interviewed by the police, Aqsa’s mother relayed her husband’s words about why his daughter needed to be killed: “This is my insult. My community will say, ‘You have not been able to control your daughter.’ This is my insult” (“Aqsa Parvez’s Father,” 2010). This is a clear example of how patriarchy works: the family, community, and nation state’s honour is conflated with women’s honour and thus there is a strict regulation on women’s mobility, sexuality, and bodies. Women must be careful of their actions and words because these are considered to reflect on the family and community’s values. Transgressing the boundaries laid out for women is not tolerated. Aqsa’s case generated questions about the status of women in Muslim communities, but one should not generalize such incidents to a religious community. Patriarchy is the real evil, and it is spread across cultures and societies.

#### WINDS OF CHANGE – RESISTANCE AND RECLAIMING AGENCY

It is crucial to recognize that the South Asian Canadian community have not remained passive, submissive, or silent victims of these horror tales. One can find many voices emanating from within the community and from various organizations strongly calling for radical change and taking steps in that direction. Individual families that were affected by these violent crimes have tried to create awareness through advocacy in the community and society at large related to issues such as bullying, racism, dating abuse, honour killing, domestic violence, and other crimes against women. This is also a way for them to try and move on with their lives despite suffering such a huge loss. To prevent anyone else from experiencing the loss they did, the families of these slain second-generation South Asian Canadian youths have converted their grief into awareness campaigns so that some good comes out of the loss of their children.

---

head, or body covering and is usually considered to be a part of Islamic standards of dressing modestly for women.

<sup>13</sup> The act of killing a female member of the family (usually a daughter) by people who are related to the victim by blood (usually a father or brother) is described as honour killing. This homicidal act takes place out of anger that a female member has brought shame, dishonour, and a bad name to the family by engaging in behaviours (sexual or otherwise) regarded as immodest or unacceptable by the family and community.

Organizations also exist which serve the purpose of ending violence and crime against women of South Asian Canadian descent.

Suman and Manjit Virk are frequent speakers at elementary and high schools, sharing Reena's story with youngsters in the hopes of preventing another tragedy. They have spearheaded anti-bullying campaigns across the country, with their main message being to speak up against bullying. If even one person had made a phone call the night that Reena was bullied, things could have been very different. They work with a provincial program that puts victims of violence in touch with perpetrators, the same program that brought them to forgive Warren Glowatski at a healing circle in 2007 in support of his day parole. Her father wrote a book about his daughter's childhood, which helped him cope with the grief of losing his child.

Maple's mother, Sarbjit, has been a speaker at various forums to create awareness around violence against women. She has written several poems in her native language expressing the loss of her daughter and the dreams that she had for her daughter—dreams which remain unfulfilled due to Maple's untimely death. She shares her grief publicly through these poems and expresses her determination to protect other girls from abusive boyfriends. Maple's sister has also dedicated her life to ending violence against women and wishes that Maple's story would start conversations about this important issue within the South Asian community. The family has hosted many candlelight vigils to honour Maple and all other victims of such violence. Her parents started a bursary for the Health Sciences department at SFU in her honour and the Maple Batalia Memorial Scholarship for the Arts was created in collaboration with Emily Carr University of Art and Design. Community members and businesses have kept her memory alive through charities, and the Vancouver South Asian bridal company Pink Orchid Studio developed a lip gloss shade named after Maple, with proceeds going to the Emily Carr Scholarship fund. A documentary about Maple's life, titled *Maple*, was directed by Jasleen Kaur, a South Asian Canadian woman who coincidentally shares the same birthdate with Maple and was very touched by her story ("I Want Her Story," 2017).

## CONCLUSION

Through the case study analysis undertaken in this paper, it has become apparent that the nature of violence faced by second-generation South Asian Canadian youth is racist, systemic, and in many instances gendered. The conflux of intersecting powers and hegemonic systems—patriarchy, race, and gender—creates interlocking oppressions for these youth. This overlap makes certain forms of violence possible and elevates the chance of exposure to violence for these youth. My research found that, at a general level, there is a dearth of information about the issue of violence against second-generation South Asian Canadian youth. However, one can find significant data and information on violence and crimes *committed by* this same population. In my opinion, this is a reflection of how Canadian media works to spread a public discourse around cases of violence against these youth that is predominantly cultural and ethnicity-centered. Blaming the practices within a specific racial/ethnic community helps the state to avoid examining the racist and gendered underpinnings of its institutions, which

create systemic barriers and perpetuate inequalities, discrimination, stereotypes, and violence. Although the scope of victims and perpetrators in this paper was not limited to any specific gender, I found that the victims of violence in most of the cases were women while the perpetrators of crime were men except for in a few cases like Reena Virk's. A big gap existed in the literature with little to no information available on second-generation South Asian Canadian male youth and self-identified LGBTQIA+ youth being victims of violence.

## REFERENCES

- Aqsa Parvez's father, brother get life sentences. (2010, June 16). *CBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/aqsa-parvez-s-father-brother-get-life-sentences-1.920103>
- Aurora, M. (2015). *The experiences of second-generation South Asian female students who are attending universities in Canada*. Retrieved from Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository (3188). <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/3188>
- Banerjee-Stevens, D. (2009). *Critical incidents in the identity development of second-generation South Asian women* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. Retrieved from [https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/53351/BanerjeeStevens\\_umn\\_0130E\\_10518.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/53351/BanerjeeStevens_umn_0130E_10518.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)
- Bhatia, S., & Ram, A. (2004). Culture, hybridity, and the dialogical self: Cases from the South Asian diaspora. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 11(3), 224-240. doi:10.1207/s15327884mca1103\_4
- Calgar, A. (1997). Hyphenated identities and the limits of "culture." In T. Modood & P. Werbner (Eds.), *The politics of multiculturalism in the new Europe: Racism, identity, and community*, (pp.169-185). New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc.
- Collins, P. H. (1998). The tie that binds: Race, gender and US violence. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21(5), 917-938.
- Dickson, L., & Burgmann, T. (2016, May 4). After almost 19 years, Kelly Ellard admits role in killing Reena Virk. *Times Colonist*. Retrieved from <https://www.timescolonist.com/news/local/after-almost-19-years-kelly-ellard-admits-role-in-killing-reena-virk-1.2246143>
- Friedman, S., & Cook, C. (1995). *Girls: A presence at Beijing*. New York: NGO Working Group on Girls.
- Ghosh, S. (2013). "Am I a South Asian, really?" Constructing "South Asians" in Canada and being South Asian in Toronto. *South Asian Diaspora*, 5(1), 35-55. doi:10.1080/19438192.2013.724913
- Grewal, I., & Kaplan, C. (1994). Introduction: Transnational feminist practices and questions of post-modernity. In I. Grewal and C. Kaplan (Eds.), *Scattered hegemonies: Post modernity and transnational feminist practices*, (pp. 1-33). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- “I want her story to be heard”: Documentary on Maple Batalia makes Canadian debut. (2017, November 18). *CBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/i-want-her-story-to-be-heard-documentary-on-maple-batalia-makes-canadian-debut-1.4407780>
- James, C. (2003). *Seeing ourselves: Exploring race, ethnicity, and culture* (3rd ed.). Toronto, ON: Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc.
- Jiwani, Y. (1999). Erasing race: The story of Reena Virk. *Canadian Woman Studies*, 19(3), 178-184. Retrieved from <https://cws.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cws/article/view/7896/7027>
- Jiwani, Y. (2000). The denial of race in the murder of Reena Virk: Deconstructing the myth of “girl” violence. *Kinesis*, 7, 14.
- Jiwani, Y. (2005). Walking a tightrope: The many faces of violence in the lives of racialized immigrant girls and young women. *Violence Against Women*, 11(7), 846-875. doi:10.1177/1077801205276273
- Jiwani, Y. (2006). *Discourses of denial: Mediations of race, gender and violence*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Kaur, J. (Producer). (2017). *Maple* [Documentary film]. Canada.
- Mahtani, M. (2002). Interrogating the hyphen-nation: Canadian multicultural policy and “mixed race” identities. *Social Identities*, 8(1), 67-90. doi:10.1080/13504630220132026
- Omand, G. (2016, March 7). Maple Batalia case: Gurjinder Dhaliwal sentenced to life in prison for second-degree murder. *The Canadian Press*. Retrieved from [https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/03/07/ex-boyfriend-to-be-sentenced-for-gunning-down-teen-on-b-c-university-campus\\_n\\_9397138.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/03/07/ex-boyfriend-to-be-sentenced-for-gunning-down-teen-on-b-c-university-campus_n_9397138.html)
- Sundar, P. (2008). To “brown it up” or to “bring down the brown”: Identity and strategy in second-generation, South Asian-Canadian youth. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 17(3), 251-278. doi:10.1080/15313200802258166