



Burdened whispers

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In the past few years, there have been numerous high-profile cases of domestic violence in the South Asian community of British Columbia. These cases have led to an increased focus on an oft-neglected subject. Research in this area, although scarce, has shown a complex interplay between patriarchy, cultural expectations, and a desire for autonomy.

As a part of my residency in family medicine, I decided to explore the effects of domestic abuse on South Asian women in British Columbia. The intent of this exploration was to develop a better understanding of their experiences, coping strategies, and possible barriers to seeking support. Eleven South Asian women who identified themselves as victims of domestic abuse were interviewed in a combination of one-to-one and group interviews. Circumstances around the abuse, their methods of coping, and the effects it has had on their lives were discussed. They were also asked about the support available to them and possible barriers they faced in accessing this support.

Common themes from the interviews were analyzed and used as inspiration to produce a work of fiction. I hope that this piece will provide family physicians with insight into the unique struggles faced by South Asian victims of abuse and serve as an impetus to identifying and supporting women at risk.

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the women who participated in this study. Their immeasurable courage and strength made such work possible.

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Simran's head is heavy, like she is 5 again, wearing Papa Ji's starched blue turban; the first and last wraps form a perfect point resting on the bridge of her nose. She sits by her son, Karan, who sleeps to her left, his lips dry from allergies that have rendered him a mouth breather. Simran's hand continues to move up and down her son's back slowly, even though he has been asleep for hours. Each stroke slow and deliberate like that of a painter putting the final touches on her greatest work. She reaches with her free hand to untie Karan's *patka*. She begins by unravelling the head covering's strings from his top knot and then untying the knot at the back of his head. She removes his *patka* and softly rubs his forehead along a line defining the *patka's* end seam, tanned skin below, smooth and milky white above. The line, like her life she thinks,

varies greatly with the season. At times it is sharp and clearly in focus. At times it is blurred, barely distinguishable from its surroundings.

The pain from the beating begins to subside. The sounds of Mohan's snoring filter in from the adjoining room and throw salt on Simran's wounds. He sleeps peacefully. She will not share his bed tonight, nor will she tomorrow. He will ignore her, carry on not as if she had never existed but as if he had suppressed her like an unpleasant thought brewing in the deep recesses of one's mind. By the third night, guilt will compel her to return to him. She will adjust to fit his curves, put her hand on his shoulder and whisper apologies in his ear. He will acknowledge them with a pat on her head, roll over to his side and fall asleep. Such is the game they play, she thinks as she rubs the bruises on her forearm.

Simran looks to her son, his thin chest rising and falling with every breath. One leg protrudes from underneath his covers, his body not fully convinced of the departure of fall, the beginning of winter. "What began with your conception," Simran whispers, "did not end with your birth." She thinks back to the pregnancy and the first time Mohan beat her. It was 4 months into their marriage, 2 months into the pregnancy. Nausea had prevented Simran from having a hot meal ready on Mohan's arrival from work. He beat her with his belt, then with his shoe. She remembers being on her knees and against a wall, covering her belly with her hands, accepting blows on her face so as to protect the child that grew inside her. She remembers the apologies that followed and their convincing sincerity. Most of all, she remembers the feeling of guilt that plagued her: she did not have dinner ready in time. If one looks closely, one can still see the scars from that beating. They serve as small, measurable reminders that greet her every morning. What one cannot see, however, are the far larger scars Simran carries within her. They stem from more penetrating wounds, such as having to beg for rides to prenatal appointments, giving birth without a hand to hold, and the realization of continued beatings despite producing a son.

A thick fog declares itself as it moves in from the Pacific and blankets Vancouver. Moonlight navigates through and shines tepidly in Karan's open window. A slight breeze drifts in and dilutes the stale air. Simran closes her eyes and travels inward, wading through her own fog as she escapes to a place of solitude. She journeys to that temple within her, seeking shelter from the harsh realities of her life. Here, there are no prospects

of midnight beatings, no need for sunglasses when there is no sun. There are no monitored phone calls and finances, no mixture of sweat and cheap cologne assailing her nostrils. This sanctuary, whose foundations were laid before Simran's wedding henna had faded, is far from public humiliation and the silent tension that follows. She does not have to worry about walking 2 steps behind Mohan when she is here.

Yet her escape is often fleeting. Long enough to perhaps catch a glimpse of Papa Ji reading the paper with his cloth *thata* tied so that his beard remains in shape. Smells of Mata Ji's *mesli parathay* may drift into her room and whisper for her to wake up. She may hear the night *chaunkidar's* stick scrape across the concrete as she lies with Mata Ji on the terrace to take advantage of a slight summer's breeze. On the rare occasion, she can get away long enough to allow a conversation. She may be able to squeeze in a hymn at the Golden Temple or even enjoy a plate of Blue Fox's famous chilli chicken.

Tonight her mind is in Dharamsala, and she remembers skipping down Temple Road with her new pashmina-type shawl on her shoulders. Papa Ji and Mata Ji walk behind her, cautioning her to

slow down, worried about her tripping and ruining her *salvar kameez*. The aroma of steamed *momos* fills the air. Tibetan women sit roadside selling jewelry to free-spirited Europeans who have come for the cheap drugs, to find themselves, or a bit of both. Monks in their maroon robes chat as they sip butter tea at roadside cafes. Tibetan elders out for their morning walk greet Simran with toothless smiles, folded hands, and an enthusiastic "*Tashi Dele*."

Simran yearns to be there again with her parents. She imagines Papa Ji lifting her so she may spin a Tibetan prayer wheel. She hears Mata Ji recite "*Waheguru*" as she spins each wheel, combining the blessings of both Buddha and Nanak. She tastes the *laichee* in the chai from the self-proclaimed "best tea stall in Asia" on Jogibara Road. She laughs as Papa Ji strokes his mustache after each sip. Most of all she remembers a sense of contentment, the ability to breathe freely without the heaviness in her chest.

Sounds of Karan stirring bring Simran back. The night has grown much colder. Simran moves to close the window. She adjusts the blanket to cover Karan's outstretched leg and smiles at how his top knot has loosened and now lies limp and off centre. She gets a second blanket from his closet, rolls up a towel from his bathroom for a pillow and settles in beside Karan, moving carefully so as not to wake him. She closes her eyes, knowing full well that she will not sleep. She closes her eyes but the mental images do not stop. Her mind is restless, and her thoughts travel from the mountains of Himachal to the fields of Punjab. Images of her wedding day begin to traverse her mental screen ...



She sits cross-legged on the floor of the *Gurudwara*. Extravagant patterns of henna cover her hands and feet. Her heavily embroidered red *duppatta* is pinned so as to keep her hair covered. *Panjeban* delicately caress her ankles and match the numerous bracelets that cover her forearms. Large gold earrings hang carefree from her ears, almost brushing her shoulders. Mohan sits to her right, dressed in a cream-coloured *kurta* with a Chinese collar and *resham* embroidery. Close friends and family sit in quiet anticipation and watch as Papa Ji takes one end of the cloth hanging from Mohan's shoulders and moves to place it in Simran's hands. In doing so, he prepares to absolve himself of his responsibilities and place Simran's well-being on Mohan's undeserving shoulders. To mark this transfer, the *Ragis*, musicians with matching turbans and long flowing beards, sit on a stage and sing the appropriate hymn:

I have discarded praise and slander, O Nanak; I have abandoned everything. I have seen that all relationships are false, and so I have grasped hold of the hem of your robe, Lord.

Simran takes the end of the cloth from Papa Ji and lowers her eyes ...

As she thinks back to that day, she recalls the happiness in Papa Ji's eyes. His eldest daughter was moving to Canada and marrying a successful man from a reputable family. "A father could ask for nothing else," he would repeat as he greeted well-wishers. The burden of having 3 daughters had clearly aged Papa Ji beyond his years. Three daughters meant 3 characters to keep pure, 3 sets of in-laws to please, and 3 dowries to assemble. Papa Ji carried this burden with his head high, Simran proudly remembers. He acquiesced to all of Mohan's parents' demands and went out of his way to please their guests; all in order to maintain the family's *izzat*. Now, so much of that family honour rests with Simran and the life she builds in Canada. Simran, acutely aware of this fact, has kept her problems with Mohan from her parents. She has had thoughts of confiding in them, hoping they may intervene, but she cannot bring herself to inflict such disappointment on them. What can they possibly do? They are not going to change his behaviour from thousands of miles away. No, Simran knows that if anything, they will ask her to change her behaviour. They will encourage her to anticipate his needs, adapt to his moods. They will warn her not to trigger his anger. "A man's blood can boil," she can hear Mata Ji saying. "A woman must cool it with her patience, obedience, and the softness of her touch."

Above all, they will implore her for her silence. If the community back home ever got wind of her situation, her family's *izzat* would suffer greatly. Women sitting on woven beds sifting through uncooked lentils would speculate on her virtue. Cleaning women would pass



stories from house to house, taking great delight in educating the housewives on the latest gossip. Men, tending to their fields, would openly cast doubt on the marriageability of Simran's younger sisters. Vendors at the local *sabji mandi* would quietly whisper among themselves as Papa Ji shopped for fresh vegetables. Sharma Ji would warn of the dangers of allowing girls too much education and freedom as his customers purchased glucose biscuits at his general goods shop. For all these reasons, Simran will have to suffer in silence. She cannot bear the thought of Papa Ji, overcome with shame, lowering his eyes when addressing the other villagers. She cannot imagine ruining the lives of her younger sisters, Manjit and Raman. No one in the community will marry them if their family *izzat* is not maintained. Papa Ji will be forced to seek matches from different villages, arrange for larger dowries, and hope that stories of his eldest daughter don't reach the ears of potential in-laws.


Like the hands of a Kathak dancer in her standing *thaat* pose while narrating tales of Krishna-Leela, the hands of the clock strike 3; the constant ticking of the second hand provides Simran some respite from the night's deafening silence. Her headache continues. She gets out of bed, reaches for her purse at the bedside, and walks toward Karan's bathroom. His Transformers night light provides enough illumination for her to navigate his collection of toys, colouring books, and half-completed puzzles. In his bathroom, she turns on the light and looks in the mirror. Dark bags underneath her eyes weigh down their already pained expression. Strands of white mingle with her coarse and thinning black hair like unwelcome guests at a funeral. A look around the neck of her *kameez* reveals that Mohan's hands have left their mark. She

reaches into her purse and pulls out an assortment of medicine bottles. Some are for her sleep, others for her pain, and some to help with her mood. According to her family doctor, Dr Roberts, she has insomnia, chronic pain, and depression. “A chemical imbalance” Simran recalls Dr Roberts saying as he handed her the latest prescription. He is like the *medicine-walla* that used to come to our village, Simran thinks; listening to your story briefly and offering the latest magic potion. “Bhenji, drink this and it will help all tension-ension, all aches and pains, money-back guarantee,” he would say.

Simran has never been entirely comfortable with Dr Roberts. He is a slight, unimposing man with a predilection for print ties and wing-tipped shoes. When talking to her, he rubs his eyes and temples, making Simran wonder why his own doctor hasn't offered him any pills. He is always running late, and Simran has often waited an hour to see him for 10 minutes. Chronic headaches and trouble with sleep have plagued Simran for years. Dr Roberts always seems to have a new answer: an increase in dose, a trial of new medicine, a sample in his cupboard. What frustrates Simran is that he doesn't ask the right questions. Why does her head constantly hurt? What causes her to lie awake for hours? Why does she have no desire to attend *Gurudwara* on Sunday or no energy to fix Karan's school lunch? She feels Dr Roberts has been handing her bandages without inspecting her wounds; quick fixes that are amenable to a 10-minute appointment and sufficient until the next visit.

Simran once summoned the courage to discuss her marital problems with Dr Roberts. It was when Karan was about 1 year old; she had taken him in for his scheduled immunizations. Dr Roberts noticed and inquired about a bruise on Simran's face. She alluded to her problems with Mohan hoping he would be able to provide some advice. She thought that maybe he would tell

her what to say to Mohan to make him stop or that he might reassure her, tell her that Mohan would change and that she needed to be patient. Perhaps he would send her to talk to someone who could give her some ideas on how to be better, how to keep Mohan happy. What she had not been prepared for, however, was Dr Roberts' suggestion: divorce. Simran remembers the chill that came over her body upon hearing this. Was he joking? Did he not realize the absurdity of his suggestion? She could never bring such shame upon her family. Leaving Mohan would ruin Mata Ji and Papa Ji. How would they ever overcome such a burden? What would they tell potential suitors for her sisters? They would be the talk of the village; she could not do that to them. What of Karan? A boy needs his father. He would blame Simran his whole life for taking his father away. She could not care for him alone. She could not provide for the both of them with no skills and a limited grasp of English. The government would certainly take Karan away and give him to Mohan. How could she live without him—her very breath, her reason for being, and the one source of joy in her life? Didn't Dr Roberts understand that divorce is not an option for an Indian woman? No man would marry her; she would be forced to spend the rest of her life alone and in shame.

Simran cowers as she thinks of the possibility of being alone. She swallows a sleeping pill and returns to Karan's room. She stands at the foot of the bed and watches her son. He sleeps in peace, unaware the woman in front of him is but a mere shadow of her former self. He has kicked off most of his covers and the moonlight shines off his *Kara*, a metal bracelet on his right arm symbolizing the infiniteness of the Divine. She lifts his blanket off the floor and places it over him gently. Simran sits by his head and strokes her fingers through his long, uncut hair. “To suffer is my karma, son,” she whispers. “I will not let it be yours.” She settles in beside her son, closes her eyes, and waits for sleep to come. 

Dr Arora is a family physician in Burnaby, BC.

Competing interests
None declared

Details of the research study can be obtained by contacting Dr Arora: PO Box 59026, 5962 Sperling Ave, Burnaby, BC V5E 0A3; e-mail amritpalsarora@gmail.com
