



Proceedings of the
INDIAN COUNCIL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH (ICSSR)

New Delhi

sponsored

A Three-Day National Seminar

on

**INDIAN DIASPORA:
NATIONAL INTEGRATION ACROSS THE BORDERS**

15 – 17 March 2023

Organized by
Research Department of English

SRI GVG VISALAKSHI COLLEGE FOR WOMEN

(Autonomous)

Affiliated to Bharathiar University

Accredited at A+ Grade by NAAC (4th Cycle)

An ISO 9001 : 2015 Certified Institution

Udumalpet – 642128. Tirupur District, Tamilnadu

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ISBN: 978-81-8124-229-7

Published by: MB Publishers
Printed at : Royal Printers, Guduvanchery

**Confronting Domestic Violence Overseas: A Panoptic study of Kiranjit Ahluwalia's
Journey of Battling Domestic Violence in the Hostland in Jag Mundhra's movie
*Provoked***

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Abstract:

The construct of an ethnic identity is grounded on the convergence of self and culture. An individual's ethnic identity is a significant premise for self-identity because it instills a sense of identification with a particular group's cultural values, kinship, and beliefs. People belonging to different ethnic groups in the diaspora preserve their ethnic identity by adhering to their ethnic, cultural, communal and social codes. In most cases the women community of the diaspora is expected to strictly adhere to these codes to keep up the honor of the culture they belong to. As a result they undergo and tolerate extreme psychological, sexual, and physical abuse laid over them by their families in the hostland in order to keep their constructed ethnic identity intact. Therefore, they are unable to dissociate themselves from this construct and find themselves trapped within its confines. This research paper is a panoramic study of Jag Mundhra's movie *Provoked*. The paper aims to spotlight the struggles faced by a real life character Kiranjit Ahluwalia, a Punjabi woman who moved to London after her marriage with Deepak Ahluwalia following ten years of domestic violence. Kiranjit's narrative subverts and overthrows the grand narratives of ethnic and cultural identity.

Keywords: Ethnic, diaspora, culture, domestic violence, identity, etc.

Domestic violence, also called intimate partner violence, occurs between people in an intimate relationship. Domestic violence can take many forms, including emotional, sexual and physical abuse and threats of abuse. Abuse by a partner can happen to anyone, but domestic violence is most often directed toward women. Domestic violence can happen in heterosexual and same-sex relationships. Abusive relationships always involve an imbalance of power and control. An abuser uses intimidating, hurtful words and behaviors to control a partner.

The movie *Provoked* follows the real life story of Kiranjit Ahluwalia, the woman whose name in the year 1989 became a household name in the UK after she accidentally burned her husband alive following ten years of abusive marriage. On the night of May 9, 1989, in London, England, Deepak Ahluwalia is severely burned in his bed while sleeping. Police on the scene find his Punjabi wife Kiranjit in a state of shock. While Deepak is rushed to the hospital he gives a statement that his wife set him on fire, and Kiranjit does not deny it. Later in the prison her lawyer Miriam discovers bruises on her body and learns that she has suffered ten years of physical and mental abuse at the hands of her London-born husband who views all women as subhuman.

Through flashbacks, director Jag Mundhra reveals how Kiranjit grew up in Punjab in India with hopes of attending college, but was forced into an arranged marriage with Deepak, a friend of the family. While she dutifully looks after him and their two small children, he has numerous affairs with other women. But despite all of the violence inflicted on her body and psyche, Kiranjit learns from her lawyer that she cannot claim self-defense since her husband

was asleep in his bed when the act occurred. As a result she is sentenced by the British High Court to life in prison. Kiranjit's case is taken up by a women's rights group represented by Indian-born activist Radha Dalal who is convinced that the law must be changed to accommodate those suffering from battered wife syndrome. While in prison, Kiranjit is befriended by her cellmate Veronica Scott. Although Kiranjit tells her that she feels free for the first time in her life, Veronica contacts her brother a lawyer, to handle the appeal. Radha Dalal and lawyer Anil Gupta they convince an ex-cop to give new evidence at the trial. Kiranjit's case soon attracts media attention.

Kiranjit was persuaded into an arranged marriage by her family. Both her parents had died by the time she was 16 she had to give up studying and marry Deepak Ahluwalia. She immigrates to London after the wedding. The violence and humiliation started two days after the wedding. Deepak's manner changed dramatically. This marked the beginning of ten years of violence, rape and sexual abuse; Deepak was so obsessed with controlling Kiranjit's behavior that he even forbade her to eat chilies or drink black coffee. She was not allowed to go out to see friends or family and was treated like a slave.

Deepak saw other women while he continued to abuse Kiranjit on an almost daily basis. He did not want her 'westernized' and kept her in almost total isolation. Kiranjit was kicked, punched and slapped, beaten with belts, shoes and pieces of furniture, threatened with knives and hot irons and nearly strangled. Deepak also regularly threatened to kill Kiranjit. Deepak forced Kiranjit to have sex with him and she subsequently had two sons. The boys were terrified of their father and were also subjected to his violence. Kiranjit attempted to seek help from her family, who merely told her to go back and be 'a good wife' and that it was her duty 'to make the marriage work'.

Cultural and ethnic codes form the central tenets with reference to which identity is constructed in individuals. In order to understand the manner in which ethnic consciousness functions in a community, it is important to understand how culture functions in creating this consciousness. In the essay "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms", Stuart Hall states that there are two ways of conceptualizing culture, "The first relates 'culture' to the sum of the available descriptions through which societies make sense of and reflect their common experiences . . . the second emphasis is more deliberately anthropological, and emphasizes that aspect of 'culture' which refers to social practices. . . . 'Culture is a whole way of life'" (196). He further argues that "'Culture' is not a practice; nor is it simply the descriptive sum of the 'mores and folkways' of societies . . . It is threaded through all social practices, and is the sum of their inter-relationships" (197).

In the name of culture many women undergo violence in marriage life. In the movie *Provoked* Kiranjit, to keep her culture and to protect her family's name, tolerates inhuman tortures at the hands of her husband. In the Indian culture women are taught to accept and tolerate their husbands however evil and bad they are. Kiranjit was born and brought up in a conservative Punjabi family where she is taught to be submissive to men. So when she is exposed to inhuman violence at the hands of Deepak in London, she is unable to retaliate against her husband because her culture blocks her from doing it. Even though Kiranjit lives in London, a well developed and a metropolitan city, she is unable to assimilate the culture of the host land.

Kiranjit's trouble of cultural assimilation comes to the surface when her lawyer asks her to speak about her sexual abuse. She feels scared and insecure to talk about it because though she lives in a faraway, developed and modernized country she sticks to how she was brought up in a conservative family where she is told not to speak about sexual abuse because it would ruin her name and the family's name. The lawyer who has no exposure to the Indian culture finds it difficult to understand the reasons why Kiranjit refuses to speak about her sexual abuse, so she finds it difficult to move the case forward in favor of Kiranjit.

Traditionally Indian women are taught to treat and consider their husbands equivalent to God. When Kiranjit gets the information that Deepak is dead she feels that she has committed a grave sin and deserves to be punished, so she refuses to talk in the court and accepts a verdict of 12 years of imprisonment. Only after her cellmate and Dalal persuade her continuously she is able to acknowledge her sufferings. After she acknowledges and accepts her sufferings she makes the biggest move in her life to speak about her life and sufferings to others and thereby letting others to help her to go for another appeal in the court.

In the prison Veronica helps her to read and write English. At one point Kiranjit admits that in the ten years of her life in London she feels free for the first time in the prison. She slowly gets along with the other cellmates with the help of Veronica and understands their life and struggles in London. The other cellmates lend her support and solace in the time of need. They boost up her confidence when she goes out of the prison for her final verdict. When women like Deepak's mother, who witnessed against her even after knowing the wrong doings of her son, failed to support Kiranjit in the host land it was the prisoners who supported her in ways that they could.

Radha Dalal an Indian origin woman born and brought up in London understands the predicament of Kiranjit as her sister has also been a victim of domestic violence. It is Dalal who brings up the case of Kiranjit to the notice of the people. On September 1991, Kiranjit was given leave to appeal on the basis of new evidence concerning her experiences of domestic violence and its impact on battered women and on the basis that the trial judge had misdirected the jury on the criminal law of provocation. At her appeal hearing in July 1992 which was presided over by the then Lord Chief Justice, Taylor, Kiranjit's barristers put forward new defenses of provocation and diminished responsibility. Although the Court of Appeal rejected the grounds of provocation as a basis of her appeal, nevertheless it accepted that the defense of provocation and in particular the requirement of a 'sudden and temporary loss of self-control' had been traditionally interpreted in ways which excluded the experiences of battered women. It recognized the notion of cumulative provocation and also accepted that as a matter of law, the time lapse between an act of provocation and the fatal act need not be construed as a cooling-off period. Instead, the Court accepted that the time lapse could be seen as a 'boiling over' period and as a factual matter that could be left to the jury to determine. Kiranjit won her appeal on the grounds of diminished responsibility based on new psychiatric evidence of her long-standing depression due to her experiences of violence and abuse. A retrial was ordered. However, at her new trial at the Old Bailey in London, in September 1992, the Crown accepted her plea of manslaughter on the basis of diminished responsibility and she was sentenced to three years and four months imprisonment, exactly the time she had already served. Kiranjit, therefore, walked out of Court a free woman to scenes of jubilation from the large number of supporters who had gathered outside the court.

Alongside the legal campaign, we campaigned and mobilised public opinion in our own communities and in the wider community through public meetings, pickets, demos and media coverage. Kiranjit became a household name. The campaign also joined forces with other women's groups as part of a wider feminist campaign on battered women who kill and the criminal justice system and in doing so, highlighted the male bias of the criminal justice system and the criminal law that affects all women. For us, the campaign was a high point of feminist activity on violence against women. This case received support from unexpected quarters within our communities and did much to raise awareness of domestic violence and the plight of women trapped in such situations. (Southall Black Women)

Kiranjit's case helped raise awareness of domestic violence in families of non-English-speaking immigrants to Western countries and changed the laws for domestic abuse victims in the United Kingdom. Her case, known in British legal textbooks as *R v Ahluwalia*, changed the definition of the word "provocation" in cases of battered women to reclassify her crime as manslaughter, instead of murder. Kiranjit was honored in 2001 at the first Asian Women Awards in recognition of her strength, personal achievements, determination and commitment in helping to bring to light the subject of domestic violence.

Kiranjit Ahluwalia is an important chapter in the book of world history. The trauma and the depression she faced were enormous. By knowing about the facts and the issues about the case one feels that women even in the twenty first century are not protected in their own households. Women, worldwide, who face these kinds of abuse, are subjected to endogenous depression which in turn affects the character of the women. Even today in many societies and families, the abuse that is faced by women is not known and the family members do not take any action against the abuser.

In the final scene of the movie, Kiranjit cuts her long hair which is very symbolic. In Indian culture women are made to believe that the length of their hair determines their beauty and the hair is considered to be something that increases their beauty. But in reality length of the hair, shape of the body or colors of the skin dose not determine a person's beauty but the way they treat the fellow human beings. By cutting her hair and wearing a comfortable western outfit Kiranjit breaks the shackles of cultures and emerges out as an empowered woman.

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