

# **Swedish Mainstream Mass Media as Opinion Builder?**

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## **Abstract**

The following study focuses on the role of the Swedish mainstream media in constructing stereotypes and public opinion in regards to the issues of gender and the identity of immigrant minorities in Swedish society. The case of the honour killing of Fadime Shaindal is used to demonstrate the significance of media reporting in generating a social discourse concerning crime and its relation to culture. Articles concerning Fadime's case over the period of 2002-2006 from three mainstream Swedish newspapers are analysed from a feminist perspective. It is argued throughout this study that the media is responsible for giving a cultural explanation for the crime. Relevant theories and debates from the academic fields, such as feminism and anthropology are used to analyse the issues surrounding the role of the media in building stereotypes to the detriment of minority immigrants in Sweden.

### **Key Words**

**Culture, ethnic minorities, feminism, honour killing, immigrants, kurdish, media, patriarchy, stereotypes.**

L'étude suivante se penche sur le rôle des médias traditionnels suédois dans la construction de stéréotypes et de l'opinion publique quant aux problèmes de genre et l'identité des minorités immigrées dans la société suédoise.

Le cas du crime d'honneur perpétré à l'encontre de Fadime Shaindal est utilisé pour démontrer l'importance de la couverture médiatique dans la création d'un discours social concernant le crime et sa relation à la culture.

Des articles se rapportant au cas Fadime parus au cours de la période 2002-2006 dans trois journaux suédois sont analysés dans une perspective féministe. Il est démontré à travers cette étude que les médias sont responsables de donner une explication culturelle au crime.

Des théories et débats pertinents issus des domaines universitaires, tels que le féminisme et l'anthropologie, sont employés pour analyser les questions entourant le rôle des médias dans l'édification de stéréotypes au détriment des immigrés en Suède.

### **Mots-clés:**

**Culture, minorités ethniques, féminisme, crime d'honneur, immigrés, Kurdes, médias, patriarcat, stéréotypes**

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## **1.1 Introduction**

### *1.2 Background and problems*

## **News, Deception, Racism and Anti-Racism**

The mass media is a powerful and useful instrument, but it can also perpetuate certain themes that reinforce the problems of racism in our society. The messages projected by the media in these cases portray visible minorities, especially immigrants in Sweden, in a negative light. Immigrants are stereotyped and categorized as the ‘others’, primarily through the process of constructing and ascribing identities. In recent years, the Swedish media has greatly increased the coverage of conflicts and problems involving immigrants. Articles stereotyping immigrants as aggressive criminals are common, largely as a result of a bias in topic selection focusing on rape, violent honour killings and forced marriage – all of which find a graphic portrayal in headlines, text, pictures and layout. At the same time, the media raises the level of public anxiety over these actions by highlighting news related to the integration of Swedish immigrants and the formation of a multicultural society. Meanwhile, immigrants are often marginalised and excluded from this discussion.<sup>1</sup>

These are the central themes that will be addressed in this paper. In so doing, I will focus upon three of the most important Swedish newspapers: Aftonbladet, Dagens Nyheter and Sydsvenska Dagbladet.

## **1.3 Media and the other**

There is a great deal of research literature confirming both the potential and actual impact of the media in their coverage of ethnic affairs. Researcher Ylva Brune has described the dilemmas of news reporting in Sweden as well as the responsibility and choices that the media must assume.<sup>2</sup>

In the following section I will present views from media researchers from both Sweden and the international academic world. Though not known as a colonial power, Sweden has participated in the discourse of the West by way of its moral dimensions and views. It has shared in the West’s representation of the ‘other’ throughout the course of European

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<sup>1</sup> Head of the Swedish government inquiry into structural discrimination due to ethnicity and religion SOU 2005: 56 Stockholm. Elanders Gotab. page 128ff 129

<sup>2</sup> Head of the Swedish government inquiry into structural discrimination due to ethnicity and religion SOU 2005: 56 Stockholm. Elanders Gotab. Page 135ff 145

modernisation as the West passed through periods of slavery, colonialism and imperialism. Ylva Brune in her anthology *Mörk magi i vita medier*, inspired by Edward Said's analysis in *Orientalism*, discusses how the 'otherness' is a category invisible to us, which we fail to recognise in ourselves. Subsequently 'we' becomes the way we construct the 'other' and thus leads to 'we' becoming the 'norm'.<sup>3</sup>

Here the Swedish media researchers asserted how the Swedish media often produces or reproduces negative representations; this would explain the present neo-colonial atmosphere in contemporary society.<sup>4</sup>

According to Brune, the 'other' was the 'dark side' of the Enlightenment, a subject that was forgotten and repressed by European society at the same time that the basic human rights pertaining to such individuals were denied. The ideologies of the Enlightenment were justified by the extinction of indigenous people both in America and Africa, those people had to be presented as the reverse image of enlightenment and modernity. Indigenous peoples were therefore represented as 'barbarians', uncivilised, warlike and cannibals.<sup>5</sup>

Brune referred to "the otherness" using the terminology of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, whose work on contemporary social and political theory describes how "the other" becomes a construction outside which is "The excluded relational identity against which a privileged social identity is defined and distinguished - a projection of otherness which at the same time establishes their self-identification as legitimate".<sup>6</sup>

Brune concludes that the way in which immigrants are represented by the media gives a symbolic meaning because the name 'refugees' is commonly used as a collective definition which it identifies as force, like a wave, or threat who cannot control their sexuality.<sup>7</sup>

Ylva Brune wrote her doctoral dissertation (2004) on the image of immigrants in Swedish media since the 1970s. According to Brune, the news media over time has constantly

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<sup>3</sup> Brune, Y (1998) *Mörk magi i vita medier-svensk nyhetsjournalistik om "invandrare", flytingar och rasistiskt våld*. Göteborgs: Göteborgs Universitet page.30ff

<sup>4</sup> Brune, Y 1998: *Mörk magi i vita medier-svensk nyhetsjournalistik om "invandrare", flytingar och rasistiskt våld*. Göteborgs: Göteborgs Universitet page, 30ff

<sup>5</sup> Hall, S., & Bram, G. (1992) *Formations of modernity*, Cambridge: Open university. page 30 ff

<sup>6</sup> Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1985) *Hegemony and socialist strategy*, London: Verso 115ff

<sup>7</sup> Brune, Y (1998) *Mörk magi i vita medier-svensk nyhetsjournalistik om "invandrare", flytingar och rasistiskt våld*. Göteborgs: Göteborgs Universitet. page :37-53 and 117, Hall, S., & Bram, G (1992) *Formations of modernity*, Cambridge: Open university. page 302.

constructed a category of 'immigrants' which is often described as flawed, problematic and negative in comparison with 'the Swedes', who are taken to be the norm. Furthermore, she added, "We" the news consumer are not being provided with much information about the characteristics of the norm category. It is the standard immigrants that are scrutinized in the mass media. These are the terms that Brune used in her doctoral dissertation on the representation of otherness in the Swedish media. Ylva Brune wrote her doctoral dissertation (2004) on the image of immigrants in Swedish media since the 1970s. According to Brune, the news media over time has constantly constructed a category of 'immigrants' which is often described as flawed, problematic and negative in comparison with 'the Swedes', who are taken to be the norm. Furthermore, she added, "We" the news consumer are not being provided with much information about the characteristics of the norm category. It is the standard immigrants that are scrutinized in the mass media. These are the terminology that Brune used in her doctoral dissertation on the representation of otherness in the Swedish media.

- Repetition of terms such as 'immigrant women', 'densely populated immigrant area', 'immigrant suburbs' in the Swedish media create a reality which is then taught to the public.
- The authority figures would often select to address immigrant problems.
- The presentation of statistical difference between "Swedes" and immigrants is often transformed into negative traits and elements.
- Often, experts or representatives for the immigrants, or even narrators in text, who give general statements about immigrants are called upon to present their opinions in the news.
- Media that contains text about "immigrants" and images of "immigrants" is likely to be reused and therefore confirm these images as a universal idea.<sup>8</sup>

Brune is most known for her research in the field of racism and structural discrimination in Sweden. Her research is often based on detecting racism in the headlines of mainstream mass media where the terms "we and "other" are used to construct the identity of the immigrants. According to Brune these terms impose a racial component on these constructed negative traits. I will not discuss in detail about the term 'structural discrimination' in this paper

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<sup>8</sup> Brune.,Y.(2004) *Nyheter från gränsen-tre studier i nyhetsjournalistik om " invandare",flyktingar och rasistiskt våld. Göteborgs Universitet.*

because the Swedish mass media seldom contains explicit racism. I am more interested in unmasking the hidden racism in the Swedish mainstream media where I have chosen the “We” and “Other” using Brune's terminology to describe how Swedish gender stereotyping in the media are racial expressions.

## **2. Case Study Background**

The Kurdish-Swedish woman Fadime Sahindal was shot dead by her father on the 21st January 2002 while visiting her sister in Uppsala. In his confession to the police, the father explained that Fadime had ‘shamed’ her father and brother by rejecting an arranged marriage and choosing an ethnically Swedish man as her partner. Previously, in 1988, Fadime had spoken out publicly in court about how her father and brother constantly had threatened to kill her. In the wake of Fadime’s death, the Swedish mass media focused intensively upon ‘honour killing’ as an immigrant phenomenon.



### **3. Purpose**

It is not my intention to analyse the media debates from a law and order perspective, but rather to examine the gender dimensions in play, to show that such patriarchal violence is not an ethnic but rather a universal concept. I will use academic sources and debates to analyse and criticise particularly the role of the traditional newspapers, in constructing social values and concepts regarding gender roles and identity.

Using the news reports concerning the case of Fadime Sahindal appearing in Aftonbladet, Sydsvenska Dagbladet and Dagens Nyheter in the period 2002-06, I intend to analyse the myth of honour killing as an ethnic phenomenon, and rather show that it is not limited by cultural boundaries. In so doing I will address the larger questions of whether it is valid to view such a phenomenon as related to one culture more than some other.

### **4. Problems**

It is important to stress that it is not my intention to convince the reader that honour killing does not exist in Sweden; it does. Rather, my aim is to show that honour killing and other crimes of violence against Swedish immigrant women are not culturally determined, despite the media's depiction of immigrant 'otherness' as violent and 'Swedishness' as violence free.

This division is in fact a patriarchal one based on gender stereotyping, reflecting a strong ethnocentric bias in which lines, boundaries and frontiers are drawn on racist criteria between West and East.

## **5. Materials**

### *5.1 Newspapers and Literature*

Newspapers

- Aftonbladet
- Dagens Nyheter
- Sydsvenska Dagbladet

Literatures

- Maktens Olika Förklädnader
  
- The Blue and Yellow Glass House/ Det blågula glashuset strukturell diskriminering i Sverige

I have used the Lund University Library to obtain most of the literature. For electronic resources, I have used Elin, Libris and the Gender Library for Gender Studies. The university media archive contains a large number of articles, which I have narrowed down to those that are the most important for showing the relationship between the media and gender stereotyping, as well as the construction of the Swedish immigrant identity. Because the construction of Swedish immigrant women is under-represented in the Swedish press, I have chosen post-colonial feminist writing from other countries to analyse how the construction of identity of women from the third world is carried out in the local context.

## **6. Introduction to the Methodology**

As stated previously, I have focused on coverage from the following three newspapers in the period 2002-06 following Fadime's death:

- Aftonbladet
- Dagens Nyheter
- Sydsvenska Bladet

## 6.1 Presentation of the newspapers

### **Aftonbladet**

Types	Political View	Published	Editions
Evening	Socialist	7 days/week	410 500

Aftonbladet is Scandinavia's biggest evening newspaper. It has been supplied to the media archive since September 1994. During the period 23 of January 2002 to 18 of January 2006 Aftonbladet published 26 articles related to the death of Fadime.<sup>9</sup>

### **Dagens Nyheter**

Types	Political views	Published	Editions
Morning	Free/Liberal	7 days/week	345 800

Dagens Nyheter is produced in Stockholm and is one of Sweden's biggest morning newspapers. It offers two political orientations. The newspaper is available in the media archive for the period 23 of January 2001 to 19 of January 2006. Dagen Nyheter published 15 articles related to the death of Fadime during this period.<sup>10</sup>

### **Sydsvenska Dagbladet**

Types	Political views	Published	Editions
Daily	Liberal	7 days/week	359 100

Sydsvenska Dagbladet is a morning newspaper that is delivered in the Malmö and Lund areas. It has been supplied to the media archive since 13 of September 2006. Nine relevant articles are available for the period 23 of January 2002 to 21 of January 2006<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Aftonbladet Feb 2007

<sup>10</sup> Dagens Nyheter May-Aug 2006

<sup>11</sup> Sydsvenska Dagbladet 2005

Because Aftonbladet, Dagen Nyheter and Sydsvenska Dagbladet were supplied to the media archive at different times, I chose to complete the search by screening all relevant articles that I could find for the period relevant to this study.

## **7. Criteria for article selection**

First, the articles were divided according to whether Fadime Sahindal was the main subject of the article, or whether an analysis based upon gender perspective was present. Articles not treating one or both of these topics were discarded.

### **7.1 Presentation of the themes**

Careful study of the materials revealed three interconnected themes useful for explaining the data found in the articles. The themes are not related to Fadime's death per se but instead explicate gender stereotyping conveyed through the lens of the media.

#### **Theme I: Culture**

I use the term 'culture' in its anthropological sense, as 'perceptions of religion and values which are shared by a group of people, who express these in common manners and customs, in other words, in the way they act and organize the group or the society'. To put it more simply, the way that individuals act and organise the group or society.<sup>12</sup>

T.S. Eliot, referred to by Eagleton, claims that culture is 'the way of life of a particular people living together in one place'. But he also gave another definition of culture: 'Culture may even be described simply as that which makes life worth living'. Eliot asserted that culture is society's manners in whole. In culture can be found religion, philosophy and the arts. The 'culture' of a society is what makes it a society.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Eliasson., M.(1997.) *Mäns våld mot kvinnor: en kunskapsöversikt om kvinnomisshandel och våldtäkt, dominans och kontroll*, Stockholm, Natur och Kultur

<sup>13</sup> Eagleton, T.1970. *Eliot and a Common Culture* page. 279-294 in Martin, Graham, (ed.) *Eliot in perspective: a symposium*, London, Macmillan

Culture is a collective consciousness. People have common knowledge, experiences and values that are created through communication with each other in different ways. In civil society, individuals live in a state of chronic antagonism, driven by opposing interests; but the state is the transcendent realm in which these divisions can be harmoniously reconciled. For this to happen however, the state must already have been at work in civil society, soothing its rancour and refining its sensibilities; and this process is what we know as culture. Culture is a kind of ethical pedagogy which will us make us suitable for political citizenship by liberating the ideal or collective self buried within each of us, a self which finds supreme representation in the universal realm of the state; “The state incarnates culture, which in turn embodies our common humanity.”<sup>14</sup>

The honour killing of Fadime can indeed be seen as a cultural practice, but it is also a global phenomenon – a fact that the media fails to portray. Mary Elaine Hegland wrote:

“The topic of honour killing, like clitoridectomy, spousal abuse, infanticide, elder neglect, rape, war, capital punishment, and pre-marital sex among other practices condoned by some groups but condemned by others, presents dilemmas to anthropologists, feminist scholars and others. Should anthropologists be apologists or advocates for their research group or social analysts? Should one’s role be researcher or activist?”<sup>15</sup> (Hegland 2000:15)

Aftonbladet does not do any favours to the Swedish Kurdish community by branding Kurdish men as killers and pointing out that Kurdish culture allows the male members of the family to commit acts of extreme brutality against women. Honour killings are a cultural practice that can be observed widely both within the Middle East, Pakistan and Afghanistan and, as a result of immigration, in the European states where refugees from these lands have settled.

### **Aftonbladet published headlines**

**De kränks, de hotas, de dödas - Så lever tusentals unga kvinnor i Sverige idag fyra år efter mordet på Fadime .<sup>16</sup>**

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<sup>14</sup> Eagleton., T.(2000 )*The idea of culture*.Oxford Blackwell Publishers. Page 7

<sup>15</sup> Hegland.,M.,E.(2001).Review of “*Crimes of Honour and Our Honour and His Glory,*” *Middle East Women’s Study Review*, Vol. XV, No. 1-2 Spring/Summer, pp. 15-19.

<sup>16</sup> Aftonbladet (2006) 18 January 2006 Section News page 18

This article by Anna Larsson was published in the memory of Fadime. It contained a brief description of Fadime's death and highlighted numerous additional possible cases of oppression against Muslim women and young girls.

All 25 articles published in *Aftonbladet* about the death of Fadime portrayed honour killing as a tragedy. In addition, all 25 represented 'otherness' as an isolated case, an abnormality or a consequence of culture conflict.

But Fadime's death should not be reduced to a question of culture alone but rather seen as a global phenomenon. It is an act of crime and violence against women and girls which is socially constructed to be considered to be caused by culture and honour. It is crime against women. I will discuss this further in the analysis section.

Fadime's statement prior to her death:

**Fadimes hela tal i riksdagen - I dag begravs Fadime Sahindal i Uppsala. Mördad av sin far. Den 20 november 2001 höll hon ett tal i riksdagen under seminariet "Integration på vems villkor?" arrangerat av nätverket Våld mot kvinnor. Aftonbladet Debatt publicerar i dag hela Fadimes tal.<sup>17</sup>**

Men jag vill börja med att poängtera att kvinnoförtryck inte endast drabbar flickor från Mellanöstern utan att detta förekommer även bland många andra familjer, från andra delar av världen

In my translation:

I want to point out that the oppression of women occurs in other parts of the world, too, not only for girls from the Middle East.

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<sup>17</sup> Aftonbladet (2002) 4<sup>th</sup> of February page 25

## **Theme II: Kurdish Patriarchy**

The term ‘patriarchy’ is linked to gender inequality: it describes a set of behaviours by which men seek to dominate women in everyday situations. The definition used here is that of Walby: patriarchy is “...a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women.”<sup>18</sup>

While most feminists agree upon the existence of patriarchal societies, there are different views about the problems arising as a result of the source of the problems. According to Walby, theories about patriarchy are changing over time, probably due to the evolution of the patriarchal element in the society.<sup>19</sup>

### **Dagens Nyheter**

*Dagens Nyheter* published nine articles on the death of Fadime. The common thread uniting all these articles was the view that Fadime’s death was an outcome of Kurdish patriarchal culture. They fail to mention that patriarchal violence is a universal phenomenon.

As Hassanpour Mojab wrote:

Patriarchy in both Kurdish and Western societies is reproduced on an hourly and daily basis. The family, the educational system, the state, religion, media, music, arts, language, folklore and all other social and cultural institutions reproduce it. Thus male violence against women cannot be reduced to a cultural trait, a cultural norm, or a dominant cultural value that accidentally pops out in the wrath of a violent man.<sup>20</sup>

According to Walby, patriarchy in Western culture today is found more often in the public sphere than the domestic. Often the term ‘domestic patriarchy’ is related to tasks performed by women in the household, and which are controlled by one individual at home. In this

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<sup>18</sup> Walby, S. 1990. *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell. page 20

<sup>19</sup> Walby, S. (1987), *Patriarchy at Work*. London :Polity Press. Page 1-10

<sup>20</sup> Mojab, S., & Hassanpour, A.(2002) *Forthcoming In Search of Kurdish Women: A Multilingual Bibliography*. Westport, CT, Greenwood

context, often the father or husband takes the leadership role and subordinates the wife and daughters to his control. In the public sphere, by contrast, it is often the state or employment sector where the act of subordination of women is carried out, often through a form of segregation.<sup>21</sup>

Magnus Dahlstedt and Ingemar Lindberg discuss the debate behind honour killings in the Swedish media and ask why it became such a large issue. Their explanation is that the issue of honour killing was used by the media to construct Swedish identity, by showing that the ‘otherness’ of the immigrant throws into sharp relief what being ‘Swedish’ is not. The actions of the ‘other’ were often portrayed as cultural behaviour by the media, while ‘our’ (Swedish) accomplishments, deeds and actions were portrayed as individual choices.<sup>22</sup> (Lindberg, Ingemar & Magnus Dahlstedt: 2002)

The question now is whether Sweden's situation differs to that of other countries; the answer is that it does not. Often we encounter in our daily lives cases of extreme violence by men against wives or ex-wives or even towards girlfriends, daughters, sisters and ex-girlfriends. Perhaps the Swedish newspapers – and perhaps Swedish society itself – are reluctant to view honour killing and abuse against women as emanating from the same source, which is a set of patriarchal values relating to violence. Rather than acknowledging that it is these values that are at work in cases of ‘Swedish’ violence against women, the media often presents headlines characterising ‘Swedish’ violence merely as acts of jealousy or as the result of severe psychological problems unique to the individual.

### **Rahmi Sahindal’s confession:**

Jag var sjuk när jag gjorde det, jag var sjuk, upprepar han flera gånger även när åklagaren frågar om något annat.

In my translation:

“I was sick, I was sick when I did it”, he repeated several of times even when the prosecutor asked him about something else.

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<sup>21</sup> Walby.,S. 1990. *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell. Page :24,178

<sup>22</sup> Lingberg, I & Dahlstedt,M. 2002-11-04, ”Gammal raslära seglivad”. Svenska Dagbladet



And again:

Enligt den rättspsykiatriska utredningen lider Rahmi Sahindal inte av någon allvarlig psykisk sjukdom och han hade heller ingen allvarlig psykisk störning när han begick mordet.

In my translation:

According to the forensic psychiatrist, Rahmi Sahindal does not suffer from any severe psychological problem to the extent that committing murder could be caused by ill mental health.<sup>23</sup>

Marie Lindstedt Cronberg, (1967)

Sociologist and researcher Marie Lindstedt Cronberg shows in her study of honour killing that patriarchal structures have existed in Sweden and other Nordic countries from the earliest periods of society and still exist in present day Scandinavia. She also comments that in society, the honour and dignity of women is constantly linked to matters of sexuality.<sup>24</sup>

### **8. Theme III: Fadime's identity as a good role model**

In this section I will discuss the construction of Fadime's identity in the Swedish media. Often immigrant women's voices are not heard. Such women are often portrayed as passive victims, and as mere objects who have no control over their lives. By contrast, men are constructed as the active subject controlling the fate of women.

In her death, Fadime became both a Swedish and international symbol and martyr for women's rights. Her struggle was represented as a struggle against domestic patriarchy and for the right of women to live their lives according to their own choices. Fadime was known prior to her death because she reported that her brothers and father were threatening her. But the question is, why did Fadime become such a media sensation? According to Ylva Brune,

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<sup>23</sup> Dagens Nyheter : 2002-03.13 page A6

<sup>24</sup> Cronberg, M., L. 1968, "Synd och skam. Ogifta mödrar på svensk landsbygd 1680-1880", Lunds Universitet, Historiska Institutionen

the Swedish media often try to portray ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Swedish immigrants, with Swedish traits being considered the definition of social norms. Brune’s example was Swedish football player Zlatan Ibrahimović, who is often depicted as a ‘good’ role model and a positive icon in the sport sections.

**Ylva Brune’s model:**

Freedom = Modernity, individual freedom, sexual emancipation and equality

Oppression = Religion, tradition, family loyalty, patriarchy, gender.

Media researcher Brune, in using the above model, draws the conclusion that media reports generally take two directions; the “Swedish” and the “Immigrant”. The term Swedish stands for “Modernity” and “Immigrants” stand for religion, tradition and patriarchy. According to Brune, nothing has changed in the way that the media stereotypes immigrants since the 1970s up until today’s current issues in contemporary society. This model explains the process of prototyping in the mainstream media in the issue of “We” versus “Them”.<sup>25</sup>

In this sense I feel strongly that *Aftonbladet*, *Sydsvensk Dagsbladet* and *Dagens Nyheter* exploited Fadime as a woman caught between a ‘Swedish’ and an ‘immigrant’ identity. This dual identity is also the most likely reason why her funeral was broadcast live on Swedish television. The irony is that numerous women are killed in Sweden by Swedish males of minority ethnic origins and yet none of those women have been treated to a state funeral. According to Lundgren and Lilja, crime and rape committed by Swedish men are never treated as emanating from Swedish culture and thus from *Swedish* sexism. This connection between culture and sexism applies only to the ‘otherness’ of the ‘immigrants’. Such bias can be confirmed on a daily basis in Swedish media reporting, where crimes against women committed by non-white men always have the highest priority compared to crimes against women committed by white Swedish men.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Brune., Y (2005) in *Maktens (o)lika förklädnader: kön, klass & etnicitet i det postkoloniala Sverige*. page 169

<sup>26</sup> Brune., Y. (2002) "Sweden" in: *Racism and cultural diversity in the mass media* Val (Red). EUMC page 180

## Theme IV: Political Statement

After the death of Fadime, the integration question was debated at length in all three newspapers examined in this essay. Former Integration Minister Mona Sahlin and former Prime Minister Göran Persson contributed to the discussion, and subsequently several policies were put forward to combat the existence of domestic patriarchal violence by taking proactive measures and by disseminating helpful information. After the murder of Fadime, the different political parties took up the issue of honour killing in a parliamentary debate session devoted to the discussion on the integration. This was possible due to the huge coverage from the mass media. Furthermore, a number of proposals have been made to raise the level of the Swedish proficiency test as well as to tighten the criteria for becoming a Swedish citizen.

### 9.1 Post-colonial critique

The death of Fadime also led to a number of controversial debates regarding patriarchal structures and gender violence. Some of the critiques raise a hegemonic view which could be read as “our” patriarchy and “theirs”, where “ours” is clearly preferable. It could also be read as asserting that Swedish men are less patriarchal and misogynist than ‘immigrant men’.<sup>27</sup>

Gender historian Yvonne Hirdman (2002) offered a critique on Gudrun Schyman’s comments on the death of Fadime. Schyman had argued that Fadime’s murder was related to cultural differences. Furthermore, she asserted that the gender system in Sweden ‘is something to be proud off’ and something to ‘defend and prefer in contrast to the gender values that were the basis for the daughter murder’. Other feminist scholars have been sceptical of this perspective however, arguing that it undermines a sound understanding of patriarchy by relating it only to immigrant men and not to men in general.<sup>28</sup>

Spokeswoman for Föreningen Kvinnors Rätt, Haideh Daragah, commented that she was proud to ‘be seen as a cultural traitor’. She claimed that Swedish feminists reluctance to condemn the cultural roots of Fadime and those groups related to her death was due to fear of being labelled racist. She claimed that by taking this position Swedish feminists would

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<sup>27</sup> Lundgren, E. & Lilja, L. (2003) ”Ett övergrepp av ”dom” mot ”oss””, *Arena*, 2, page 58-59

<sup>28</sup> de los Reyes, Paulina, Johansson, Susanne, Knocke, Wuokko, Molina, Irene & Mulinari, Diana (2002) ”Våldet mot kvinnor är problemet” *Aftonbladet*, 15 March.

eventually end up supporting the conservative foundation of these cultures. Therefore, she asserted, feminists should reject traditional traits and support people who adopt liberal values. They should also remember that no 'culture' is homogeneous when it comes to values or conduct or even to behaviour.<sup>29</sup>

But Daragah's argument is perhaps a contradiction in itself. On the one hand, she stresses that culture is at the root of the problem, but on the other, she asserts that culture causes conflict between liberals and conservatives who are bound within one and the same culture. Many members of the Kurdish community have different opinion and values and also differing political positions, despite sharing the same culture. Thus Daragah's main argument that the Kurdish community would not support honour killing is unconvincing; the Kurdish community, like all communities, is comprised of people with different views.

Since Daragah based her argument upon a logic that leaves culture within closely defined ethnic and national boundaries, the remainder rests upon an essentialist perspective of the notion of culture. However, since Daragah claims honour killings to be an essential part of Kurdish culture, this could, per define, also include any kind of position within the Kurdish culture, again it would make a significant difference depending on how 'liberal' the honour killing could be criticised.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991, 56) suggests that the representation of the "Third world woman" as "sexually constrained", "tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc." needs to be reassessed as it implies an "(implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions."<sup>30</sup>

Chandra Mohanty's work is hugely influential, especially her writings detecting the so called neo colonialist move in the work of a great number of Western radical feminists and liberal feminists. In her essay "Under the Western Eyes", Mohanty looks into the construction of the world's women as a singular and monolithic subject. Most post colonial feminists argue that

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<sup>29</sup> Daragahi., H. (2003) "Likgiltighet för slöja livsfarlig", *Dagens Nyheter*, 21 January.

<sup>30</sup> Mohanty., C., T. (1991) "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" In Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, Russo, Ann & Torres, Lourdes (eds.): *Thirld World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 51-80.

oppression is related to the colonial experience, especially class, race and ethnic oppression; these are the key factors for the marginalization of women in the post colonial societies. In the of reading our local newspapers, we get a picture of immigrant women as passive victims of their culture and surroundings. This stereotype is especially common when it comes to Muslim women in Sweden. One of the factors is the contribution that the media makes by creating and producing stereotypes connected to racism, and to the growing trend of ethnocentrism in the West and the West's attitude towards Muslims. Here the media plays a central role in describing Muslim women as oppressed. Mohanty asserts that this is the universal perception of the third world women and Western society especially, has the obligation to liberate these oppressed Muslim women.

## **10. Earlier Research**

The role of media is often seen as neutral. Moreover, the media is also often seen as the fourth cornerstone of society, the other three being the legislative, executive and juridical.

‘The Blue and Yellow Glass House’ was a publicly funded document reporting on structural discrimination in Sweden, conducted within the framework of a project investigating racism and structural discrimination in all sectors of society, including mass media, based on ethnicity and religion. The period under review was 2003-2006 but the main aim of the report is to address the most recent findings. The Swedish government has conducted several studies illustrating this problem, and several attempts have been made to rectify the situation.

The main finding of the report was the existence of ethnic and gender power structures resulting in racist discourse in Swedish mainstream media. The study found that Swedish society is divided along ethnic lines, and that the media tends to report more often on criminal activity when it is committed by immigrants or when the offender is not Swedish.

The research showed that the media creates ‘Swedishness’ through selective reporting, and by projecting negative traits upon the ‘other’. According to the report, immigrant men are often seen or illustrated as being prone to criminal activities, while immigrant women are depicted as being passive and repressed. Therefore, social problems are presented as cultural problems and thus, instead of the problems being the Swedes and Sweden, the problem becomes the immigrants and their impact on Swedish society.

Lena Grip, a media researcher, shows in her study the exploitation of immigrant women and immigrant men in relation to the murder of Fadima. Although the analysis of the study is treats gender and race as equal, the weight of her study based is more concerned with race, and ignores the issue of gender. Hence, her conclusion is based on the stereotyping of “immigrant women” and “immigrant men” as a singular entity, instead of being two different gender-based groups, in the perspective of the mass media. At the end the author concludes that “We” and “They” is a construction that results in a binary opposition, where “They” are a collective while “We” are individuals, “They” are traditional while “We” are pro modernity, and finally, “They” marked by oppression while “We” are equal . These binary oppositions reflect a certain order of hierarchy within the social structure. Furthermore, the discourse of religion is not seen to have a significant role but it is more likely to be explained in relation to culture.<sup>31</sup> .

The next media researcher, Ylva Brune, wrote her dissertation “News from the border”, within which she has conducted three studies from a journalist perspective, which were based on immigrants, refugees and racial violence where the issue of ethnicity was by far treated from a post-colonialist perspective in Swedish mainstream media. Her study was framed as a case study which has had great impact on the mass media’s views on refugees and immigrants during the period of 1976,1987,1993,1995, 1997 and 2000. The focus of her study is based on immigrants and refugees, but she has a huge interest in the working ethics of news journalists. She also commented that on the one hand, the reports produced by the mass media could be seen as a mythical history. From her results, the stereotypes created by the mass media show that immigrants are represented as a homogeneous group that are significantly implied in all matters concerning social ills .<sup>32</sup>

The oppression of Moslem women continues through the lying and deceit of oriental men. Although Brune tries to separate “Women” and “Men” it is not applied in the theoretical frame, where gender as a position is not problematic in itself, but is a variable which is seen as important as ethnicity. Brune found there to be a strong relationship between “Them” and “Us” which is often articulated in the form of “immigrants” and refugees portrayed through

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<sup>31</sup>Grip, Lena, 2002. *Mediernas syn på De Andra. En medieanalytisk studie i samband med mordet på Fadime*. Karlstad: Institutionen för samhällsvetenskap. Avdelningen för Geografi och Turism. Page 45ff

<sup>32</sup>Brune, Ylva, 2004. *Nyheter från gränsen. Tre studier i journalistik om ”invandrare”, flyktingar och rasistiskt våld*. Göteborg: Institutionen för journalistik och masskommunikation. Göteborgs Universitet. Page 342-353

negative traits. The Swede is represented as the ideal self while immigrant men are seen as a threat to the ideal Swedish society.

Finally she explains how the mass media systematically discusses problems or topics such as criminal activity in the context of immigrant communities; when there is a problem to discuss, suburb housing areas such as “Rosengård” are consistently implicated ( Brune s. 353).<sup>33</sup>

## 11. Analysis

The honour killing of Fadime Sahindal was reported and discussed widely in all three newspapers that comprise the main sources for this essay. Each paper published a series of articles on the subject of female immigrants and patriarchal violence, focusing primarily on Kurdish violence. In each of these articles, explanations revolved around a construction of ‘otherness’ as a non-Swedish identity.

It is my contention that the mass media forms and shapes how we view reality, including such basic notions as what it means to be male or female. The media reflects our society and, even more importantly, the media influences public opinion either by reinforcing traditional representations or by helping to pave the way for change.

After analysing the treatment of Fadime’s death in the three mainstream newspapers I asked myself the following question: in a society so thoroughly grounded in the notion of equality as Sweden, did the newspapers present immigrant woman as equal? Did they make an accurate representation? To answer accurately, it is important to view Fadime's case not as an isolated incident but as one among many. To view her situation as isolated would only contribute to the division of Swedish in contrast to the ‘other’.

The negative portrayal and representation of women due to media-embedded stereotypes can be found today in all Swedish newspapers. What is needed to bring balance and accuracy is a gendered perspective.

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<sup>33</sup> Brune, Ylva, 2004. *Nyheter från gränsen. Tre studier i journalistik om ”invandrare”, flyktingar och rasistiskt våld. Göteborg: Institutionen för journalistik och masskommunikation. Göteborgs Universitet. Page 353-386*

In the case of media reporting on immigrants, it would likewise be useful to hear the voice of Swedish immigrants and not just viewpoints from the traditional Swedish perspective, as occurs in most of the leading articles related to Fadime's murder. The discussion of honour killing should not be restricted to one ethnicity or gender or discipline if we hope to understand the most basic causes for the existence of violence against women in our society.

As the main purpose of this thesis is to analyse the gender stereotyping in the Swedish media, it is natural for me to discuss Fadime's case, however, as I mentioned in the earlier section violence against women should be seen as a global problem. The death of Fadime was splashed all over the three mainstream Swedish newspapers for months which eventually continued to 2006. I do think that the Swedish newspapers did engage with a range of important figures in varying political debates, including perspectives from intellectuals, political actors, feminists and human right organisations. However I would like to emphasise strongly that Fadime was not the first honour killing in Sweden. I will not elaborate about the other two cases but mention them implicitly as it is relevant to the subject because the murders of the two young girls were as highly controversial as the murder of Fadime.

Sara was 15 years old when she was killed and strangled in 1996 by her brother and her cousin; and Pale Atroshi was living in Sweden and she was killed by one of her male relatives from Iraq in 1999. In all three cases the media played a key role in naming and framing the issues surrounding honor killings.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps this is the underlying reason why the death of Fadime became so dramatically important in Swedish discourse. The media generalises that crimes are committed by immigrant men. I do think it is good however because it would receive great attention from multiple disciplines such as the legal and academic worlds so that more drastic measures could be taken against crime that was committed in the name of culture. The death of Fadime is still being discussed in feminist research publications. One of the shining examples is this study.

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<sup>34</sup> [http://www.qweb.kvinnoforum.se/Documents/Resources/2006/060905\\_HRVresourcebook.pdf](http://www.qweb.kvinnoforum.se/Documents/Resources/2006/060905_HRVresourcebook.pdf)



Honour killing which is related to violence has created an exclusive effect in the Swedish society especially the drama surrounding the honour killing of Fadime. The Fadime case has created dialogues among well-known feminist spokespersons. There is a need for interpretation not only through the lens of the mass media but also in the academic world. The debates emerged with two different directions: one that represented honour killing as a set of values, an expression of men's violence towards women which has a patriarchal explanation which I have explained in the prior section; and one that explains honour killing as a reflection of cultural patriarchal practices where culture is the explanation.

Gender researcher and docent, Diana Mulinari, from the Department of Gender studies Lund University, and several post-colonialist feminists, Paulina de los Reyes, Susanne Johansson, Wuokko Knocke, Irene Molina were invited by Aftonbladet to debate the death of Fadime from an international perspective.

The theoretical framework of post-colonialist theory is most often recognisable in its critique of those that seem to analyse contemporary culture as being a set of values constructed outside the colonial history. Most of the post-colonialists would criticize those that base their argument on culture as the main root for all social problems in our society and also those that deny the existence of racism.

Kultur används mycket godtyckligt för att förklara kvinnovåld. Detta godtyckliga kulturreduktionistiska ställningstagande följer ett kolonialistiskt mönster.

Att tro att det finns olika kulturer, en för den inhemska befolkningen och andra för de invandrade befolkningarna är att förneka att invandringen ändrar den kulturella verkligheten i ett samhälle.

In my translation:

*Aftonbladet* published articles that related honour killing which is called 'Cultural Racism' to an international perspective.

According to them the culture definition is too often used to explain extreme violence against women. It is a set of values that explains how that the role of culture needs to be

reduced in accordance with neo-colonialist move. They further insist that to believe the existence of other cultures, but still to emphasize one dominant culture for Swedish and another for immigrants is to deny an evolution in reality that is changing the culture in society.

Politician Gudrun Schyman, in *Dagens Nyheter*:

Fadime Sahindal som mördades av sin far föll inte offer för den kurdiska kulturen, utan för den ordning där män förtrycker kvinnor en ordning som finns överallt.

In my translation:

When Fadime Sahindal was murdered by her father, it was not a question of Kurdish culture but a structure whereby men oppress women.

Feminist researcher Yvonne Hirdman criticized Schyman's attempt to universalise honour killing in *Dagens Nyheter*.<sup>35</sup>

Även politikern Gudrun Schyman utgick ifrån en universalistisk tolkningsmodell och gjorde en parallell med "svenskt patriarkat" i sin analys av händelserna. "När Fadime Sahindal mördades av sin far så handlade det inte om en 'kurdisk kultur' utan om en ordning där män förtrycker kvinnor"<sup>36</sup>.

## 12. Conclusion and Recommendation

The role of the mass media in our society occupies a privileged position, but it is also one of the most important tools in our society.. In this essay I have tried to highlight the central role of the Swedish mainstream media in the production of racist notion of culture that distinguishes between the "other" and Swedes. The media plays the central role by creating differences that dictate how culture becomes the main headlines in the main stream mass media.. Thus the mass media plays important role as opinion builder.

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<sup>35</sup> Hirdman., Y. (2002) "Hon sviker det Fadime stod för", *Dagens nyheter*. 30 January.

<sup>36</sup> Schyman, Gudrun (2002) "Fadime offer för mäns förtryck", *Dagens Nyheter* 26 January.

It must be recognised that the duty of the mass media is more than to simply seek out truth and report it to the public. Furthermore, even though one of the most important fundamental laws in the Swedish Constitution is the Freedom of the Press and Freedom of expression, it is irresponsible to neglect these two acts, which embedded together, have a great impact on the Swedish Constitution. As we are aware the media has an active role in influencing and shaping the public opinion politically.

I do think it is rather disturbing as an individual that the media plays such an important, yet hidden role in the creation of stereotyping immigrant women and immigrant men. It is also rather disturbing that the media tends to only give the public news which it considers to be most attractive to the consumer and thus mislead their readers as to the extent of the problems it reports.

By describing how culture is presented in mainstream media we can see how it is treated as a set of values, traditions and practices. As I have described in the previous section, culture is often used to describe the context for many news reports, for example the murder of Fadima Sahindal where her murder was related to Kurdish Patriarchy which is a matter of collective consciousness. To insist on “cultural values” as an explanation where immigrant men such as fathers and brothers are potential murderers such as the way Kurdish men have been represented, when crimes that committed by the Swedish are considered to be acts decided by the individual, regardless of culture, is rather disturbing because the media is producing a stereotypical model of immigrants.

Honour killing could take place anywhere, it might take place in my neighbourhood or yours, in a different time and place. Because I truly believe it is an act of violence against women and young girls like Sara Pale and Fadime There are many interpretations from different sources such as the mass media, politicians and feminists in regards to honour killing that are largely based on the attention given to this issue in the mainstream newspapers. After going through all the sources, I would say that honour killing is a global phenomenon and crimes that are committed in the name of culture are always taken lightly but this is the wrong attitude to take on the behalf of journalists, to blame crimes of this nature simply on culture. Crime and

violence against women would not be taken seriously if the mass media did not influence the public and politicians and shape public opinion

As I have analysed, all the mainstream newspapers had articles written by journalists from a predominantly white Swedish background, male and female. As Brune asserted, the Swedish news agencies are embedded with homogeneity; therefore news agencies should probably have more initiative to recruit Swedes with immigrant backgrounds to work within the field of journalism in order to reduce the stereotyping in the newspapers. In this way, the newspapers will be able to relate matters to multi-ethnic society instead just for Swedes of a traditional Swedish background.

### 13. Result

Honour killing is a matter of violence against women. It might be seen as a cultural practice by the mainstream mass media in Sweden and as a result of Kurdish patriarchal ideologies but it is important to combat the practice of honour killing without stereotyping it as a phenomenon unique to immigrant men which frames them as potential murderers because Swedish men commit murder and violence against women too, and this should not be forgotten. It is possible to reduce domestic violence through the writing of mass media, Western and Third World feminists to tighten the law concerning crimes that are committed in the name of culture.

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