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INTERVENTION PAR LE MOUVEMENT POUR LES VICTIMES  
DE VIOLENCE CONJUGALE: CRÉATION INSPIRÉE DE  
L'EXPÉRIENCE DE TROIS FEMMES DE L'ASIE DU SUD

MÉMOIRE-CRÉATION  
PRÉSENTÉ  
COMME EXIGENCE PARTIELLE  
POUR LA MAÎTRISE EN DANSE

PAR  
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MOVEMENT INTERVENTION FOR  
SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE:  
THREE SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN AND A CREATION

THESIS IN CREATION  
PRESENTED  
AS PARTIAL COMPLETION  
FOR THE MASTER'S IN DANCE

BY  
SAMEENA MITTA

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## RÉSUMÉ

Malgré les progrès que la pensée féministe a apportés au statut des femmes, la violence posée envers elles, violence physique et psychologique, reste un problème présent à travers le monde. Même si plusieurs femmes vivent leurs souffrances en silence, elles communiquent, bien souvent malgré elles, les conséquences de leurs douloureuses expériences à travers un langage non verbal. Je suis intéressée par cet aspect non-verbal de la communication. Mon projet de mémoire de création, en deux étapes, consiste premièrement en l'analyse des mouvements des femmes d'Asie du Sud victimes de violence, puis en la création d'un essai chorégraphique basé sur cette même analyse.

Pour faire l'étude du mouvement, j'ai dirigé, à New York, des sessions d'exploration des émotions par le mouvement dans un centre d'hébergement de femmes violentées d'Asie du Sud. Trois femmes ont participé à ces ateliers. Ces ateliers d'expression par le mouvement ont permis à ces dernières de se remettre en contact avec leur identité physique, en explorant le mouvement et l'espace.

Pour permettre également de sensibiliser la population à la problématique de la violence faite aux femmes, je conclus mon mémoire par cette présentation de *REturn*, chorégraphie inspirée de l'expérience de vie de ces femmes en hébergement. Le vocabulaire chorégraphique, chargé de signification, est basé sur la gestuelle de celles-ci. De plus, l'usage de la vidéo amplifie le côté humain et touchant de la création.

Mots clés :

-danse création

-femmes violentées

-femmes de l'Asie du Sud

## ABSTRACT

Despite the positive influence feminist thinking has had on the status of women, violence against women – both physical and psychological – remains a serious problem throughout the world. While many women suffer in silence, they often communicate the consequences of their painful experiences unconsciously, through a non-verbal language. I have become extremely interested in the non-verbal aspect of this communication. My two-part thesis in creation focused first on analyzing the movements of a group of South Asian women who had been victims of violence, and then on the creation of a choreographic essay, *REturn*, based on this analysis.

In order to study the non-verbal language of the women, I led movement sessions in a New York City shelter for South Asian women who are survivors of domestic violence. Three women participated in these sessions which focused on expression through movement. The workshops helped the women get in touch with their physical selves through the exploration of movement and space.

I concluded this part of my thesis with the presentation of *REturn*, a contemporary dance piece inspired by the life experiences of the women in the shelter. The choreographic vocabulary of *REturn* is based on the movements of these women. The structure of the creation is a representation of our journey in the shelter.

Key words:

- Dance creation
- Domestic violence
- South Asian women

## INTRODUCTION

Violence against women occurs throughout the world among various cultural and religious groups regardless of their educational or class standing. The role of the woman has always been defined by her child-bearing capabilities, as well as by her nurturing essence. Because of these qualities, the majority of the women in the world have been easily dominated and are being kept in their subordinate place. While societies, in general, seem to focus mainly on power relations, gender politics and sexuality, I am working from a feminist activism type of approach, crossing class and race boundaries with culturally specific issues relevant to the women within a distinct society.

All women move the same way. This is a false statement. All South Asian women move in the same manner. This, again, is not true. However, if some women in South Asia have similar experiences in life due to their political situation, environment, diet and fashion choices, would it be possible to see similarities in the way they move? And if a group of women with those common experiences had also, unfortunately, experienced recurring abuse, would they have a tendency to have identifiable body expressions?

It is important to note that movement analysis must be accompanied by an analysis of the individual's life experience. We, as human beings, are a representation of society's requests and demands, and much of what we do and how we act is subconscious. "The ability to realize humanity in another individual is an extremely important key to how we act and react in body language as well as in all relationships." (Fast, 1970: 49) My focus is on the different elements which are influential to the way women move, gesture and take stance. More precisely, I am looking at the body language of South Asian women who have experienced abuse.

## CHAPTER I

### RESEARCH AND FIELD STUDY

#### 1.1 My project

My research project and creation are made up of several aspects within a field study which became the foundation for my choreographic and artistic creation. This project is a study of an intervention which took place at a shelter in New York specifically geared towards South Asian women seeking refuge from extremely violent situations. I led and observed thirty hours of movement sessions during a three week period. These sessions can be defined as exploration movement and creation through the eyes and bodies of three abused women of South Asian origin. The participants in my research established a movement vocabulary which I then used to form my creation. This, in turn, gave the women a sense of value and accomplishment and taught them that their bodies and their minds have the power to make decisions; perhaps a decision as simple as what they will eat for breakfast, or what they would like to wear that day.

My study in New York took place at the NYAWC (New York Asian Women's Center). The women in the shelter were going to take part in a series of movement sessions conducted by a Women@Work project, through a dance company called Gina Gibney Dance. I planned to act as an observer during these sessions which would allow me to analyze the movements and gestures of three participants who

fulfilled my subject criteria<sup>1</sup>. There was a conflict in schedules between the shelter and the dance company, forcing Women@Work to cancel their series of classes. This offered me more freedom to work independently with the women. However, I could no longer focus solely on the women as I had to develop a class plan and creative exercises. The concept of these movement sessions was based on giving the subjects a safe space to explore, not to force them to attend workshops that they would fear or could not respond to at the time.

The other part of my study took place as I led the group of three women in a creative collaboration. These two hour sessions took place five times a week, for three weeks. This was when we created a movement vocabulary which I then used as the base of my choreography. This part of my study was in effect from January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2006 to February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2006. The total hours of field research in this specific section of my thesis were thirty hours.

The three participants in my study were clients at the NYAWC, where they were being protected from further violence in their lives. The movement sessions took place at the shelter, at an undisclosed location within New York City. I personally met with the three South Asian women who fitted my criteria and asked them to take part in my study. I thoroughly explained my direction and goals to the women, as well as my creative process. Each individual verbally accepted her role in this project and was eager to be exploring movement and a different form of expression. The shelter is legally responsible for its clients and it has a strict policy of anonymity, therefore the NYAWC signed the authorization form on the participants' behalf.

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<sup>1</sup> The criteria were as follows: women between the ages of twenty five and thirty five, originally from a South Asian country. They had to be survivors of domestic violence now seeking refuge at the New York Asian Women's Center.

The three women I chose to work with were mothers of one or two children each, and had been living at the NYAWC for anywhere between one week and four months. Two women were Muslim, from Pakistan and the third was a Hindu, from India. All three were escaping extreme situations of domestic violence. They were all aware of what my project entailed and what I was asking of them and were eager to begin the process.

My choreographic project was not only a physical analysis of the women's movements throughout our sessions, but it became a reflection of our process during the entire month we spent together. It showed the growth and development of the women, the emotional rollercoaster effect, and even some symbolic moments we shared. The final outcome was not only a creative exploration of my process but it was also a tool to educate the public about the current situation involving violence towards women in South Asia. In addition, it was a dedication to the three women in my project and their children along with the countless other women around the world who are survivors of domestic violence.

## 1.2 Goals

“The expansion of knowledge is a goal of all research...knowledge comes through perception and understanding.” (Van Dyke, 1998: 6)

My direct goal for this research project was to create thirty minutes of body poetry using four dancers and a video based on a movement analysis during my intervention with three South Asian abused women in a New York City shelter. This piece was performed for the general public, as well as for my invited guests from women's shelters within the Montreal community.

My indirect goals were to give abused women a different type of voice to express their issues or concerns. I wanted to use my movement sessions as a way of giving the women a sense of value and accomplishment which taught them that their bodies and their minds have the power to make positive decisions. Another indirect goal, which was actually the inspiration for this project, was to deepen my knowledge and understanding of how South Asian abused women portray their physical body. The final outcome was used as a way to spread the word about this increasing dilemma as the East and West grow closer, and worldwide issues surrounding human rights are being discussed and tested daily.

I understand that this project is about the process more than the end product, but part of my process and growth was in learning how to best communicate my art so that it is accessible to all. This is a subject I feel strongly about, as I believe that the body is a valuable tool to be explored for various forms of healing, empowerment, and understanding of the self.

However, unlike hard science, both qualitative research and art emphasize the role of subjectivity and tradition in understanding and interpretation. That is, they move forward based on the history of interpretations through which meaning has been acquired in the past. (Van Dyke, 1998: 10)

My first step in the qualitative approach was to study the movements which led to my choreographic process and which could also be interpreted as a different form of expression for abused women from South Asia.

### 1.3 Movement analysis and creation

My research project was a movement analysis, as seen through my eyes, which I sculpted into a choreographic process. I believe that dance can be a powerful tool used as an alternate voice of expression to that of vocalization. "Art can and must

change the world, for that is its only justification” (Orlan as cited in Davis, 1997: 176) Women, specifically those who have been abused, have a difficult time expressing themselves through common verbal language and could benefit from the exploration of communication through movement.

In addition to what we say with our verbal language we are constantly communicating our real feelings in our silent language-the language of behaviour. Sometimes this is correctly interpreted by other nationalities, but more often it is not. (Hall, 1973: XIV)

Any type of analysis must take its environment into consideration as well as the variable influence of perspective. I took into account that the women I analyzed had surroundings that were quite different from my own and even distinct from one another. I examined these aspects, including culture, religion, tradition, society, and media.

In a perfect situation, I would have had the chance to develop a clear assessment of movement patterns already existing among the women, prior to any physical abuse, in order to properly achieve an accurate view of any changes from their natural physical state. Since this was not possible, I needed to develop a literature base to help establish a deeper understanding of how the women’s environment, culture and religion, among many other aspects, could influence their physical identity.

Creativity and self-expression are essential to the Women at Work process. Through creative choice and articulation of self, Women at Work empowers women to regain control of their lives -- and move forward toward safe and healthy futures. (Gibney, 2005)

An anthropological study by Holt and Bateson in 1944 (Givens, 2005) was developed on the defining aspects of posture and gesture by various individual groups. These authors have clearly examined postures in dance, specifically the contrast between stiff hips and torsos with round and rhythmic movements of the pelvis. Using

movement analysis as a way to enhance or actually deepen a research in a variety of disciplines is still rather new. "Joy is a core emotional experience common to all living beings, and one of its most spontaneous and transparent expressions is the act of dancing." (Khokar, 1987: 15) Even though dance has been around as long as people and animals have been in existence, we still have difficulty understanding the primal nature of this form of expression.

One field which still awaits exploration is the question of how far a dominant kinesthetic awareness of certain parts of the body is related to psychological factors. If posture and movement of an individual are closely interdependent with his psychological state, would not stylized posture and gesture in the dance of a people be relevant to a general psychological trend in their life? (Givens, 2005)

I believe that the use of space can be a powerful form of communication in dance as it gives tones and accents while it shifts around bodies or objects. This was an important component of investigation during my choreographic process. I used it as a tool for each body within the space, space being defined by the relationship between bodies, a cultural space, or even the space within the space. Space could be considered a language of its own, a silent, subconscious form of expression where distances flow around one another.

#### 1.4 My personal position

"You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women." (Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru as cited in Coonrod, 1998)

I do not believe that one can always give a reason as to why we are attracted to specific things in life. However, the concept of working with abused women is an idea that landed in my lap one day in New York City during my time there as a performer. As a dancer questioning what the real meaning of art was and why I was

struggling financially, emotionally, physically and politically just to dance, I could no longer see the sense in this type of life. I was then introduced to a type of training program where I could use my technical skills, passion for dance, teaching skills, interest in humanity, and the simple fact that I am a woman. Naturally, it made perfect sense to dive right in and soak up the valuable information I was receiving during the movement training for abused women in second-stage shelters offered by Gina Gibney Dance in affiliation with Safe Horizon and Sanctuary for Families.

#### 1.4.1 My cultural position

“With creative work, tradition is part of who we are and where we must begin.” (Van Dyke, 1998: 10)

Eastern civilization has developed concepts and perceptions of the body over thousands of years. The body is a peaceful place, something to be worshiped, not just as a single entity but rather as a part of the group of bodies which make up the world. Asians don't feel the need to overanalyze or to individualize research projects dealing with “self”. This concept is seen in Sartre's *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* written in 1946. Sartre notes that “Existence is prior to essence.” He discusses the idea that subjectivity should be the beginning phase of all philosophy and that metaphysical thinking should be centralized around the human.

I am fortunate to have both Western and Eastern aspects to my character, with influences of a German mother and a South Asian father. My European eyes have helped me to see that in order to achieve greatness, one must be conscious of one's own body, not necessarily as a whole being but more as pieces of a puzzle. Eastern eyes enable me to see the peace and caring we might provide to our own bodies as well as to our neighbours. This perception of the body has led me to see science as

being a wonderful advancement to life, as scientists discover more and more ways to add, remove, and alter body parts to help enhance an individual's life. On the other hand, meditation and mindfulness could lead us to a greater understanding, and more importantly, acceptance of how our bodies and souls help each other to survive.

#### 1.4.2 My position as a woman

A Feminist, whether she calls herself Leftist or not, is Leftist by definition. She is struggling for total equality, for the right to be as important, as relevant, as any man. Feminists are, therefore, genuine Leftists. In fact, they are to the left of what we now traditionally call the political Left. (Bair, 1990: 544)

I am a woman who has seen and experienced moments resulting from a misogynistic society. I have met many women who have had frustrating or terrifying experiences with humans of the opposite gender. It is almost impossible for me to go even one day without seeing something which reinforces my understanding that we live in a male-dominated society. The ideals of women which are based on the desires of men can be found on television, in magazines, on the radio, in the dance community and the list continues. I am a strong woman with many battles behind me and ahead of me. I have chosen to address this issue as a woman, as a South Asian woman, and as an often terrified woman who desperately needs to step up and be heard.

Feminism has been a movement seen principally in Western societies since the twentieth century. Limited advances have been made elsewhere and the current goal for feminists in the twenty-first century is to have a greater effect in places where female subordination is seriously threatening the lives of innocent women.

Male violence against women is a worldwide phenomenon. Although not every woman has experienced it, and many expect not to, fear of violence is an important factor in the lives of most women. It determines what they do, when they do it, where they do it, and with whom. Fear of violence is a cause of women's lack of participation in activities beyond the home, as well as inside it.

Within the home, women and girls may be subjected to physical and sexual abuse as punishment or as culturally justified assaults. These acts shape their attitude to life, and their expectations of themselves. (Coonrod, 1998)

One cannot really compare the American and the Asian attitudes about women's bodies. Throughout the years, women in western society have developed their approaches toward supporting the rights of women, from the "no" of the 1950's to the "yes" of the 1960's. The 1970's encouraged women to speak up further and to take ownership of their bodies. This is the time when feminist activism came into the forefront of popular political movements. The fight was now on "from the double standard of sexual behavior to the single standard of patriarchal/political/religious control over women's bodies as the means of reproduction." (Wolf, 1990: 20)

For feminist scholars, the body has always been – and continues to be – of central importance for understanding women's embodied experiences and practices and cultural and historical constructions of the female body in the various contexts of social life. (Davis, 1997: 7)

#### 1.4.3 My position as a dancer/choreographer

I am that student hiding at the back of the room, sitting quietly, listening intensely, and observing always. Since I was a small child, I remember watching people's bodies and analyzing them, perhaps in a simplistic sense, but the concept remains the same today. The world we live in, its environment, the anger among humans, the rapidly growing technological world and, more recently, feminist issues are all aspects which are compelling to my everyday thought process. The subject of abused women has steered me towards further studies to help find a way to deal with the existing problems of abuse rather than attempt to fix or change this persistent struggle. Honing in on the particular plight of South Asian women, I feel that it has given me even more incentive and inspiration to pursue this research.

As a choreographer, I had been searching for some inspiration or an important subject matter to show the way toward a new creation. I now know that I have something to say and I would like to share it with others. As a dancer, however, I am finding it more and more difficult to create emotionally charged movements which I will just hand off to other dancers to perform. The choreographer in me is leaning towards taking a little space from the piece, by having performers interpret my movements, in order to allow for breath and to have a somewhat distant eye.

### 1.5 Methodology

The methodology for my creative process is an exploration of various forms of expression in conjunction with the voices of three South Asian abused women. This is an ethnographic field study which took place in the current healing place provided for South Asian women escaping their violent situations. This space clearly defined the environment the women are enduring, including their day-to-day activities such as where they cook or where they experience therapy.

Valuable data can be discovered through ethnographic methods that might never be found through interviews and certainly not through introspection or walkabouts. Only by directly observing the users at work can designers capture these unspoken user needs. A useful result of an ethnographic study is that the individual(s) who conduct the study can provide a user's expertise; the researchers obtain a firsthand sense of the needs and concerns of the users. (McCleverty, 1997 as cited in University of Calgary, n.d.)

I gathered first-hand information to build my research, including some defining elements, such as how often specific gestures are performed and when exactly they are executed. My project is considered a qualitative study for many reasons: the low number of participants involved as well my own interpretations of the women's experiences. I began this research with an open perspective but I could not erase my entire background, experiences or passions, or the fact that I was looking for qualities

and emotions from the women. This type of analysis is one which could only take place through my eyes as the researcher/creator and would undoubtedly be different for any other viewer or participant.

The goal of sociological ethnography is to understand an individual's or group's interactions within the culture. The data gained from ethnographical research is almost entirely qualitative. (Rose, Plaisant, and Shneiderman; 1995; p. 115)

My recruitment process was straightforward as I already had my criteria set for the participants I needed for my study. As previously mentioned, they had to be women between the ages of twenty five and thirty five and it was essential that they originally be from a South Asian country such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bengal, Kashmir, Punjab or Nepal. I was looking for women who had experienced violence which could include physical, sexual, emotional, political or religious, and who were seeking refuge at the New York Asian Women's Center. I had previous training working in shelters within New York City doing movement sessions with varied groups of women and had been invited to this specific shelter as the administrators believed that it would help the women to divert their minds for even a short time. I looked for participants who had a desire to explore movement, who understood English on a basic level, and people who grasped the purpose of my research and what their participation entailed for them.

In the shelter system of New York City, there are two stages of housing for abused women. The first stage is a short-term emergency facility providing medical care and counselling for a maximum stay of two weeks after which women and children are moved to the second stage facility. NYAWC is a second-stage shelter, a temporary home for women and their children escaping domestic violence, usually housing them for up to six months. I was able to find three women who fit my required criteria and who were willing and eager to take part in my research. As indicated previously, two of the women were Muslim from Pakistan and one was Hindu from India. One

woman had already been living in the shelter for four months and the other two had just arrived within two weeks prior to my movement sessions.

A source of personal inspiration for my creation included a poem by Suman Chatterjee who writes about the experiences of abused women in Pakistan. I used music by artists who demonstrate a true sense of vulnerability, such as Me'shell Ndegeocello or Rebekah Del Rio. The use of video was integral to my process and was developed with the help of Livienne Hélène César Grenier, a student at UQÀM studying visual arts and media with a personal interest in women's rights. The video was used as an accompaniment or an enhancement to the developed movements of the live dancers and the established movements. My process was documented using video recordings during my rehearsals and a written daily journal to keep track of my progress, discoveries, problems and ideas.

#### 1.5.1 Field study and observation

My field study was specifically geared towards the female subjects and I made it very clear that I was not judging them or making light of their situation. I had their best interest at heart and would give them the choice to participate only if they felt at ease and were completely willing. If any activities made them uncomfortable, they were encouraged not to continue and they were given the choice to join again when they felt absolutely ready. The movements that were being explored were natural to each participant and should therefore not have been painful or uncomfortable. I was not setting movements on the subjects in order for each individual to feel free to move her body in the manner that worked best for her. These sessions would be stress free and were to be considered a time for the self; a time for not thinking about the negativity in their lives or in the world. I explained to them what my process would

be and part of my job was to make them feel at ease with the project and to not feel threatened or judged.

I led the group of three women in a creative collaboration. As previously stated, these two hour sessions took place five times a week, for three weeks. This is when we created a movement vocabulary which I used as the base of my choreography. We began these explorations with a warm-up, from the head down to the toes. This prepared their bodies for bigger movements, gave them a sense of basic motion and generally brought awareness to their bodies. We then moved towards free flowing exercises as a group, each person having the opportunity to follow as well as to lead the group.

One of the most important elements to my program was to encourage the women to redefine their names. We did this by each creating one movement which best described our own given name. These were generally movements or gestures which came naturally to our bodies without much thought; for some the gesture involved a little more thought about what it meant to them. The next stage of this activity was developed by sharing and learning each others' gestures or sequences representative of their names. We supported each other within this group by gaining some trust in each other and seeing the value of our own creativity being portrayed through the bodies of others. There were many other types of exercises which we utilized, including movement exploration in pairs, working with spatial awareness, music changes, speed and lengths of time. In addition to the name game, we built upon the women's own expressive movement choices with personal and group creativity. I led the women in exercises to build varying movement qualities and play with the emotional body versus "dance for the sake of dance".

Yet this formal training in the language, history, government, and customs of another nation is only the first step in a comprehensive program. Of equal

importance is an introduction to the non-verbal language which exists in every country of the world and among the various groups within each country. Most Americans are only dimly aware of this silent language even though they use it every day. (Hall, 1973: XIV)

Some factors which I focused on for observational purposes included specific gestures which could be of a repetitious and subconscious type, such as twiddling thumbs or tapping toes. I observed the participants with some knowledge of their background which influenced their movement patterns representing their emotional state. I followed my own method of analysis (Appendix A) with the influence of some basic aspects of the Laban technique of movement analysis. This method has four large categories to observe: Body, Effort, Space and Shape, all of which contain several subsections and very refined details. This is a wonderful tool which I used to enhance my time as observer, but also during my creative process to bring further depth to the material. As I am not a Laban specialist, I used just the basic elements to complement my own observation techniques and to give my eyes a clear direction during the sessions. Further details of my field study, including the environment within the shelter, obstacles, the movement sessions and the participants can be found in Chapter 2 (section 2.2, p.43-55)

I enriched my research material further with the use of literature by Irshad Manji, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Gail Omvedt, Kamla Bhasin, and others. I focused on Manji's feminist perspective of Islam, explored what religion has to do with physical constraints, and analyzed ways in which South Asian women, specifically Muslims, can develop and share their own visions and questions.

She is now working with young people from the West and the Arab world to explore ways of giving reform-minded Muslims three things: the confidence to debate and dissent with religious orthodoxy; a physical space in which to network with one another, and an incentive to re-create the conditions that led to the Golden Age of Islam – and, therefore, to the spirit of *ijtihad*. (Manji, 2005)

I used Foucault's definitions of gesture, Bourdieu's concept of *Habitus*, where "Bourdieu's sociology in general can be characterized as an investigation of the pre-reflexive conditions that generate certain beliefs and practices that are generated in capitalist systems." (Wikipedia, 2005). Gail Omvedt and Kamla Bhasin are both feminist writers in India whose works promote the ending of violence against women. They are finding ways through the political and judicial systems of their country to protect women's rights, as well as fighting for new ones.

It is quite common for many women who have experienced violence to have low self-esteem and feel physically and mentally vulnerable. How a woman's self value can be regained through movement sessions was a primary focus in my research. The movement sessions helped the women to reassert themselves in space and to give them back their own physical identity. By contributing to the creation of my choreography, these specific women indirectly furthered public awareness of this problem.

I would have loved to invite the participants of my study to my performance presentation of my thesis. However, this was not possible since the show was in Montreal and the participants were in New York. Given that the maximum stay at a second-stage shelter is six months, my subjects were no longer living in the shelter when my creation was performed. Once the women have left the shelter, they are to remain anonymous and their new whereabouts are undisclosed. In order for the women to see the final outcome of my project, I will send the videos of my work to the shelter as well as the final written element to my thesis, which they can then pass along to the women in my study, wherever they might be living.

### 1.5.2 Creative process

My creative process began with a four week intensive reflection of my research and analysis of the information I gathered from working with the three women in the shelter. This time was spent developing various aspects to build my creation including musical choices, video ideas and my own personal movement exploration and integration of this subject matter in a dance studio on my own body. Once I established a base of movement vocabulary, I shared my concepts and sequences with three other female dancers. I spent four weeks with a group of women from The School of Dance professional modern dance program, in Ottawa, who range in age from eighteen to twenty-nine. It was extremely important that the dancers I chose were willing to explore their own feelings with openness and it was my job to extract an essence of vulnerability and maturity, regardless of the dancer's actual age. It was essential that I was able to accurately communicate my thoughts and desires to this group of young dancers in order to build my creation in an efficient manner.

The final creation was approximately thirty minutes in length, including a video that was shown independently at the beginning and at the end of the piece. There were moments of connection throughout the piece between the dancers and the video. I choreographed sections for the trio as a whole, as well as some interspersed solos and duets. One solo encompassed the emotional aspects of the women's lives to a piece of music called "Wasted Time" by Me'shell N'dégeocello. The rest of the choreography represented more of the physical elements developed by and for the participants. My choreographic details, developments with the direction of the video and my musical choices will follow in CHAPTER II.

## 1.6 Key concepts

My key concepts are South Asian Abused Women, Body Language, and Religious Violence which have all been researched and discussed over centuries as individual subject matters. I have chosen to research these topics in a new context; presenting the combined information from the perspective of a female dancer.

Throughout the past 100 years, women have been reaching out in new directions searching for positive change. However, the changes are slow, sporadic and not always noticeable. Female directed violence is revealed through many forms whether it be rape, childhood sexual violence, physical abuse, sexual harassment, terrorism against reproductive freedom or female genital mutilation. Culture, religion, tradition, education and economics are all aspects of the reality which conspires to keep the woman helpless. This is an apparent dilemma among many women from South Asia, creating a disillusioning sense of the body. All the information used in this following Key Concepts section was gathered from published sources<sup>2</sup>, personal communication (NYAWC, personal communication, 2005-2007) and internal documentation<sup>3</sup> utilized by the New York Asian Women's Center. I am using the statistics from these documents to support my thesis and opinions expressed are not necessarily my own.

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<sup>2</sup> Main sources of published material used for compiling information for this section includes: Afshar, H. (1994), Bardach, A.L. (1993), Bhasin, Kamla & Khan Nighat Said. (1986), Bose, S & Jalal, A. (1997), Coonrod, C.S. (1998), Erez, E. (2000), Manji, I. (2003), Omvedt, G. (1990). Other minor references can be found in the Bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> Hand-outs provided by the NYAWC (2005-2007). Resource material for staff and clients at the New York Asian Women's Centre. Unpublished documents.

### 1.6.1 South Asia

The South Asian sub-continent is home to nearly one billion people and has always been known as a volatile and sensitive area. Countries included are India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh, to name a few. It contains a wide variety of religions and languages and is recognized for being culturally rich. The area is in constant turmoil, with a long history of disputes based on religion, politics and boundary conflicts.

#### 1.6.1.1 India

Bharat, the official Hindi name for India, is the world's second-most populous country with an estimated population of 1,129,866,154, in July 2007. The two national languages are English and Hindi, but the Constitution also recognizes twenty-two other regional languages including Bengali, Urdu, Punjabi and Tamil. It is a country enriched by a variety of religions and cultures, with eighty percent of the population being Hindu. Muslims are the largest religious minority, at around eleven percent, followed by Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, Parsees and Jews. Seventy-seven percent of the people live in villages and belong to a tribal society rather than the main Hindu community.

The farming communities and the extreme poverty are what hinder much of the individual growth-development among women. Each person within the family has a specific role to follow in order to achieve basic livelihood. These assigned tasks are accepted, more often than not, and even respected among the individual family members. Society, on the other hand, has made it perfectly clear that women are to be beautiful, obedient, domestic and most importantly, non-verbal.

### 1.6.1.2 Pakistan

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is the sixth most populous country in the world with an estimated population of 164,741,924, as of July 2007. Their almost equal sex ratio is 1.05 males to 1 female; a drastic change since the days of a society overpopulated with females. Pakistan is the second largest Muslim country in the world, following Indonesia. Islam in Pakistan is practiced by ninety-seven percent of the population; seventy-seven percent are Sunni and twenty percent are Shi'a.

Pakistan is a country with a rich cultural and traditional background from the Indus Valley Civilization, 2800BC to 1800BC. The region, which is now Pakistan, has been invaded and occupied by many different groups including Turks, Persians, Greeks, Arabs, White Huns and Mongols. This has created a plethora of cultural influences on local food, religion and dress, which have all had an impact on the establishment of such a currently sheltered society. These differences can help define the elements that were once pre-Islamic customs, which have either been dropped from the religion or developed into today's Islamic practices.

In February 1979, the country's judicial system decreed new penal measures based on Islamic principles. The President appoints the Supreme Court leading the judicial system in either the Federal Islamic or Shari'a Court. This system has recently brought forth a debate in Ontario, Canada, as the province is considering the implementation of this alternative way of dealing with family law issues for Muslims residing in this province. If such a decision passes, it is quite possible that it would have a negative outcome in regards to Muslim women in Canada, just as it has done for women in the East. The Islamization program consists of many ideals of a nation, decided by a male-dominated group of politicians. In May 1991, the Shariat Bill was passed in Pakistan; the government-supported bill that states that all laws within the

country must conform to Islam. In a move with far-reaching consequences, the State had attempted to dictate a specific ideal image of women in Islamic society.

### 1.6.2 South Asian abused women

Abuse is an all too common occurrence in many people's lives. It affects individuals of all sorts, and of all ages. It can appear in our lives at any time and has a tendency to linger for longer than necessary. It is possible to see abuse in two categories: personal and institutional. Within these categories are three main types of abuse: physical, sexual and emotional. They, in turn, contain several other possible sub-sets.

Physical abuse includes hitting, slapping, pushing, punching and withholding vital medicine, food and necessities of life. Emotional abuse includes screaming, threatening, constant criticism, threatening suicide, shunning, adultery, harassment, or stalking. Sexual abuse includes violent sex, forcing someone into prostitution, constant nagging for sex and forcing someone to participate in pornography. Threatening to shoot someone, throwing things through windows and breaking things are considered to be a combination of physical and emotional abuse. Though it is not commonly known or accepted, adultery is actually considered to be a form of emotional abuse. There is also a sub-set of emotional abuse known as religious abuse in which the abuser uses religious sayings to make the victim feel like a failure.

Women who are physically or emotionally abused for an extended period of time by any dominant individual can experience what is known as "battered woman syndrome". This can create an extreme vision of the impossibility of escaping the situation and a general feeling of fear. There are many emotional, social and practical factors which can make the act of leaving extremely difficult. The fear of further violence is one major concern, as leaving may end the relationship but may not end

the violence if the victims are tracked down by their abusers. Language difficulties, living in isolated areas with no access to funds can result in an acute lack of knowledge about and availability of timely aid. The woman may not have an awareness of what her legal and housing rights may be, if any exist, and therefore cannot take advantage of the possible services. There is also economic dependence - even if a woman is working, she may need to leave her job if she is in hiding or she may need time off work, which could result in being dismissed from the job. There could be legal disputes about financial matters or property and if she is a single parent, work may become impossible. Many women believe that they should stay for the sake of the children and they tend to forget about their own needs.

Social isolation is commonly experienced by the victim of domestic violence. The abuser may keep her from sources of support including family and friends, or the woman may be too ashamed or afraid to tell anyone. Within certain societies a claim of spousal abuse is considered disrespectful, will not even be heard, and could possibly result in more violence. Emotional dependence comes with conflicting feelings of fear, shame, bewilderment, care for the abuser, hope that things will improve, and a commitment to the relationship, if not the violence. Lack of confidence is the most common thread among abused women. Their self-esteem has been eroded to the point where they no longer have confidence in themselves, including their ability to survive alone, and may believe that there is no other option but to stay in abusive relationships.

Most women from South Asia deal with conflicting moral issues based on staying in an abusive relationship due to cultural reasons. Many women have been brought up to believe that real fulfillment comes from being a wife and mother. Divorce is not accepted by the family, the community, and/or religious leaders, all who may encourage the victims to stay in the relationship.

Most of the countries in South Asia do not wish their women to make eye contact with strange men, or quite often with any male. This is not considered being modest or coy, just simply respectful and dutiful. Downcast eyes and subservient behaviour is favoured in a bride and the whole marriage ceremony in both Hindu and Muslim weddings demonstrate this clearly. It is not really because religion is anti-female or that holy books are destructive to the ideals of women, but it is rather that fundamentalists have distorted the true essence of theological theories. (Manji, 2003) Western society has a completely different belief system with a greater dependence and trust in their political and judicial systems.

A similarity appears in all societies as the female body has become a canvas for a bizarre connection between sexuality, politics and violence. Adolf Hitler relegated women to concentrate on the three Ks, 'Kinder' children, 'Küche' kitchen and 'Kirche' church<sup>4</sup>. The way we view the Eastern world is quite often negative as we find ways to fix their problems. Our sceptical eyes have forgotten that the individuals who live in South Asia also have their own way of envisioning their roles held within a culturally strong society. Placing things into perspective is also of major importance; realizing what the women in different communities need and believe. Western women may find gender oppression to be the root of their subordination, but women in other parts of the world may trace their oppression to their race or economic status rather than their status as a female. It is therefore not possible to make harsh judgments and the simplicity of what is right and what is wrong cannot be established by anyone other than the involved party.

In the west there is sexual abuse, wife beating, rape and other assorted violent acts against women, but when and if the crime is reported, a severe punishment may be administered by the courts. In addition to the judicial options, there is often a societal

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<sup>4</sup> Expression found in Weisstein, Naomi (1968) as well as in a 1934 speech given by Adolf Hitler.

consequence to wrong behaviour including neighbourhood sanctions or family banishment. This is not the ultimate solution to the problem as it is quite often ineffective due to lax police work and the general belief that what happens behind closed doors between a husband and wife is no one's business.

In India, which is a diverse country with many cultures and religions, much like Canada, there are laws, newspaper campaigns and social groups all fighting against abuse such as bride burning<sup>5</sup>, human trafficking, acid-throwing and wife beating. There have been movements to stop the demanding of dowries<sup>6</sup> which is the underlying reason for the bride-burning, but traditions are difficult to change overnight and, of course, the basic bias against women is an ever present fact of life. However, there are laws protecting women, even though they may not be enforced as rigorously as they should be.

Pakistan, as a Muslim country, has a different problem. With its closed society, Muslim laws, and censure of most things not included in the Islamic faith, it remains difficult to affect cultural changes. "While fundamentalist regimes restrict the rights of all, the greatest sufferers have indisputably been women." (Bardach, 1993: 1) The idea of any type of change to such an ancient culture is slim, as is the achievement of real equality in a society dominated by religion. According to the World Health Organization, Pakistan is one of the few countries in the world where female life expectancy is lower than the male. Women are to be seen but not heard, and even the being seen must be contained and limited. "When I am by myself, I am nothing. I only know that I exist because I am needed by someone who is real, my husband, and by my children." (Rowbotham, 1973: 74) The laws reflect the Muslim culture which

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<sup>5</sup> Bride-burning originally began from the mythological story of Sita, the wife of Rama. After she was accused of adultery, she chose to walk through a fire and miraculously exited without a mark. Unfortunately, this practice is still in existence but does not have the same phenomenal ending.

<sup>6</sup> A dowry or Mehr (in Arabic) is a gift of valuable items or money from the bride's family to the groom's family to allow the wedding to occur.

is male dominated in the extreme, with laws such as a woman needing two witnesses where a man only requires one.

While individuals may be trying to expose Pakistani society to different ideas, the male-dominated government and courts are slow to listen and the religiously based laws cannot easily be transformed. There are also extremists working to step back further rather than forward. "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only the relations of men to women, but the relation of women to themselves." (Berger as cited in Wolf, 1990: 58) Feminism has been a movement seen principally in Western societies since the twentieth century. Limited advances have been made elsewhere and the current goal for feminists in the twenty-first century is to have a greater effect in such places where female subordination is threatening the lives of innocent women.

Many facts, concepts and studies previously examined have helped in creating a more precise picture of my interests with a more direct focus. The article by Edna Erez deals specifically with violence, culture, immigration and traditional values compelling the woman to stay in an abusive situation. Gail Omvedt focuses on the religious and judicial laws in India forcing women to keep quiet and to accept their situations. Leslie Tutty and Michael Rothery discuss why women return and how effective shelters are, but only focuses on North America. The different economic sections of the female population and how they manifest themselves in the families of well-to-do, middle class or poor women is discussed touching on dowry death at one end of the social scale to wife beating and rape at the other end.

There are increasing numbers of immigrants to North America due to a decreasing rate of home-grown population. Many immigrants experience alienation and are usually subjected to prejudice and discrimination in their new surroundings. It is a

common occurrence in some countries to urge the victims of violence to keep quiet and may even encourage and protect the perpetrators. It is typical for the man to instigate a move to another country as they may see the possibility to excel further in education or employment. The man will make his decision to emigrate based on economic or political reasoning whereas the woman believes in tradition. Since women are generally just along for the ride and are caring for their children, their vulnerability and dependence increases greatly. In a new country, not only language and cultural differences isolate, but also there is no safety net of family and neighbours to defuse potential problems.

### 1.6.3 Body language

The concept of perception has been dissected in-depth by philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Similarly, Jean Paul Sartre touched on the concepts of the body as well as perception; however, he was much more focused on the basic elements of this study as well as having a major focus on transcendence. The two main visions concerning the body are perception from the body and perception of the body. Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu clearly address the Social Body, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Richard Shusterman focus on the Experienced Body, whereas Susan Bordo takes a feminist approach using both body types for research purposes.

During my training sessions to work with abused women, I was informed of their personal approach to their outer body. They consider it to be their shield, the one thing which can protect “their real self”. There is no perfect solution to this age-old problem of female subordination, but awareness is the first step in making any change possible. My goal is not to diminish women of South Asia but rather to reach for the possibility of further empowerment and self confidence beyond what the average eye can see.

Gibney explains: Many of the clients we work with were physically restrained and violated. For these women, dance can be a positive, liberating and empowering experience. Movement is the natural counterpoint to the kinds of experiences the women have endured in their previous abusive relationships. (Gibney, 2005)

Humans show emotions, culture, society and themselves through body language. The people of fundamental Islam are deprived of many pleasures such as drinking alcohol, playing secular music and dancing. They display their repressive lifestyles by not being able to fully express their sexuality and noticeably they are not able to enjoy the arts. It is therefore possible to observe oppressed women from misogynistic societies as they hold their bodies in such a way which demonstrates shame. "Physical blockages are most often the product and the source of social intolerance and political repression". (translation of Shusterman, 1999: 89) As long as these patriarchal countries are being religiously dominated, women will remain undereducated and with the belief that their bodies, both the contents and the container, are truly inferior.

Studies of human emotions have shown physiological changes and can be identified by definitive elements. "Heart rate is a convenient and sensitive indicator of emotional tension" (Cherkovich and Tatoyan 1973:265 as cited in Givens, 2005). If we take a look at medical advancement in the 1990s, Damasio studied intensely the scientific elements of emotions. (Damasio, 1994) He approached these elements from two directions; the innate responses and those which are learned or otherwise feelings attached to objects or events.

Primary emotions such as fear "depend on limbic system circuitry, with the amygdale and anterior cingulatory being "key players. Secondary emotions require additional input from the prefrontal and somatosensory cortices. The stimulus may still be processed directly via the amygdala but is now also analyzed in the thought process. (Damasio, 1994:137)

Gesture can be defined as a body movement, posture or material artefact which influences a concept, or mood. "A disciplined body is the prerequisite of an efficient gesture." (Foucault, 1977: 152) Gestures are considered to be neither matter nor energy but can be used as an encoding device. "A well disciplined body forms the operational context of the slightest gesture." (Foucault, 1977: 152) Some examples of gestures could be facial expression, eyebrow-raising, clothing styles or choices and body movements.

We have passed from a form of injunction that measured or punctuated gestures to a web that constrains them or sustains them throughout their entire succession. A sort of anatomico-chronological schema of behaviour is defined. The act is broken down into its elements; the position of the body, limbs, articulations is defined; to each movement are assigned a direction, an aptitude, a duration; their order of succession is prescribed. Time penetrates the body and with it all the meticulous controls of power. (Foucault, 1977: 152)

Culture can be quite influential towards our subtle, defined, unconscious body movements. In addition to the numerous universal gestures, such as the shoulder-shrug or smile, most often shaped by tradition, culture, and environment, are more gestures which must be learned to be understood. Desmond Morris (Morris, 1994) studied many of the culturally defined gestures such as the Italian hand ring, the British hand ring-jerk, and the French hand ring-kiss.

As seen among all species, gestures can be seen through a variety of ways other than with the above mentioned typical body gestures. If we look at the more basic elements of expression we would have to take note of the primitive aspects common to all primates and mammals.

Bowing and scraping in general are all variations of superiority or inferiority by height. They are all actions to point out the body language message - You are higher than I am, therefore you are dominant. (Fast, 1970: 40)

These could include intonations of the voice which can ignite feelings or attitudes in all involved parties, and also spatial integration using level changes as well as distance for personal expression. "His withdrawal is interpreted in body language as - I need privacy. Even though I'm among you, touching you and living with you, I must withdraw into my shell." (Fast, 1970: 29)

Erich Fromm once stated that "the silent language shows how cultural factors influence the individual behind his back, without his knowledge" (Fromm as cited in Hall, 1959: x). These wordless messages can be sent or received by gestures, postures, facial expressions, gazes, and even tones of voice. There are many subconscious signals influencing our choices and demeanour including audio, visual, tactile, and chemical. Some less commonly mentioned aspects of expression are body positioning in space, grooming habits, and designs of consumer products such as food products, engineered aromas and media images.

Everyday, in our personal and professional lives, we are both giving and responding to thousands of nonverbal messages. We use this detailed and subconscious information to decipher who we are in relation to the others around us. The most basic of messages presented via body language will affect us emotionally and without our conscious knowledge. The study of the body and what it does goes as far back as when cavemen drew their perception of the activities of the human body on walls in their caves. The subject of nonverbal communication has been touched on by most fields of study, and is now becoming much more recognized by the general public as it takes its place in new-science.

There are many different kinds of body-language signals which may be innate, and/or learned. This nature-nurture issue is a hot topic among many body language researchers. Many cultural anthropologists believe that all gestures are learned, for

example, the eye-wink, thumbs-up, and military-salute. Darwin<sup>7</sup> and recent studies by human biologists suppose that many body-motion signs are innate including the eye-blink, throat-clear, and facial-flushing cues. Mixed cues originate as innate actions but will eventually become combined as they are influenced by culture which alters the use. Because of this inevitably strong influence, most body-language signals are actually a combination of biological and cultural approaches including the laugh, cry, and shoulder-shrug. Paul Ekman researched this study from a psychological point of view and has shown that culture does not define the primary facial expressions, including disgust, surprise, and sadness but that they are, in fact, part of a universal language. (Ekman, 1984)

Body language is used by creatures as simple as fish and as complex as man. We can see blowfish that can expand many times their normal size to discourage attacks by their enemies. Both bears and the great apes will attack individuals who threaten them by standing tall and looking them in the eye. Body language used by man is more subtle and more individually refined.

The body is the only constant in a rapidly changing world, the source of fundamental truths about who we are and how society is organized, the final arbiter of what is just and unjust, human and inhumane, progressive and retrogressive (Frank, 1990: 133)

Although human beings all share the same general musculature and bone structure, apart from gender differences in movement there are also ethnic differences which were created through generations of specific ways of living. Chinese foot binding is one example of this but much more subtle influences come to bear in the creation of an ethnic characteristic such as the Gallic shrug of the French or the Japanese bowing or the Indian head-waggle. The structure of the different languages contribute to the

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Darwin published a scientific study of nonverbal communication in his 1872 book, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*.

defined characteristics as does religion, ethics, culture, tradition, politics and environment. However, women, as opposed to men, carry the biggest burden of society's expectations. They are to be perfect; beautiful, intelligent, hard-working, caring and, naturally, the baby-bearer. Therefore, body language is quite different in women.

Indian women have been confined to specific roles as defined by society, religion, politics and even family. Being beautiful is not just about being slender, having nice clothes, putting on makeup, but also having fair skin. This is a human trait that cannot be changed without extreme measures which are also life threatening. The female body has been carefully defined, controlled and concealed by various groups within male-dominated societies. "We women are just shells for the men. When you sink your identity into someone else you suddenly get a terrifying feeling that you are no longer there." (Rowbotham, 1973: 74)

Woman must always be dutiful, always following orders from the male in authority, who is most often influenced by society's desires. If a woman should choose otherwise, she will have to face grave consequences which could include beating, burning, rape, and worse yet, divorce.

Along with the constant need to guard our body language, to keep a tight reign on the signals we send out, there is also a paradoxical need to transmit wildly and freely, to tell the world who we are and what we want, to cry out in the wilderness and be answered, to drop the mask and see if the hidden person is a being in his own right, in short, to free ourselves and to communicate. (Fast, 1970: 65)

#### 1.6.4 Religious violence

When speaking of religion and their interpretations, I would like to make clear that I am dwelling on the negatives rather than the positives in order to support my study. I

do not wish to disrespect any religious groups and their practices and beliefs. A common concern among many individuals is the interpretation of religious scripts and not the actual words expressed. However, the more extremist and fundamentalist leaders and their rigidity create fertile ground in which religious violence is rife.

Woman has not fared well in any of the major religions or the interpretations of the Holy books that represent their credos. She is depicted as weak, both morally and mentally, and she is considered to be a mere adjunct to the man. The subordination of women to men in the Bible, which shaped western thought on the issue, is clearly depicted in the Leviticus 12:1-8 passage. After the birth of a male child, the woman is considered to be ritually impure for seven days, however after the birth of a female child she is considered to be ritually impure for fourteen days according to the law of the Bible. In the past, Gnostic Christians worshipped the female Holy Spirit, Sophia, and believed that Mary Magdalene was Christ's wisest disciple. With the increase in male empowerment, more diminishing comments were being interpreted in regards to women and being backed up by the church. The second century St. Clement of Alexandria wrote: "Every woman should be filled with shame by the thought that she is a woman." (Lea, 1966: 320)

Not all religions currently or historically envision a negative force behind female sexuality. In Islam there is a sect of mystics called Sufi who believe that bliss can only be reached through Fravashi, the female spirit. The list can continue, but in the present time, we are more likely to hear of the negative perceptions of women within the religious frame.

The Yin is the negative force in nature. It is seen in darkness, coolness, FEMALENESS, dampness, the earth, moon and the shadows. The Yang (good) is the positive force in nature. It is seen in lightness, warmness, MALENESS, dryness and the sun (Hopfe as cited in Hobbs, 1994: 51)

Neopagan religions tend to place a greater emphasis on the spiritual role of the Goddess, and to challenge the degradation of woman in more traditional religions. An example of this is Dianic Wicca, a form of white witchcraft. It is a religion based on the concepts determined by an early form of feminism. Even older and more established religions such as Hinduism are swayed by this onslaught of modernist thinking and feminist foment and are slowly responding. Hindus were instrumental in having laws passed in India prohibiting child marriage<sup>8</sup>, polygamy and the practice of sati (in which a widow self-immolated on her husband's funeral pyre). Hindu laws have also made it legal for a widow to remarry.

The women's movement has fought for the right to debate important issues of our times. Most religions are not conducive to change and their hierarchies are male-dominated. Christianity, with its branches such as Catholicism and Protestantism, has perhaps the most diversity of the three major world religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam). There is a spiritual home within the many sects for most minorities from feminists to the gay community. Judaism, with its progressive and orthodox branches has room for some differences of opinions, but Islam has no room for dissent or dialogue although it started out, curiously, as the most inclusive of religions. It has long been subverted into an unbending collection of rules that cannot be changed under any circumstances.

#### 1.6.4.1 Women in Islam

Islam has no official authority who decides whether a person is accepted or dismissed from the community of believers known as the Ummah (family). The word Islam means 'submission' (to God) and is described as a Dīn (a way of life). The term Muslim derived from the word Islam and means 'one who surrenders' to God. It is

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<sup>8</sup> According to a Hindu holy book called the Manu Smriti, it is advised that a man's perfect mate is a woman one third his age (Manu IX:94).

one religion which is open to all regardless of gender, age, class, race, or previous beliefs. There are certain guidelines which all Muslims must follow in order to maintain their positive status with Allah (God). Reciting the Shahādatan which are two statements of belief in Islam, “There is no god but God; Muhammad is the messenger of God” (Taqi-ud-Din, 1998; translation by Dr. Muhammad: 872), is a major element practiced by all devout Muslims.

The Qur’an is the holy book of Islam and consists of one hundred and fourteen *Suras* (chapters) which state specifically or indirectly all of the divine commands from Allah as channelled through Mohammed. There are approximately five hundred *Ayats* (verses), although the exact number still remains in dispute. Approximately eighty could be said to be articles of a code of law.

By selectively interpreting the Koran, the Hadith (the sayings of the Prophet), and Sharia (a code of religious law), most Muslim countries have legalized polygamy and repudiation whereby a man divorces his wife simply by announcing, "I divorce you" - while denying women the right to divorce, child custody, and any community property. The issue, of course, is not Islam - the world's fastest-growing religion - but fundamentalism, which uses Islam as a billy club. The mock slogan of fundamentalists, "One Vote, One Man, Once!" is no longer a joke; for many it's the grim reality. (Bardach, 1993: 1)

The Qur’an has been translated into many languages from the original Arabic source but these are not considered to be the ‘real deal’. They are known as interpretive translations and do not carry any value within the Islamic faith. As with all holy books, it was written for that moment and could therefore only be considered relevant at the time. When the Qur’an was written, the ratio of men to women was incredibly meagre and therefore it made sense for each man to take care of several women at the same time. This is no longer the case but the practice in the Islamic faith has not evolved with the times and has not been integrated for the realities of today.

There are 500,000 fewer women than men in our country... Yet we are told that we must accept that our husbands have the right to remarry. I even went to some of our religious leaders and asked them whether the government were backing the family or planning to destroy it? Since it is obvious that the moment a second wife steps in, effectively the first wife is discarded and her life is ruined... But they are forcing women in this country to accept polygamy, if they don't then they are told that they have to quit and divorce the husband... How can you have such a policy and still claim that women are respected and valued? What is there left of such a woman? How can she become a good mother and raise a healthy family? (Afshar, 1994: 5)

The *Hadith* is a collection of Islamic traditions taken from early Islamic history and compiled into another form of Holy literature to be respected. Before touching either the Qur'an or the Hadith, the Muslim must perform *wudu* which is a washing for prayer to keep any filth away from the revered words. To read the Qur'an with an outside eye, one would notice that men, women and all beings are considered equal. There are positive reinforcements towards women just as there are some negative messages about men. However, as with most religions, over time religious leaders have distorted the meanings in holy books to highlight only what their members need and want to hear.

On its inception the Islamic Republic<sup>9</sup> embarked on a series of misogynist laws, decrees and directives which rapidly curtailed the access of women to much of the public domain. Female judges were sacked, the faculty of law closed its door to female applicants and article 163 of the Islamic constitution states that women cannot become judges. (Afshar, 1994: 5)

“Men were also entitled to kill anyone who "violates their harem", men who murdered their wives, or their sisters, or mothers on the charge of adultery, were not subject to any punishment. But women do not have such rights.” (Afshar, 1994: 5) It just so happens that most countries in South Asia revolve around their male

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<sup>9</sup> Islamic Republic exists as of 1956 in Pakistan, 1958 in Mauritania, 1979 in Iran, and in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001.

dominated communities and see the necessity to degrade women using such texts, which are respected by all, in order to support their argument.

Men are the protectors (Qawamoon) of women, because God has given preference to some over others. And because men spend of their property on women. So good women are obedient, guarding even unnoticed that what Allah (God) has asked them to guard. As for those from whom you fear rebellion in this (i.e. guarding their chastity in your absence), i) talk to them, ii) leave them alone in their beds, iii) strike them. If they then obey you, look not for any way against them. (Koran 4:34 as cited in Taqui-ud-Din, 1998; translation by Dr. Muhammad: 332)

In South Asia, most of the women who have achieved any type of political status are actually religious, and just like men, they adhere to the religious objectives established by the country. Women have become heads of government in such countries as India, Sri Lanka, Turkey and even Pakistan and Bangladesh. However, most men from the named countries believe that these women in power are just marionettes being played by men. Just because a female has reached a position of power, it does not mean that every woman has won her rights.

Look at Indira Gandhi, and especially at Margaret Thatcher-she can make war as well as any man. No, I don't believe that women as heads of state will make any significant change in society because...the moment a woman gets power, she loses the solidarity she had with other women. She will want to be equal in a man's world and will become ambitious for her own sake. (Bair, 1990: 555).

In many of the third world countries, women are considered effectively, as property, and have no legal rights in practice. Millions of women are expected to undergo female circumcision, a form of genital mutilation. However, this is practiced most often with the consent of the girls who feel that it is their rite of passage in becoming a woman. While female circumcision is consensual there are many examples of how the judicial system is weighted against the woman.

In 1990, Iraq issued a decree allowing men to kill their wives, daughters, or sisters for adultery. In Pakistan, the current penal laws stipulate stoning to death for adulteresses. Women who claim to be raped are often imprisoned for having committed zina, sex outside of marriage. To prove that a rape occurred, women must produce four male witnesses. Under the law, the testimony of a woman carries only half the weight of a man's. In rape cases, women's testimony carries no weight. (Bardach, 1993: 1)

To this day, we are onlookers to unjust cruel traditions such as honour killings, bride burnings and forced marriages. It is not surprising that more and more women choose to burn themselves rather than tolerate difficult marriages or rivals. "Within the family women are carrying the preposterous contradiction of love in a loveless world." (Rowbotham, 1973: 76) They don't often have the choice to leave and if they do, they must deal with the possibility of grave consequences. Not only do they lose their home, status, friends and sometimes family, but their children officially belong to the father.

Children are sent to Islamic school to learn all about their religion and way of life. The biggest problem of this theology is that it emphasizes the value of memorizing the passages rather than understanding them. Questions are forbidden, removing the option for any type of dialogue or comprehension of such a dated piece of text. This is especially true for the girls, as women are kept separate and having a voice is certainly not encouraged.

Murder is now punished by retribution; but the murderer can opt for the payment of daheh, blood money, to the' descendants of the murdered, in lieu of punishment (Article 1 of the Qassas laws). Whereas killing a man is a capital offense, murdering a woman is a lesser crime. (Afshar, 1994: 5)

There are women around the globe in all societies, religions, communities and in a variety of classes who attempt to promote knowledge among the underprivileged groups of women. There are many women who have put their lives in danger and

given up their homes, friends and family in order to have their voices be heard. There are groups of women who have been kept in jail without any legal counsel after simply explaining to illiterate women how any of the new laws could affect them.

In May 1984, we lost the right to marry whom we want, to divorce, and the custody of our children, while polygamy and repudiation for men were legalized. The Family Code is pure apartheid. It discriminates against half the population. (Bardach, 1993: 10)

Irshad Manji, Fatima Mernissi, Shirin Neshat and Nawal El-Saadawi are among some other liberal Islamic women who seek equality and respect from the hegemony of the male elite society and are actually putting up a fight. Taslima Nasrin, who has a Fatwa<sup>10</sup> placed on her, has been exiled from Pakistan and has fought for many years to be heard. Several books later, after life changes and living in constant fear, she was up for a Nobel Peace Prize. These brave and powerful women are responsible for fostering an open dialogue. They are questioning the interpretations of Islam by others without attacking the faith itself. It is their primary focus to promote positive elements from within, not to paint a hopeless picture. They understand that it is essential to act on several fronts at once, including improved access to education. These women have turned their imagination into a weapon to resist, confront and threaten and they are making attempts to transform their repressive society.

### 1.7 The feminist dance scene

I have discovered a few dance companies which have touched on feminist issues or violence in various forms. These include Kriota Willberg's New York company called Dura Mater dealing with women who commit acts of violence. Mythili Kumar is the director of Abhinaya Dance in California where she retells stories of women in

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<sup>10</sup> A Fatwa is a legal ruling decided by a Mufti (an Islamic scholar) and is often based on Islamic laws. An example of this sentencing is when the Ayatollah issued a death sentence for Salman Rushdie after he wrote *The Satanic Verses*.

India suffering abuse. Vermont's dance company, Pendium, was founded by Tracy Penfield and she provides workshops in schools to educate our youth about domestic violence. Kirsten Williams established a feminist dance company in San Francisco called Strong Current.

I received my training to work with abused women through the New York dance company, Gina Gibney Dance. She has a strong group of six women who perform in New York City a few times a year. The rest of her time is dedicated to working towards expanding her movement sessions in shelters throughout the company's home city. This program is called W@W (Women at Work) and is not considered "movement therapy, but rather a unique opportunity to incorporate artistic and physical expression into a clinical setting." (Gibney, 2005) However, this training program and her creative process are generally not related and she does not generate movement specific to this subject matter. The W@W vision is similar to the path I would like to take in my research, but geared towards the South Asian community and more towards a physical analysis which will lead directly to my choreography.

## 1.8 Conclusion

The female body has been transformed into a political battleground for philosophical, social, and religious debates. Muslim women, in particular, have been greatly influenced by their society to practice the value systems through their bodies and behavioural actions. "The human body is a canvas for the expression of cultural ideas of men and women throughout time and around the world" (Sands, n.d.) Words have been uttered for so long, in so many different ways that we, as humans, have become somewhat immune to the power of the voice.

Thus women's secrets I've surveyed  
And let them see how curiously they're made  
And than, tho' they of different sexes be,  
Yet in the whole they are the same as we.  
For those that have the strictest searchers been,  
Find women are but men turned outside in;  
And men, if they but cast their eyes about,  
May find they're women with their inside out.  
(The Works of Aristotle in Four Parts', 1822, as cited in Greer, 1970: 99)

There is plenty of information on the subject of domestic violence or abused women in certain fields of study – politics, religion, culture, tradition, economy, psychology and sociology. However, the body, movement, and a general physical study surrounding the concept of abused or violated women has not yet been established or given proper value.

Where and how can dance take a role in this issue? How can my choreography make a difference? Will it be educational/informative for the general public or used as individual growth for the affected population? Through the medium of dance, how can I best create a voice representative of silence? These are just a few questions which I will be focusing on in CHAPTER II.

## CHAPTER II

### CREATIVE PROCESS

#### 2.1 Introduction

Like many other students and professionals in the artistic field, I have been conflicted with the balance of art and research. On a regular basis, I have questioned what the purpose of dance is and how it can be used to express and inform. I have always used dance as a form of personal expression (both as a dancer and as a choreographer) and questioned who else could gain from such a powerful art form.

The research process for my study has proven to be representative of the age-old saying that movement heals and protects our emotional selves. It is said that exercise increases the happy hormones in our bodies which I have personally experienced throughout my twenty-five years dancing and has provided satisfaction to my thesis project as a whole.

I have taken this opportunity to share a passage of dance and movement as experienced through the lives of four specific individuals. I have used the power of video combined with live dancers, a musical collage, impact lighting and enriching costumes to show the journey of these women. This section will explain my choices and vision of my creation titled *REturn* through both literal components as well as my artistic vision.

## 2.2 Women's shelter (NYAWC)

My field study took place at an undisclosed location in a NYAWC, second-stage shelter for women and their children seeking refuge from domestic violence. It was a multi-family dwelling with five compact apartments divided over three floors. The main floor was the shared quarters, containing one room for group gatherings, a larger kitchen than those found in each apartment, one toy room for the children and the well-covered entrance door. The finished basement was kept for staff offices, files and a high-security computer zone.

The old building was filled with a large assortment of donated items for women and children as well as excessive amounts of home accessories scattered about. Every corner was filled with boxes of random objects and the hallways were lined with spare televisions and refrigerators. The walls remained otherwise bare, painted in neutral tones and in desperate need of a new coat of paint. A few decorative items representative of various Asian cultures and religions could be found in each room, for example, the Hindu Om<sup>11</sup> or the Catholic cross.

Each secured apartment generally housed two families who shared a kitchen, small dining area and two or three bedrooms with several bunk beds in each. This allowed for the children and their mothers to remain close and maximized space. Most of the women had fled their homes in a hurry or possibly via a hospital and therefore they did not carry many things with them. They were provided with the bare essentials and would eventually build a new wardrobe through donations and allowances offered for each family in the shelter.

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<sup>11</sup> A mystical symbol in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. (Archer, 1946: 57)

The NYAWC supported women with any Asian background, gathering individuals from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Korea, among many others. There were people milling about on the main floor at all times of the day, sharing their stories, recipes, smiles and tears. The kitchen acted as a central zone where we all spent time getting to know one another. There was an enormous amount of tea brewing and sipping as various languages echoed throughout the room. This is where I spent much time observing the women's gestures in their natural surroundings and I was able to clearly see their personalities shine.

It is necessary for the shelter to evaluate the needs of each woman and to decide what the appropriate timeline is for every individual case. This policy creates a revolving door concept; every woman arrives and leaves at a different time. It was rather difficult to plan who I would be able to work with and how many women would be available during my predefined block of time considering the instability of such an environment. Just a few days before beginning my sessions, I was informed of how many participants I would have for my study. I was told that I would have three women and their children would be cared for during our time together. One of the three women was waiting to be transferred to our facility but the paper work was slow and she was not able to join for the first few days.

I decided to use a private room in the basement to hold our movement sessions as we were less likely to be disturbed by the staff or other clients at the shelter. The room was quiet; we had a functional door and no windows to distract us. There were several chairs, tables and other office equipment filling up the space. We spent the first few minutes of each session opening up the space by moving out the furniture and cleaning up the room of clutter. At the end of each gathering, we replaced all of the furniture and returned it to its official purpose. Two of the three women had children living with them at the shelter, one was a teenager and the other two were

under the age of ten. The staff and I had arranged childcare on premises during our sessions to give the women some time for themselves and to avoid any distractions that could potentially disrupt the growth of our project. Occasionally, the children were in need of their mothers and would join us for part of the time creating a different atmosphere and altering our direction. Other than the three children, there were no onlookers and the shelter staff respected our time together and ensured that we not be disturbed.

### 2.2.1 Obstacles

I began my journey in the shelter with such hope and promise and quickly realized how my structured session time would need to be completely readjusted to accommodate the many unanticipated roadblocks. These included the general lack of interest by the three participants with my project once I arrived, which was not the sentiment prior to my arrival. I had anticipated certain hesitations by my participants, namely religion and culture clashes. I did not, however, expect scheduling issues different for each individual, a shortage of child care workers resulting in the inclusion of the youngsters during our sessions which then limited our already restricted amount of space and concentration.

The most difficult barrier I faced was not having any stereo equipment for use during our sessions. Music is a universal art understood and appreciated by the majority of people and in the past I have found that it helps people feel on a level which does not require too much thought or analysis. Music has been a way for individuals to express themselves and has been a very valuable tool to help in healing and releasing.

I have always been aware that for any progress to occur, steps backward need to be taken at times before growth and development can be seen. I was fully prepared for

this to happen, but I was never sure when, how or with whom. Two of the participants shared their concerns about how dancing is not accepted within their Muslim community. They understood that a woman who dances, whether modern, classical, or traditional, is considered to represent prostitution. As a group, we discussed how Islam is a religion and way of life based on peace, submission and obedience to Allah. Nowhere does it say that art is taboo and that expression of the body is against God's desire.

### 2.2.2 Sessions

The experience and sheer joy of moving can also engender feelings of entitlement and empowerment. Dance is an art form that uniquely promotes greater personal awareness through our bodies and, by means of a very primal activity, reaffirms an essential and shared humanity. (Durand, n.d.: 1)

On January 18th, 2006, I entered the doors to a New York Asian Women's Center with a plan of action for the next three weeks. What I had not taken into consideration was the number of unexpected road blocks that would come my way. I began the sessions slowly with a little time for discussion, as a way to gain their trust and understanding. I wanted to learn about each woman so that I could approach the movement sessions in an appropriate manner. I needed to be absolutely sure that I did not open any previous wounds. These women have endured much time with partners who have told them what to do and how to do it. Therefore, I needed to be extra careful in my approach with the participants. I knew that they needed guidance but there is a fine balance between one's perception of direction and force, which would end up doing more damage than good.

Women's shelters provide a tremendous amount of support and protection for their clients. The women are offered a variety of traditional therapies including support groups and different forms of personal analysis, depending on their duration of stay

and what is available at any given time. A common frustration felt by the individuals in the shelter was that they were tired of talking and they no longer wished to declare their stories, at least not verbally.

At the beginning of my field study in the shelter I spent much time trying to convince the participants that our internal and external bodies are connected and it is important to take both into consideration, especially during this time of intense healing. The act of physical activity can be extremely beneficial to the way the individual feels about herself; building up her self-esteem. There have been many studies which demonstrate this type of physical power, primarily art therapy studies.

Dance/movement therapy or "DMT" is founded on the principle that a vital connection exists between personality and the way in which one moves, and that changes in movement behavior affect the emotional, intellectual, and physical health of the individual. (Wennerstrand, 2006: 1)

Once settled in and having listened and adjusted to the several justified concerns shared by all, we opened our minds and suddenly took a flying leap forward. The women began making requests based on what their bodies needed on any given day and I gratifyingly saw their bodies speaking to me rather than closing in and shutting down.

Most people, especially in Western Civilization, understand verbal language or script since this is what the general population is exposed to at an early age, as it is built into our education system. I created an informal questionnaire (Appendix B) for the three women in the shelter, containing simple questions to respond to independently. I gathered the information provided from each participant to gain further knowledge about them in order to fully develop their characters within my choreography.

We often practiced breathing exercises to begin our sessions together in order to ease the tension in our minds and bodies. This wonderful tool was also used to establish a sense of calm throughout the room and to create a subconscious connection between the participants as well as myself. Everyday was a completely new experience, as we tried to build on what had already been accomplished the day before, but yet somehow it was all new. I was continuously learning more and more about not only the women, but also myself and what my weaknesses are.

A few of the activities we engaged in during our sessions required the use of imagery. I would give the group different situational scenarios to think about in order to help the women get a little distance from reality. I asked them to picture themselves walking barefoot on a warm beach and then the group would recreate this movement quality in a sequence of steps. I wanted to introduce some animal-like gestures to the women, so in my questionnaire (Appendix B), I asked if they could be any animal which one would they chose. Interestingly, each woman was drawn to the idea of birds and more specifically wings. "If I could be any animal in the world, I would be a bird so that I can be free and fly far away" (Anonymous, NYAWC, 2006).

I formulated an observational chart (Appendix A) influenced by the Laban Movement Analysis (LMA)<sup>12</sup> which I used during my time spent with the women. It includes details of their movements and gestures during our sessions as well as our time spent away from the planned activities. Along with this movement analysis, I felt it necessary to learn as much as possible about each woman, while maintaining a professional distance. The informal questionnaire (Appendix B) that I had developed, contained information that would help describe a whole picture to each of my participants and would also help me to create a choreography which would be respectfully representative of each individual as well as the group.

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<sup>12</sup> (LMA) established by Rudolf Von Laban "is a system and language for understanding, observing, describing and notating all forms of movement" (Wikipedia, Laban Movement Analysis: 2007).

Biological, clinical, and social investigations have continued to converge on the fascinating phenomenon of dissociation. It has become clear that, as Janet observed one hundred years ago, dissociation lies at the heart of the traumatic stress disorders. Previously, many clinicians viewed the capacity to disconnect mind from body as a merciful protection, even as a creative and adaptive psychological defense against overwhelming terror. (Herman, 1992: 238-239)

I would like to give the reader the opportunity to learn as much as possible about each of my participants in order to get a more defined picture of my piece and the process prior to the creation. I share with you the information I gathered using my observational chart along with the women's responses in the questionnaire which have helped in developing my vision and understanding of each woman. The information I am providing is as detailed as possible without exposing the identity of the participants.

### 2.2.3 Participants

As previously discussed, abuse can be experienced in different ways including physical, emotional, verbal and sexual. It is understood that the women who are living in the shelter have all experienced abuse in some form. They are most often healing from physical damage as well as emotional turmoil. The women come from different backgrounds and their situations are all unique to varied extremes. As previously discussed, the group of women that I chose to work with fell into my predefined category; age ranging between twenty-five and thirty-five, being mothers to one or two children each, and having lived at the shelter between one week and four months. There were two Muslim women from Pakistan and one Hindu woman from India, all escaping extreme situations of domestic violence.

The three women were all unique in their experiences, life choices and backgrounds; however, they still demonstrated some elements of likeness. All three women preferred the colour red and when asked where on stage they would like to stand, they all chose centre stage.

#### 2.2.3.1 Strong Woman #1

Strong Woman #1 (SW#1) loved to dance and express herself through a variety of movement styles, especially when listening to Smooth Jazz, Bhajans and Bollywood music. Her artistic personality was quite noticeable during our discussions as well as her attraction to non-linear shapes and varying clothing choices. She loved the colour red and would choose to stand front and centre if imagining herself in a stage-like setting. Upon review of SW#1's questionnaire responses to how she perceives her body she notably wrote that "The purpose of our body is to keep our soul going inside our body." When she examined what her body actually represents, she concluded that "it represents me which is inside of me".

SW#1 interpreted the word *beautiful* as something "artistic, and everything has its own beauty". Her responses to other questions I asked showed that she looked beyond her own physical being and that her body often reacted before her mind. She spoke about having confidence in knowing that she is not alone because she will always have God. She kept herself at peace by chanting mantras and could easily connect to her physical being to find a sense of ease.

SW #1 had some great obstacles to overcome including the disappearance of her husband along with their daughter, passports and every other official document. She had no choice but to stay at the shelter for a slightly longer period of time, until the

government was able to issue her a new form of identification and to figure out what to do about her missing child.

She was definitely an inspiring woman who put a strong personal value on life itself. Her long stay at the shelter meant that she had been living at this location the longest of the three women and, as a result, became the dominant figure. She had a clear vision of what she needed and had figured out how to get the two other women to support her decisions. My observation was that the loss of her daughter led her to attempt to take on a mother role to the other women's children, which became apparent during our sessions as a whole group including the children.

After two weeks of us working together, I began to notice that she had a slightly different approach to her body. She said that she was no longer the same woman she had been a few months ago and that what happened to her in the past must stay in the past. She no longer felt the need to tell her story; reliving the experience by verbal communication seemed to make her feel ill. However, as the trust grew between us, she began to want to share her story with me. She wanted me to know the details of what she had experienced in her life and how much it meant to her that I wanted to share my time and passion with the Strong Women. In our last week together, she handed me a written version of her story. She said that it was her first attempt at writing it down and that the movement sessions helped her to further purge it from her body.

Her next step was to learn how to express herself with a new sense of freedom and openness. Throughout our three weeks together, SW#1's personal development had been reflected by her altered movement patterns. She began to clearly demonstrate freedom in her body without thought or hesitation and her requests were unfailingly directed towards a need for release from emotional and physical restraint. Her

personal chosen movements demonstrated liberation in the upper back and triceps brachii muscle with big luscious arms initiated from the scapula area.

#### 2.2.3.2 Strong Woman #2

Strong Woman #2 (SW#2) was without a doubt an amazing woman with much devotion to the world around her. She was born and raised in Pakistan with a family who was unable to provide her with the education she desired and she was therefore never exposed to the English language until she arrived in America just one year ago. The most important element in her life was her teenage daughter who often joined us during our sessions to provide her mother support and translations when required. It was because of her daughter that she was able to get out and find the help that they needed for a safe new beginning.

SW#2 had definite preferences, but did not always feel comfortable enough to share them. It took until the end of our sessions together to learn who she was and what she liked. When asked what her favourite sound was, she replied, "Sad; Emotional which expresses my mood and emotions." She was attracted to triangular shapes and fast movements. For such a shy woman she had chosen to stand very close to centre stage and also preferred a vibrant colour red. She was a well-centered and spatially aware woman who imagined the ground as something secure and safe.

We spent a little time discussing how our bodies feel and what they represent to us. She was always incredibly positive about most things in life and she tended to feel good about her body and believed that she was alive because of her physical shell. Enduring many years of abuse and fear, she became aware of how she reacted to things physically and noticed that her body would often react before her mind. She

associated the word *beautiful* with the word *good* and believed that it is something that comes from within.

The Hijab, a headscarf which covers the hair, neck and shoulders, is most often worn voluntarily when the women are actually given the opportunity to decide whether or not to cover up. Many Muslim women believe that their bodies are only to be of their own private concern and that the Hijab aids in removing any attention given to the physical self. Wearing the Hijab is not necessary within the extended family nor within the company of other women or of small children. This teaches them, whether subconsciously or not, to limit their physical movements and freedom of behaviour.

SW#2 always wore the Hijab during our sessions and around the common areas in the shelter. At times, the headscarf limited certain movements such as head-rotations and body-bends tilting the torso and head. She spent much time adjusting the material over her head as it shifted around when she moved, thus establishing a movement pattern to build into my creation. In our third week of sessions, the group was working on a stretching exercise for their lower backs and SW#2 seamlessly slipped the headscarf away from her body and pushed it off to the side. I purposely did not outwardly acknowledge this action as I did not want to bring any attention to a possible insecurity she might be feeling. She continued to join our group sessions for the final week without her headscarf and I began to notice her movements becoming slightly more released.

Her religious dedication was inspiring and it was fascinating to learn about her beliefs and life structure as built through a life full of culture and tradition. At times she found it difficult to take part in some of the activities during our sessions including having others watch her and especially to have them follow her. She mentioned that

she had never taken on a leadership role before but she eventually worked through her insecurities and found support and satisfaction from those around her.

#### 2.2.3.3 Strong Woman #3

I was informed by the shelter supervisor that there would be another South Asian woman who would be arriving shortly from a first stage shelter; an emergency care facility providing short-term, immediate housing. Strong Woman #3 (SW#3) joined our group for the final two and a half weeks. She brought with her a lack of trust, fragile emotions and distance which I needed to somehow work through in a very short period of time.

SW#3 was an intelligent, educated, well spoken woman with two children under the age of five. She was very direct in her demeanour but could not seem to connect with the other women in the shelter. Her verbal communication remained indifferent, however, her emotional state was made clear to me both by her body language and her written thoughts. Her movements were heavy and sluggish and she had a tendency to hide behind others; demonstrating her feelings of general discomfort.

The questionnaire was a revealing source for SW#3 and helped me to deepen my understanding and approach with her. She was a traditionalist at heart but wanted very much to fit into the North American society. She wore a skirt and shirt outside the shelter but enjoyed wearing a sari for indoor private functions.

Further in this chapter I develop the main theme of my creation which is flight and freedom. While SW#3's favourite sound was birds singing in the morning, interestingly, she would never allow herself any type of freedom; body, mind, work or leisure. I observed much sadness and struggles from depression as she,

understandably, gave priority to her children over maintaining her own health. Many of the days her body felt painful and weak but she remained focused and self contained.

The three main elements I chose to focus on when choreographing the role of SW#3 was the speed at which she liked to move, what the ground represented and the purpose of the body. I noticed that she was always on the go, chasing one child or the other child, coming and going at an incredibly quick pace. When asked what her preferred speed of movement was, she responded, “fast”. In the questionnaire I asked, “What does the ground/floor represent to you?” She answered, “I never thought about that before, so I don’t really know. I’m scared of what I feel.” She believed that her physical being represents herself and that the purpose of her body is “to follow the brain’s instructions and do purposeful activities.

### 2.3 Creation

I developed a movement-based creation integrating four live dancers with a thirty-three minute video. I have created a few pieces in the past which lasted no longer than fifteen minutes each, so one of my goals for this creation was to establish a concrete piece of material lasting at least thirty minutes.

The most riveting expression from the women was their unanimous desire to become birds so that they could be free and fly away. This inspired the underlying theme to my creation and has helped in providing hope and direction to a subject matter that is often represented in a scary and depressing manner.

The goal of art is to influence perception, illuminate and reveal complex issues, and expand vision. Just like science, interpretive inquiry and art both hold innovation and originality as key values. (Van Dyke, 1998: 9)

The piece develops through many layers, physically and emotionally, all directly associated with the women. The observer can find movements and gestures associated to our session time, including those that represent their names, stretches that the women enjoyed repeating, and floor patterns that the women chose to follow. I also explored the women's subconscious gestures or stances that have become a force of habit due to the influence of culture, religion, tradition, education and personal life experiences.

### 2.3.1 Reference points

I made a conscious decision to create moments in my piece that are accessible to the general audience. I used several different methods to make my piece a little more understandable to those who are not accustomed to the language of contemporary dance. I call these creative components, *layman's reference points*. Accessibility is an important component to the purpose of my creation. I felt it was important to share my thoughts on this subject matter with as many people as possible. However, labelled as useful to the layman, I believe that these are the elements which complete a piece and add extra layers essential to the overall vision of my creation.

These layers are added to the soundtrack, the lighting, the costumes, the video, as well as to some of the movements. Examples of this are established with some of my musical choices, either through the mood of the music or with the actual words of the songs as demonstrated with the James Brown song, "This is a man's man's world". I think it is important to try to find components that are familiar to the viewer which will put him/her at ease and allow information to enter through his/her subconscious. I inserted bird cues throughout the piece, for example, the bird that flies in front of the house in the introductory scene of the video, the flock of birds choreographed at the end of the trio, and the song about a bird, "Cucurrucucú Paloma" by Caetano

Veloso. I made a conscious choice of colours to be used in the video, for the costumes, and for the lighting design. The colour red became another reference point for the viewer, as highlighted in the middle section of the video, taking twenty minutes to approach the unknown red dot.

### 2.3.2 Red

On the psycho-spiritual level, this chakra relates to self awareness. That is to say our awareness of ourselves as human beings and our place on earth. It is the area of survival and relates to our basic human instincts of fight or flight. Red gives us courage and strength. The colour relates to stability and security. (Logan-Clark, Valerie. 2006. The Colour Red)

Red is an incredibly beautiful and powerful colour representing an array of different theories, organizations, political parties, and customs. According to Wikipedia, “Red is associated with anger, death, blood, passion and love.” According to the same reference, red is used as a national colour in over fifty countries around the world. This adds layers of meanings and interpretations including courage, leadership, confidence, fear, brutality and resentment. I started my creation believing that red is a symbol of pain and love, a vision mostly expressed in the western world.

As mentioned previously, all three shelter women chose red as their favourite colour and often wore clothing this colour to our sessions. They informed me that they were drawn to this colour as it is considered traditional for Indian brides or married women to wear it. Having heard their stories of bloodshed followed by courage gave me the idea to use red as a subconscious element in my piece.

There are three definitive examples of the strong representation of this colour during my creation. A red pouch can be found in the introductory scene of the video as all of the female participants are carrying it somewhere on their bodies. In the middle

section of the video, I am wrapped in a large red sheet which is only visible as a red dot until zoomed in enough to see my body as well. Symbolically I am wrapped in blood from the physical abuse, carrying pride on my shoulders with protection for my children and am considered a married woman by society even after divorce. The least obvious of colour stimulus is with my lighting design. In the middle section of my creation, I opted for a strong red formation, analogous to prison bars during the climactic trio, "Can You Hear Me".

### 2.3.3 Soundtrack

Music is an integral part of my creative process as well as part of the final product. I am a firm believer in the connection between music and movement and do not often opt for silence during my creations. I understand that music can actually give meaning where it need not be but it can also be used as a tool to enhance and highlight specific elements. The reason for my choice to use some recognizable music pieces was to give the opportunity to the audience to take a minute to sit back and enjoy the movement. Without much conscious thought, the viewers could then easily understand a choreographic component of my message and perhaps see the correlation between the movements and the emotional content unfolding before their eyes.

The video and the soundtrack were created together as one unit which would then give the basic outline to the entire structure of the piece. The videographer, Livienne H el ene C esar Grenier, works in a very rhythmical way as she edits each scene and transition to specific counts in the music. This editing technique enhanced the overall feel of my creation and generated a full sensation on all levels for the viewer.

The list of musicians included in my creation is diverse: Blahzay Blahzay, James Brown, Rebekah Del Rio, Ani DiFranco, M.I.A., Me'Shell NdegéOcello, Alice Russell, Nitin Sawhney, Tellu, Caetano Veloso, and Interviews with Arundhati Roy. I provide a brief description, below, of each of the musicians included in my sound score as well as my reasoning for why I chose them or the specific piece of music. (Listed in Alphabetical order)

#### 2.3.3.1 Blahzay Blahzay

Blahzay Blahzay are known for their harsh hip hop beats and vulgar lyrics. This all male group has only one album, *Blah Blah Blah* which was released in 1996. The song “Danger” became popular among the New York hip hop community as well as the mainstream music industry. The words in this song were written using the premise of New York’s opposing gangs with the threat of violence. The chorus repeats these words, “When the East is in the house; Oh, my God; Danger! When the West is in the House; Oh, my God; Danger!” The concept of danger is a reality in the lives of the three women I worked with in the shelter, as is their immigration issue regarding a clash of cultures, East versus West.

#### 2.3.3.2 James Brown

The late James Brown was a well known musician both for his professional success as well as his turbulent private life. His reputation as a Black American musical genius and the “father of soul” has been scarred by several legal entanglements including domestic violence charges back in 2004. Since its release in 1966, the song “This is a man’s man’s world”, has been heard numerous times by people around the world. I have become quite familiar with the tune and have often found myself thoroughly enjoying its rhythm without realizing what the song was really about. It is

a catchy, recognisable tune with a clear idea about women versus men, relevant to my research and creation. This is a very distinct reference point used to grab the viewer's attention, making them feel comfortable while illustrating the well masked male dominance in our society.

#### 2.3.3.3 Rebekah Del Rio

Del Rio began her professional music career when she was just 11 years old in her hometown of San Diego, California. Her pure and powerful voice struck me immediately as one which must be included in my piece. Beauty within sadness is the focal point of her sound which resonates with the first set of characteristics I discovered with the participants.

The song I chose to use is called "Llorando", originally sung by Roy Orbison in English titled, "Crying". This song is so compelling and rings true for all of us who have experienced tears over a loved one. I imagined this song would be extremely complimentary to the final video scene with its powerful female voice, the simplicity of the sound as well as the words being so relevant to the emotions experienced by all who took part in my study.

#### 2.3.3.4 Ani DiFranco

I have been listening to Ani DiFranco for a number of years and seem to have been attracted to her music around the same time I began the training program to work in women's shelters. She has multi-faceted ethnic roots, with an Italian-American father and an American-Jewish mother. She is a feminist who speaks up about how the political situation in North America has had a negative impact on the growth of

women's issues. Her lyrics touch on a number of subjects which she believes need more awareness and further study to initiate a change.

In 1994, Difrano released a CD titled *Out of Range* with a focus on the many struggles of relationships. Her song "You had time" demonstrates her own personal relationship-struggles within the first minute of the instrumental introduction. She continues, through her lyrics, to explore the emotional distress that one goes through once released from a negative partnership. I felt that the most compelling part of this song was the introduction, which I chose to use during the water scene in the video. The aspects of questioning and disturbance are also seen through the visual component in my video; rippling waves and water's unknown depths.

#### 2.3.3.5 M.I.A.

Maya Arulpragasam is a Sri Lankan activist and feminist who uses her musical talent to get her voice heard by a large number of individuals. She has a very typical East meets West mentality, is clear with her anti-war views, but never claims to know the only truth and she does not advocate war in any fashion. She was born in the United Kingdom but lived in Sri Lanka for much of her youth where her father was one of the founding members of the Tamil Tigers. The song "Sunshowers" is from her first album titled, *Arular*, the nickname for her father during his rebel years. I chose this song mostly for its strong political message expressed with such joy and catchy rhythms. This is exactly how I wanted to get across the message of domestic violence; showing a positive outcome rather than a negative one.

### 2.3.3.6 Me'Shell NdegéOcello

For many years and for many reasons, I have been attracted to the music of Me'Shell NdegéOcello. American born, she is a proud feminist and converted to Islam several years back. I have heard other musicians refer to her as their inspiration as she creates sounds that replicate struggles as well as triumphs. She translates the Black American experience through her musical scores. Her music had a definite role during my journey with the women. I would quite often listen to her songs before the sessions at the shelter as a form of inspiration and I would again listen after the sessions to recollect my observations from that day.

I chose four pieces of music by NdegéOcello, “Papillon” and “Eve” joined together with Amelia’s solo. “Wasted Time”, is a song I consciously selected to accompany my solo which I explain in detail further in this chapter. The fourth piece I included in the *REturn* soundtrack is titled “Adam”, and is found in the concluding video segment, aptly placed to adjoin the concept of the first known relationship between a woman and a man. Coincidentally, her name NdegéOcello means “free like a bird”.

### 2.3.3.7 Arundhati Roy

Arundhati Roy has been one of the most influential women in my life to date. She is an incredible Indian writer with the talent and desire to touch on a diverse range of subjects including, political and social activism, feminism and eloquent fictional stories based on facts about South Asia and the people. She travels the world giving speeches and offering compelling arguments about issues which drive her. I have listened to many of her interviews and talks and felt it necessary to somehow include her in my creation. I chose to integrate two very short interview segments that I found quite gripping; the first one I used to show the vulnerability of the female voice and

the second one offers a powerful sound. The second clip used at the end of my solo could possibly be considered a little over-dramatic. However, I do believe that it is essential to hear the reality of certain situations in order to grasp full comprehension. These two little segments are discussed further in Act One and Act Three of the Video component.

#### 2.3.3.8 Alice Russell

Alice Russell is a British soul singer who has performed with a variety of musical groups including The Quantic Soul Orchestra, The White Stripes, and Kushti as well as having a successful solo career. I did not choose her music for her political views but solely for the power of her voice and the melodic content of her music. She has the ability to draw out strong emotional reactions from most of her listeners. Some of her fans have stated that her music raises hairs on the back of their necks and therefore I've incorporated her music into my piece as another example of a layman's reference point.

#### 2.3.3.9 Nitin Sawhney

Nitin Sawhney is a British multi-instrumental musician, as well as a DJ, producer, writer, and an activist. Originally from India, he has Eastern cultural experience which comes through in his music both rhythmically as well as in the lyrics. He also has classical music training in both Eastern and Western forms, moulding the fusion sound very distinct to Sawhney's style.

I chose two pieces by Nitin Sawhney, "Tides" and "Nadia" from the album *Beyond Skin* released in 1999. "Tides" is a song about nuclear testing in the South Pacific, expressing a sense of disturbance against a sense of serenity due to such activities.

This was reminiscent of the lives of the women from the shelter; once the damage has been done, it will always exist, even though the damage can be repressed below the calm surface of a woman's demeanour. The song "Nadia" is a soft and somewhat sultry Indian sounding piece mixing traditional sounds of a classical singer with added electronic beats. The title of this song has four different meanings in Hindi: Joy, God Vishnu, a son and a type of musical pipe with a two-sided edge, similar to the awkward beauty of the three women.

#### 2.3.3.10 Tellu

Tellu is a contemporary singer and fiddler from Koskenpää, Finland. She is nationally popular but has not had the opportunity to be heard on a more international level, therefore, much of her music is not easily accessible. I was introduced to her music through a friend who had randomly received a mixed CD of female artists from Finland. The distinctive "throat singing" sound of Tellu's voice is astounding and fascinating which added a refreshing spark to my soundtrack, *REturn*. Her song "Manaus: Word Of Incantation" resonates with the clatter of several women discussing intense issues at the same time.

#### 2.3.3.11 Caetano Veloso

"I make my records as a painter would paint his canvas." (Watrous, 1992)

Born in Bahia, Brazil in 1942, Caetano Veloso is a widely recognized and extremely established musician. His music has been largely influenced by the politics of his time nationally and internationally. He fought primarily against the Military Dictatorship of his country and then also had problems with the Brazilian socialist party for which he spent some time in jail; he was ultimately exiled to London. He

expresses himself and his views on certain issues through his music. “Cucurrucucú Paloma” is the story of a man who dies from a mortal passion as he cries “Ay, ay, ay, ay!”. It turns out that his soul becomes reincarnated as a dove that flies to his love’s window everyday. This enhances the bird concept that was integral to my experience in the shelter and Veloso adds yet another international layer to my creation.

## 2.4 Video

### 2.4.1 The purpose of video

I opted to include video in my creation mainly because video is a powerful tool that I always wanted to experience. I spent several years learning the ins and outs of dance, choreography and the body in connection with music and space. I was determined to integrate the art of film either during the process or in the outcome of my creation and as it turned out, the video became an integral part of both my process and my presentation of *REturn*.

It is known that “99 percent of households possess at least one television and the average American watches more than 4 hours of TV each day” (Herr, Norman. 2001. p 1). We watch movies, play video games, look at pictures through a screen, and experience endless hours online in cyberspace. Because we have taken this activity to extremes, our eyes and minds seem to be much more attracted to visual stimulation of the video screen than that of living bodies sharing our space.

The influence of television and commercialism on domestic violence has also taken a role in my choice for using video. According to the 2001 Sourcebook for Teaching Science, “the number of violent acts seen on TV by age 18 is approximately 200,000”. The exposure desensitizes us to violence, almost to the point of pure

acceptance. As an alternative, one of my goals was to give everyone a chance to experience thirty-three minutes of meditation time during which a large video screen would help take the viewers on a similar journey as the one I had experienced.

#### 2.4.2 Concept

The general concept for the video is a summary of my research project in the shelter with the three women and their children. I examined all of the key elements that were essential to their growth as well as my own and formed a collection of thoughts and ideas, descriptive of our process together. The entire film lasts thirty-three minutes with the live dancers performing for twenty minutes of that time.

There are three very distinct sections within the video, separated by moments of stillness or darkness. These moments of closure, best described as black-outs, have been inserted in order to give our eyes, ears, and mind a chance to readjust. The film is in no way meant to startle, shock, or make the viewer feel uncomfortable. It is a story of the journey of four women together and alone who are transforming and blossoming into hope and beauty after experiencing such ugliness and horror.

#### 2.4.3 Videographer - Livienne H el ene C esar Grenier

The video was filmed and edited by Livienne H el ene C esar Grenier, a visual artist recently graduated with a BA from UQAM. She was born in Haiti and at age four was adopted into a Quebec family. She has a strong focus in video production and a keen interest in women's rights. Her artistic focus examines the relationships between people in different environmental contexts.

With the expertise that Livienne brought to the video production, I was able to give her visuals, and a description of my concept, and fully trust that she would process it in a creative and thoughtful manner. She has an incredible ear for the integration of music with picture and helped to ensure that my video had rhythm and flow. We included several techniques through the “Avid” editing program such as fading, left and right track shifting, speed changes, and superimposing, to name a few. These options helped us to soften the tones and give the film a sense of flow and calm essential to the general undertones throughout my creation.

#### 2.4.4 Understanding the video element

##### 2.4.4.1 Act I – “The unspoken *ugly*”

The basic idea of the introductory video section comes from the age old saying, “don’t judge a book by its cover”. You will notice at the very beginning of the film there is a panning down from the hopeful sky, past some tree branches, and onto the front of a very pristine house looking as though it is frozen in time past. A key element during this scene can only be noted if observed closely; it was actually edited in a reversed format. This is quite noticeable when the bird flies backwards across the picture and actually sets up the underlying theme throughout my entire creation, *the freedom in flight*, and not always knowing which way is forward.

##### 2.4.4.1.1 Scene I

The scene initially begins in black with just the sound of an international radio interview with Arundhati Roy. The interview is as follows:

Interviewer: If you are on your own as a woman, which is a special situation. I suppose that not only in India but being a woman on your own anywhere is something to deal with.

Roy: ya...(she gets interrupted by the interviewer)

Interviewer: I imagine that being in India

Roy: I ummm... (she gets interrupted by the interviewer)

Interviewer: There's something about that?

Roy: Ya. Well, I uhum... (Roy, 2004: 18)

This interview excerpt demonstrates the male dominating voice over a woman's right to speak up. This is my own personal perception since the whole interview was created to increase the awareness of civil liberties. Roy is widely recognized for her strident views on gender equality but somehow this moment illustrates her voice as being weak and hesitant. I established this moment in the video to display an image of my participants' inability to express themselves. The viewer sits in darkness and must only listen.

As the video continues, we then allow our eyes and bodies to fall into the screen as we observe a journey from the sky signifying hope, promise and purity. Once established, an a cappella tune by Alice Russell joins us in welcoming the viewer into the home, beyond its exterior as seen in the opening scene. We created an echoing sound effect with this piece of music entitled "Somebody's gonna love ya" adding depth and intrigue. We also experienced this feeling when looking down a long and narrow hallway with endless amounts of closed doors and each footstep echoing louder than the previous.

In order to draw in the attention of the viewer from the very beginning I chose to set up the creation with video and in this way shared my view and perception of my subject matter. This prepared the audience fully to share the journey of the live dancers; four diverse women who came together for a few short weeks in 2006. I was

able to clearly portray the elements of my direction with the two art forms most accessible to the general population; music and film.

The first image is a lovely house located in downtown Montreal. This beautifully well kept home is exquisite on the exterior but as we open the scene to the rear of the building, we see the raw and the unsheltered truth to what really goes on behind those pristine closed doors. I chose to film this section at the beginning of spring when garbage is now reappearing after being hidden under all of the snow and ice for so many months. The dirt and grime added to the desired rough quality as did the overcast day which assisted in the creation of a melancholy ambiance.

#### 2.4.4.1.2 Scene II

As we enter Scene Two of Act One, we now begin to experience a little ugliness which I showed by filming the dirty objects in the alley such as old mattresses, broken glass and a few indescribable items. There are many women who walk around with pride and promise but are often feeling lost and terrified demonstrating powerfully vulnerable bodies. There is no possible way to determine who is suffering from the inside, but we seem to still maintain a justification to our judgements. As previously noted, physical abuse is not the only type of abuse but is the most tangible.

I was fortunate to find some incredible women who supported my research project and volunteered to take part in one section of the film; I will refer to them as the “walkers”. There were four single women between the ages of 20 and 30; Mélanie Bernard, Annick Lavallée-Benny, Livienne Hélène César Grenier, Annie Zielinski. The three other walkers brought in the aspect of a family with three generations of women. There was Anne Dryburgh, her daughter Amelia Dryburgh-Bouchard and

Anne's mother Rachel Dufour, which really added another dimension to the wide range of individuals affected by domestic violence.

I asked the walkers in my video to wear their personal everyday fashion to ensure that bare skin was not overly exposed. My goal was to show their vulnerable bodies without *stripping* the concept too far which would in turn, unnecessarily sexualize the concept of the video. The walkers in my video were chosen based on their interest in the project, their ability to expose their vulnerability, and they all carried a style of *normalcy* overlying a truth hidden just below the surface. I was successful in finding a group of females from a variety of life backgrounds and an age range covering various generations.

I subtly placed on each walker a little red and gold sack attached to different places on their bodies symbolizing their painful secrets they carry around with them daily. The little girl is playing with her sack with beautiful naivety, as she unknowingly faces what the present and future have to offer her. She is trusting of the people around her while she continues to fill the little sack with different emotions and experiences. She is oblivious to the impact they have on her future.

A piece of music named "This is a man's man's world" by James Brown accompanies these ladies as they reveal their own personal realisation of such facts. We watch the women walking away from us, as well as towards us, as they contemplate the very meaning of being a woman in today's society. The walkers used their own past experiences to access their thoughts and perceptions of their female bodies in the space offered during our afternoon together. There were a few tears shed, as well as much laughter and occasional wise words shared between the women. This reminded me very much of the experience I had working with the three

women and their children in the shelter. This connection was, therefore, an essential element which needed to be included in my creation.

The imprisoned lives led by abused women are represented by the metal bars, seen in a variety of forms. Towards the beginning, the women stroll past bar-secured windows and the little girl innocently manoeuvres herself around such barriers without any concern of challenge. As this section builds, the location moves closer to the rear of the house where the images of caged women have been inserted. Here, Blazay, Blazay's raw hip hop beats in "Danger" have been interwoven with the softer tones of James Brown, offering us the male perspective on the realities of a patriarchal society. This musical layering effect was added to emphasise the harsh ambiance, creating a disturbing sound and distraction akin to delusional thought. The visual element fades to black as the sound clarifies and we are left in the dark with a sense of *danger*.

This section runs for nearly 5 minutes which I've used to introduce my theme and gather the viewer's attention. The visual and sound choices for this section were kept for the most part, within the same frame as the rest of the creation. However, I wanted to create a slightly disturbing quality and therefore, this section has become notably distinct and has a feel somewhat different from the rest of the piece.

#### 2.4.4.2 Act II

##### 2.4.4.2.1 Scene I

My goal in this section was to demonstrate the process that I personally endured during my field study. It is the story of my journey from the minute I walked in the door of the shelter to my departure one month later. This middle section has several

layers added one on top of the other creating a simple and meditative vision. The complexity is such that one is only able to take in its simplicity.

This scene was filmed by a large pond nestled among the trees and wildlife in the Parc du Mont St. Bruno just outside of Montreal, Quebec. I discovered a location by the water which could be filmed from various angles to enhance the illusion of being alone in this large world. The surrounding water demonstrated an aspect of purity and slowly developed into a sense of cleansing, for both the body and the soul. We are shown that among such natural beauty exists much ugliness which should not be reinforced by our own negativity. We filmed in the very beginning of spring when rainy days predominated. The skies were a dull grey and the earth was soft and moist. The subtle greens pushing through the dormant earthy tones represented a form of rebirth and resurrection as experienced through my process with the women.

One of the most difficult aspects to create during this frigid time was my concept of real time. The challenge of outdoor filming became rather unsettling since we had limited time and resources. We eventually created a rain cover for the camera, and we went ahead with our plans to depict my journey during my days spent in the shelter with the women. The idea of this section was developed in order to take the audience on a similar journey to that which I had experienced several months before. The temperature was cool for Livienne's fingers as she manipulated the camera making it difficult, at times, to access all of the tools offered by such an elaborate machine. Due to the weather conditions, my initial plan to film thirty minutes of real time was shortened to seventeen minutes, which was then extended to twenty minutes using a speed-altering tool in "Avid".

I used physical distance and colour to help the viewer focus on a red dot that was unidentifiable at this early stage in the video. As time passes, we begin to approach

this red dot. Without knowing when or how, the viewer is brought close to a red cloth covering a woman, otherwise known as *Sameena*. This represented the journey I experienced with the women in the shelter. It was a slow process to get close to them, but I eventually gained their complete trust and honesty. This scene lasted twenty minutes concluding with a view of *Sameena* from the back, limiting the viewers' image of this person by keeping her somewhat veiled.

#### 2.4.4.3 Act III – “Up, up and away”

This final section of the creation was established through the exploration of physical and emotional freedom, developed within an eight minute video. It takes us beyond the visible shell of the human body and brings our attention to the innermost workings of the emotional being. The transition from Act Two to Act Three is a fade-out to complete darkness returning to the words of Arundhati Roy. However, she is now speaking loudly and sharing the harsh realities of violence towards women in South Asia.

I know that many people who are here know about it but many of our friends outside, I don't think, are aware of the horrors that were visited on the women. Many don't know that Muslim women were taken out, gang raped and burnt alive. Many don't know that pregnant women had their stomachs slit open and their foetuses taken out and held up.... (Roy, 2004: 20)

The soundtrack for this section includes a Me'Shell NdegéOcello piece titled “Adam” as a follow-up to the song “Eve” used during Amelia's solo, encapsulating the simplicity that once existed between a man and a woman. This piece flows into “Llorando”, an a cappella Spanish version of “Crying” which added a cross-cultural layer that women around the world have experienced, and continue to experience, domestic violence. The following musical choice, “Cucurrucucú Paloma” is the beautiful story of a bird, again sung in Spanish. Caetano Veloso's voice is gentle and

kind, redefining the image of violent men, established from the harsh sounds of Blahzay, Blahzay used in Act One. The final piece of music leading us into the sky is the upbeat “Sunshowers” by the South Asian social activist M.I.A.

I have subdivided this section into three scenes for analysis, although, as a creative video segment, it was envisioned as one whole Act. The first scene takes us through our skin and into the emotional turmoil that exists among survivors of domestic violence. Scene two is a developmental journey to reach freedom. Scene three is the realization of independence.

#### 2.4.4.3.1 Scene I

The scene opens with a shedding of the red cover and displays the skin of my back for all to see. The camera slowly zooms in to the point at which we are able to see my pores which have evolved, by video technique, into an inanimate object removed from its usual reference. My shoulder blades begin to move underneath my skin but all one is able to see is a peculiar shape moving around behind some type of cover.

Livienne and I experimented with varying speeds of the video, ranging from real time to extreme slow motion in order to capture the subtleties of the human body. I wanted to show that our bodies are strong and capable, yet somehow they remain vulnerable and delicate. The film then looks beyond the skin and is able to see the struggles that exist within the physical body. This becomes apparent when the viewer sees through my back to a quick, superimposed image of my face which appears as a preview of the final scene. My arms and upper body build in height, volume and intensity throughout this sequence until eventually I am lifted from my perched position on a rock.

#### 2.4.4.3.2 Scene II

This brief segment begins with my standing on the edge of the water as if I am just about ready to fly away. Due to the cold and wet weather, the miniature peninsula on which we were filming was covered in mud and chilly water. It was therefore necessary for me to wear my boots which took away from the luscious image we were attempting to create. With some creative reorganizing, we discovered a possible solution would be to film from the torso up. This brought further attention towards the upper body and actually gives the illusion that I am standing on the water.

I now wanted to reveal the women's result of hard work and preparation to become independent, perhaps for the first time in their lives. The reality of the video seemed a little raw and dark for the impression I aimed for, so I chose to layer the film with a special effect called, "metallic" leaving the picture brighter and somewhat dream-like. This coating added a bit of distance from the actual past and opened the door to a brighter future.

#### 2.4.4.3.3 Scene III

The final scene of my creation is a representation of awakening dreams and positive growth, leaving the viewers with a sense of hope. The video component lasts thirty-three minutes and the viewer has not yet been able to see a clear image of my face on the screen until this final segment in the conclusion. I slowly turn to face the camera and am trembling from the cold, giving the illusion of unease and fear. I release my arms from the introverted hug into the bird-like movement developed by SW#1, SW#2 and SW#3. My arms are placed in a V shape above my head and begin to morph into wings. The camera begins to scan up towards the sky, slowly passing my arms, hands and fingertips until the screen is completely white.

This final image with the upbeat music is intended to complete the creation with the idea that change is possible and domestic violence will not prevail. However, during my research I became more pessimistic about the possibility of ending violence towards women, especially in South Asia. No matter how much effort I put into positive visions, it seems that my piece could be interpreted otherwise. If I draw special attention to the final scene as the camera is scanning upwards, it may give the illusion that I am drowning, since the well-established image of water begins to disappear from our vision and my fingertips continue to reach.

## 2.5 Dancers

Amelia Griffin, Martine Larochelle and Julie Anne Ryan were the movement interpreters for my thesis creation, *REturn*. I began this part of the process knowing that I had chosen two dancers who were young and inexperienced but what they did have was a desire to participate. Their determination and dedication was refreshing, not only to me, but also in their approach to the subject matter. None of them had ever visited a women's shelter or experienced what happens there, but they were willing to immerse themselves in unfamiliar material.

Each dancer represented one of the three women I worked with in the shelter during my research. I represented myself through our journey. It was important to me that my choreography and other creative components represent the women and their experiences without the dancers having to act or pretend to be someone else. I had decided to share with each dancer, two or three details about their correlating participant to give them something to work with. Beyond that, it was my duty to develop the creation with the characters and depth, authentic to the real experiences of the Strong Women.

Amelia was informed of how SW#1 was currently engaged in a custody battle with her husband after he fled the country with their daughter. This naturally left SW#1 in a state of confusion with much sadness. I chose to inform Martine of the seventeen years of abuse experienced by SW#2 and how she held onto her religious faith as a coping mechanism. I had a difficult time trying to express in words to Julie Anne the main focus of her character as SW#3 was much more reserved but communicated tremendously through her body language. However, through Julie Anne's personal experience with our creative process, she actually gained the information required without much verbal explanation. This concept will be elaborated in the section titled "Julie Anne".

#### 2.5.1 Amelia Griffin

Amelia Griffin is a recent graduate of The School of Dance's Professional Training Programme in Modern Dance. She also trained in The School's Professional Ballet Training Programme. While in the Modern programme, she performed in pieces by Michael Trent, Karen Guttman, Julia Sasso and Brian Webb, among others. Amelia has performed in the two Canada Dance Festivals as part of the student showcases: in 2004 she performed in a duet by Sylvie Desrosiers and in 2006, in a piece by Paul-Andre Fortier and also in a student-commissioned piece by fellow graduate Martine Larochelle. Amelia recently moved to Montreal and is looking forward to dancing more in her new city.

I chose Amelia to represent SW#1 because I noticed some similar traits and actions between them. They were both the first people to arrive at my workspace, either at the sessions in the shelter or at my rehearsals with the dancers. They both saw life in a positive fashion and at times mentioned feeling a sense of sadness or confusion. They are very different individuals who both felt loss, confusion, emptiness and fear, but for completely different reasons.

During the first few rehearsals I had with Amelia we spent much time discussing the concept of and the realities of being a woman. I asked her a number of questions about the topic of who she was. These included what it means to her to be a woman, how she feels around men, how she interprets the word *pain*, both physically and emotionally, what her name means to her, and what her concept is of a feminine movement quality.

### 2.5.2 Martine Larochelle

Martine Larochelle is a recent graduate of the Professional Training Programme in Modern Dance at The School of Dance in Ottawa. In 2006, she received a grant for a student creation as part of the Canada Dance Festival in Ottawa. She has an undergraduate degree in communications and is exploring the links between dance and media.

Dealing with any type of turmoil varies from individual to individual and is not always apparent to those around them; Martine's quiet struggles were similar to those expressed by SW#2. SW#2 had a reserved movement quality but once she began trusting our group she would occasionally demonstrate a raw openness; physical and emotional freedom often seen in children. This was a similar approach Martine had taken throughout our process and I had decided to incorporate it into the piece.

There were a few times during the shelter sessions when SW#2 would try to convince me that what we were doing was somehow going against Allah and therefore she was unable to continue coming to the sessions. I understood her concerns and respected her choices. We would discuss her concerns and I would clearly explain my research, reassuring her that participation in these sessions was completely optional and I would never force anyone to join if they were not comfortable. We were a group of

women exploring ways to redefine our physical being through movement and personal expression.

Martine's journey throughout our time together was somewhat similar to my time with her counterpart, in that I spent much time explaining and supporting. She is a warm-hearted woman who was struggling with the role dance played in her life. She didn't agree with many of the politics we face in the dance world, such as the fact that the university's budget would not fund any dancers for a creation but would support most other collaborators. This was bothersome enough to make her doubt whether she could take part in this project. I took her concerns to heart and tried to find ways to accommodate her needs. Eventually, we were able to work through all of the issues and what came out was an emotionally driven production, equal to that of the shelter experience as well as the creative process.

### 2.5.3 Julie Anne Ryan

Julie Anne Ryan received her professional dance training under the direction of Sylvie Desrosiers in the Professional Training Programme in Modern Dance at The School of Dance in Ottawa. Since graduating from the programme, she has furthered her training with Peter Boneham, Artistic Director of Le Groupe Dance Lab, and through workshops and master classes with many other choreographers and teachers from Ottawa to Vancouver. Active on the local dance scene, she has collaborated on numerous local performance projects as a choreographer, rehearsal director or administrator. Julie Anne teaches modern dance to teenagers and adults at The School of Dance. She also devotes part of her time to studying translation at the Université du Québec en Outaouais, with the future goal of specializing in dance writing and translation.

In my search for appropriate dancers, I was drawn to Julie Anne's energetic movement qualities. Julie Anne thinks of the ground as representing support and she considers her body as her personal responsibility. Her natural movement flow alternates between two extremes; quick/abrupt and slow/gentle. This was similar to the daily non-stop action of SW#3. Given the opportunity to breathe, both SW#3 and Julie Anne welcomed the moments of calm. When I asked Julie Anne where her favourite spot on stage is, she replied, "Anywhere I'm asked to go." This brought awareness to the fact that dancers are always being directed and are not often given the opportunity to choose or voice their opinions. This correlated to what the Strong Women had experienced with their partners, and provided a major link between both forms of disciplinary action.

It was mid-way through the rehearsal process when Julie Anne joined Amelia and Martine in representing one of the Strong Women. This drew another common thread between Julie Anne and SW#3, who joined the movement sessions slightly later than the two other Strong Women. Integrating into an active circle of individuals could potentially be more stressful and could be the reason for the two women's quiet demeanour and overall feelings of discomfort. Amelia and Martine had already processed through their emotional character leading into the movement vocabulary. Julie Anne, however, did not have the same amount of time to develop her internal dialogue and relied solely on my direction. While I was guiding Julie Anne through the choreography, I noticed that it was not necessary to delve into SW#3's life story to establish a connection. This gave her more distance from the choreography than Amelia and Martine, and ultimately created ideal relationships between the dancers, relative to that of the Strong Women.

## 2.6 Choreography

The choreography was developed with the aid of an observational chart (Appendix A) which I created for my shelter research. My observations of the Strong Women included physical movements and gestures during our movement sessions in the shelter as well as during their everyday lives. I included, in my analysis, their religious and cultural influences of Islam, Hinduism and living in South Asia, which affected their stance, gestures and daily routine as well as most subconscious behaviour. As noted in the previous chapter, it is possible that our body language tells the story of how and where we grew up. I noticed this mostly when the women were interacting amongst each other, for example, while they were making some tea, their weight shifted smoothly with careful hands, exuding ease and comfort. Throughout my creation, I used these direct visual cues, and at other times I opted to use the core element behind these actions.

I began my choreographic process using my own body to dissect and develop the movement vocabulary explored during my time spent in the women's shelter. The primary elements I chose to focus on at the beginning of my studio time were the idea of birds, flight, and freedom, the women's physical names, and the emotional state of each person involved.

The introduction of live dancers to the stage was a rather large challenge. I asked myself many questions regarding their entrance, position, movement and most importantly, the purpose of their presence. I decided to refer back to the first day I entered the shelter and bring out the most important elements of that time. Most notably, I recalled my feelings of excitement, confusion, fear, and eventually comfort. There was one Strong Woman waiting for our session who mentioned how eager she was to begin the process.

Rather than using the obvious elements of the Strong Women's physical bodies to be portrayed by my dancers, I integrated other symbolic elements to show the subconscious actions or reactions of these individuals. This was often accomplished by putting the viewer in the position of the women without his awareness. One example of this can be noticed during the "Ashamed Legs" section when all dancers were lying on the floor at a distance from the seated members in the room while performing small and simple movements of the legs. The concept of lowered eyes was essential during my process but I chose this point to allow for the viewers to experience a form of submissive behaviour forcing them to lower their eyes and heads in order for them to be able to properly observe the dancers at the low and distant angle. Additionally, the awkward yet sensuous feel they carried through their lower bodies represented a disassociation between their souls and their exterior body while being battered or raped.

Amelia began upstage left in close proximity to the large projection screen, which acted as a backdrop. As such, the images were projected onto her body. We were able to angle the projection downwards to splash the images out onto the floor beyond the available back space. This technique created a slight 3D image and added depth, intrigue and a visual connection between the dancers and the video. This was seen quite noticeably in the trio of backs during Martine's solo, during the ashamed legs section, and also during my solo.

I discovered two time lines during my creative process with the video which became an integral part to my creation. I perceived video to represent what has already been experienced as opposed to live performance which symbolized emotions being expressed in real time.

### 2.6.1 Amelia's solo – "SAD"

Amelia began the live dance section with her solo representing Strong Woman #1 (who was always the first one to join the movement sessions in the shelter). Her initial movement is one which demonstrates confusion due to a loss of direction. She looks different ways which her body may or may not follow and eventually picks a direction not knowing if this is the best choice. This hesitant choice leads her into the main concept of her character development, which is a floor pattern spelling out the word "SAD".

She begins by shaping out the letter "S" in her continued search for the right direction completing the first letter with a heavy feeling allowing gravity to take control. Next, like a panther cautious of the danger that may appear, Amelia moves low to the ground, writing out the letter "A". She fights the heaviness in her body to a standing position where the flow of life is finally allowed to take her for an airy journey patterning the letter "D", passing by the two other participants who have now joined her on stage. The other women represent themselves and their attempts to help when one woman feels *SAD* or lonely.

Amelia is exhausted and takes the time to catch her breath. This movement was based on an actual breathing exercise practiced during our sessions in the shelter. Amelia's breath created an undulation in her chest which increased in volume throughout the rest of the body until her weight thrusts forward representing another big step towards healing. She continues her healing process and reaches out further while forming the same image of hands into the sky as seen in the final scene of the video.

SW#1 was womanly, with a curvaceous body and rounded movement qualities. I chose to explore this characteristic through Amelia's repetition of an exaggerated

figure eight hip action, gradually increasing in speed. At this point Martine becomes inspired by Amelia and joins in to begin the healing process. The two dancers simultaneously fall and roll forward and are immediately pulled back again into another fall and roll in the opposite direction. Any major changes in one's life after experiencing trauma will likely result in tumultuous transitions, as demonstrated by the dancers' repeated falls.

The first musical accompaniment to this solo is an excerpt from a jazz-influenced piece by Me'Shell NdegéOcello called "Papillon", French for butterfly. The music, that suggests the insect's transition from confinement to freedom, leads naturally to the bird and flight imagery prevalent in my choreography. The next song, by the same musician, is appropriately entitled "Eve" as the first woman is sharing her journey. This instrumental piece is a beautiful song with a slightly eerie and dark tone adding an extra layer to the vision as a whole. Amelia's breathing section is being supported by an excerpt from Ani DiFranco's simple piano sounds in "You had Time".

#### 2.6.2 Martine's solo – "17 years"

There were several defining characteristics or moments from SW#2 which I felt were integral to her representation in this creation. No matter how badly SW#2 was feeling that day, she would always tell me that she was doing well. Fortunately, because of my focus towards body language, I could usually see beyond the verbal, and truly understand when she was having a bad day. I experienced a similar process with Martine as she attempted to show that she was fully capable of handling all of her life's current pressures.

I found that both Martine and SW#2 often tried to give of themselves without having anything left to offer. Dealing with any type of turmoil varies from individual to

individual and is not always outwardly apparent to those around them. Martine's quiet struggles were similar to those expressed by SW#2. With the established analysis of my participants, I was easily able to incorporate gestures and stances characteristic to the individual. However, finding dancers with some similar traits, ideas, or dancers who would possibly have the depth to create it, was definitely an essential step for this creation.

This section was developed with great difficulty as the movements were contrary to that of my natural flow. This somewhat awkward style was necessary to give accuracy to the journey experienced by the represented participant. It was clear to me that Martine's demeanour would allow my choreographic plans to shine and I would likely not need to adjust my movement vocabulary to accommodate her ways.

The main concept for Martine's solo was the number seventeen. SW#2 had endured seventeen years of physical, verbal and emotional abuse which had undoubtedly impacted her personality. I noticed certain physical qualities which could have been established pre- or post- marriage but were nonetheless distinct to her persona.

At the beginning of her solo, Martine stands up and begins SW#2's story: as the years accumulate, her body is no longer able to hold in the pain and suffering. This is represented by slow, angular movements that bring Martine down to the floor, a symbolic metamorphosis, as the music volume is turned down so that it is no longer audible to the audience, though it continues to play. I chose to have the dance go on in silence to open the space for breath and quiet thoughts. However, by allowing the music to progress at an inaudible volume, rather than stopping it completely, it allowed both the creation and the music to continue moving in sync. Once Martine shared her saga from the past seventeen years, the volume returned to its original level. The sound effect created a feeling as if an eternity has passed but we've missed

nothing. The viewer also experiences the passing of time which has given one an opportunity to hear the struggles within the silence.

SW#2 was a simple woman who wanted happiness for everyone else. She rarely felt that she needed to express her own feelings. Through our process at the shelter she was able to attain a comfort level within the group and eventually remove her head scarf. This allowed for new physical freedom and thus a new-found enthusiasm for movement. Her personality blossomed, her beauty began to shine and her expressive self was unleashed. Her signature movement was her arms held in a high V-shape as her hands briskly jiggled. She thought this an appropriate representation of how she just wanted to rid herself of any tension and negativity.

Nitin Sawhney's song titled "Tides" accompanies this section, moving in sync with the rippling water in the video. This gave all the more reason to incorporate the contrasting, quirky movements as established through SW#2's style. I maintained a feeling of calm throughout the video and music which offset a feeling of discomfort when viewing Martine's peculiar ways. The elongated silence or the thorny movements, indicative of an injured bird, could add a sense of embarrassment or mild anxiety for certain spectators, representing the participants' emotional discomfort.

Martine is joined by Amelia and Julie Anne who have seamlessly moved to a sitting position with their backs facing the audience. They begin movements which express their desire for flight and eventually Martine connects with the dancers sitting on the floor as they all move their arms and torsos alike. The trio of women becomes a flock of birds with the flowing water from the video superimposed across their backs. The main focal point draws our eyes in towards the women's bones, muscles and skin allowing the three sets of scapula to seamlessly evolve into wings. The fluttering action progresses in speed and volume which becomes a little scary for Martine who

leaves the group. This represented a desire to continue her search for independence. Eventually, she accepts her need for others and once again joins Amelia and Julie Anne on the floor.

### 2.6.3 Trio

#### 2.6.3.1 “Ashamed Legs”

The first trio was created to show the discomfort the women had with public displays of the body. Most noticeable was their tight upper body and the constantly covered and contained legs, hence the name of this section “Ashamed Legs”. I noticed that no matter what we were doing they would find a way to hide their legs which would restrict their movements. Interestingly, their often bare feet were the most expressive part of their body.

This trio section is the second time all three women move together and show how their journeys have brought them to the same place, demonstrating peer support and a collective consciousness of experience. The rubbing of one foot against the other is reminiscent of a disciplinarian using this action with two fingers in pointing out one’s naughtiness. Each dancer breaks off into her own short sequence to tell her version of her life before she entered the shelter. Their paths before the shelter were all different and even though they have structure within the confines of a building, their experiences in the shelter remained unique as will their directions after the shelter.

The music for this section adds an element of tradition through the beautiful Indian vocals in the song, “Nadia” by Nitin Sawhney. The woman’s voice gives a decadent sound, a commonly defined quality among Indian song. There is an added modern element to the piece with the electronic beats introduced part way through. This

touches on the aspect of immigration, combining traditional Eastern philosophy with Western civilization experienced by the participants.

#### 2.6.3.2 “Can you hear me?”

This section was the most thrilling to choreograph, but took a great deal of focus, planning and energy from myself, the dancers and the videographer. The first physical movement represented the women’s huge leap forward to seek aid from the shelter, as seen through the dancers’ proud walk to the front of the stage. Once there, in a *safe space*, they struggled to move forward represented by traveling on the spot. This felt as though they expended great efforts without much gain. The exaggerated hip movements highlighted the femininity of the participants’ bodies. I also used one major characteristic for each woman to enhance the strata of this movement. Amelia used an elbow jab symbolic of SW#1’s increasing desire for control as she pushes her way through life’s trials. Martine represented SW#2’s established need to express her voice after seventeen years of silence with a wide mouth opening. Julie Anne added a flick of the head illustrative of an individual with attitude which has been initiated from a deep insecurity.

Eventually, the three dancers began traveling through the space toward a major highlight in the piece when the audience should become aware of the women’s confidence. This was achieved by all three women whipping their heads towards the audience and staring ahead with assurance while their bodies stood strong. Further visual impact at this moment was completed with a sudden image change in the video where we saw a flash of communicating hands. At this moment there was also a lighting change from flood lights to narrowed floor lamps creating light-defined corridors.

The choreography for this trio was inspired by the violence the Strong Women had endured and by the gripping image of their longing for the freedom of flight. The women shared their stories of extreme abuse (physical, emotional, verbal and, at times, sexual) and how each time they were knocked down, put down or feeling down, they managed to pick themselves up again, only to be ready for the next round. Occasionally, the damage was substantial and required time for physical and/or emotional healing. I demonstrated this matter in the sequence of falls using opposing speeds, differing in duration for each dancer; at times, the getting up was the struggle and in other instances it was the going down that took extra effort.

I used the Doris Humphrey<sup>13</sup> concept of “fall and recovery” to create a series of eight quick movements and four slow falling actions. This composed a twelve numbered sequence of different types of falls. Then I used a Merce Cunningham tool of choreography, known as “chance”<sup>14</sup>, to randomly adjust the numbers for each dancer, now creating three individual phrases. This allowed for the possibility that two or even all three dancers could potentially intersect and even have moments of unison which were not predetermined. I chose to exclude the four slow actions in Julie Anne’s phrase as she was establishing SW#3’s swift characteristic, giving this section a driving and exciting energy.

The trio section concluded with the formation of a flock of birds developing their wings and their skills to be able to fly away. Both the dancers and the Strong Women all reach flight and begin their journey as independent women. At this moment I

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<sup>13</sup> Doris Humphrey established the concept of fall and recovery, “dance happens in the frightening moment between falling and recovering, during the arc swept by a body moving between equilibrium and uncontrol.” (Mazo, 1977: 117)

<sup>14</sup> Merce Cunningham describes the use of chance in numbers as having equal validity to predetermined numbers and has often incorporated this concept into his choreography through various methods including rolling of a dice. (Mazo, 1977: 220)

entered the space to recap the experiences of the Strong Women infused with my own perceptions.

#### 2.6.4 Sameena's solo – "From the outside in"

The final live section titled, "From the outside in", was definitely the most difficult to choreograph. I went back and forth on the decision to dance myself or to have someone else perform on my behalf. I thought that I was a little too close to the entire experience and that it might be interesting to step back and look from afar. As it happens, finding dancers to rehearse and perform with no funding to support them was a rather large challenge. I decided to go ahead and prepare the solo myself while keeping my eyes and ears open for a dancer who could be a match for my work.

The deadline approached and I realized that I would not find anyone to perform my solo. I was having a difficult time finishing the final sequence of this section and I began filming myself in rehearsal. I struggled more with that one minute of choreography than I did with the entire piece. It was just three weeks before the scheduled presentation of *REturn*. I began to feel disconnected and questioned my reality; real life versus life in *REturn*. In the blink of an eye, stability became an illusion and physical and emotional damage began to take over. Eventually, I locked myself in the dance studio for several consecutive days. My movements began flowing out giving me a much needed emotional purge. I refined my choreographic choices and kept the simplicity of movements created during a physically painful period in my life. By contrast, I had no choice but to be immersed in the depth of my emotional state. This was completely relevant to the theme of the creation, but difficult and confusing on a personal level.

I am, without a doubt, a musically oriented individual in all aspects of my life, especially when I need to bring my expressive art to its deepest level. I had struggled for some time before deciding on a specific piece of music for my section but knew that it was an essential component to fulfill my vision. There was only one musician whose compositions could bring my journey to the next level due to her personal correlation to where I had ended up, Me'Shell NdegéOcello. Her voice is mesmerizing and her words are powerful; when the instruments are added, I seem to be completely overcome. Because her lyrics could be directly interpreted, I knew that if I was going to add her music into my creation that I would have to be extremely careful about which songs I used. I knew that the lyrics could potentially overshadow the rest of the creation if I was not careful about the structure of my solo, including the video aspect. I inserted two fleeting musical excerpts reminiscent of the defining group moments in the piece. This added an extra textural layer as well as a way of breaking the more consistent sound of the song. The other sound effect, also used in the introductory section, was created through a shift in one of the sound bars within the video editing process. The left speaker would hear the sound at a different time than the right speaker depending on how much space we placed between the two sides. I altered the music just after the second musical insert and slowly increased the spacing until the surround sound became slightly distorted and a little uncomfortable to the ear, through to the end of the piece.

I entered the stage from the back of stage left as the other three dancers were ending their journey and preparing to fly away. My back led me into the space, forming a connection between my live back on stage and the image of my twenty foot back in the video projection. I turned around in complete silence and fell to the floor when the music began. The slow lowering from the push-up position gave the overall sensation of the resistance all the women felt before coming to the shelter.

I took some time on the floor to show the process I had to overcome just to get started with my own movement sessions. The floor work was developed primarily from my own emotional experiences throughout the research process, but also with the physical discomfort I was experiencing. Remaining close to the floor provided me with a sense of safety that I felt I needed at that time. I came to fully understand why the women in the shelter wanted to do more stretches close to the ground, or sitting meditations.

Once I was finally able to push myself to stand, I introduced myself. I returned to the movement from my first session in the shelter representing my personal name. This is a wavy, round arm gesture with palms together, executed once to express my own journey. I repeated this movement with my focus towards the three dancers to offer my journey in their honour. This movement was accented with a change in music, reminiscent of Indian vocals from the “Ashamed Legs” trio.

The next segments in my solo were composed by integrating different movements, themes or expressions from the three other dancers. The communicating hands, seen as a flash image in the video during the trio, returned for a longer period of time but in a more subtle tone with slight transparency in the image. I included a short musical repeat from “Tides”, used during the trio of backs as their arms became wings. I took defining elements from the choreography created for each woman and I interpreted them with my own physical style. Therefore, certain choreographic elements began on one woman from the shelter, were transferred onto my body, followed by the assigned dancer’s interpretation, and then finally returned to my own body.

The day before the dress rehearsal, Amelia, Julie Anne and Martine had the evening off to rest. I returned to the theatre to adjust and fine-tune the equipment as well as the ending of my solo. I sat in the theatre alone, watching myself in the video,

plastered as a giant on the wall. I saw hope, desire, and freedom from my bones but I saw pain, doubt and fear from under my skin. I walked towards myself, the individual who was squashed on the wall for everyone to see. I was suddenly struck by a wave of shivers; I looked at the emptiness of my hand which was once open to the world, full of life and offerings. I sat down beside the magnified video image of me from five months previous and I came to the realisation that she and I were one.

## 2.7 Costumes

I spent some time with the Strong women discussing their personal preferences for clothing. The shalwar kameez<sup>15</sup> was their unanimous choice for comfort and style. During our sessions they wore varying designs and colours of this more traditional suit, but informed me that they wore western clothing when out in public, so as not to draw attention to themselves.

My goal in costuming this creation was to keep the more cultural shalwar kameez as the basic design, but show the modern and western dress influences. I chose a material that had many earthy toned patterns which I thought would blend in with the forested image in the video. The tops were slightly shorter and shapelier than their cultural norm. The neckline showed only what would be considered acceptable. This gave a lovely contrast to the back which was left completely open and would be considered quite taboo. The open back clearly allowed the audience to see the use of the scapula which was a major focus in the choreography as well as the video. The bare backs were also used as a type of projection screen at certain moments throughout the piece.

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<sup>15</sup> Shalwar Kameez is a pair of pyjama-like pants with a long top. It is usually made from cotton to allow for cooling and comes in varying lengths, designs, and colours. It is worn by both men and women.

## 2.8 Reflection

The male elite has conjured up the strange notion that women need to attain 'perfection' physically and mentally, however, allowing some 'fault' in the emotional aspect. "I feel dead now, but if he stops loving me I am really dead, because I am nothing by myself. I have to be noticed to know I exist." (Rowbotham, 1973: 74-75) The problem with this is that perfection cannot actually be defined. Society has its perception of ideals as do religious communities and each individual. "Women tend to worry about physical perfection in a way men seldom do because Genesis says that all men are created perfect, whereas Woman began as an inanimate piece of meat; malleable, unsculpted, unauthorized, raw-imperfect." (Wolf, 1990: 93) Women are taught from early childhood that their worth is proportional to their attractiveness. Whether it is women who refuse to wear makeup or shave their legs, society, both men and women, have trouble dealing with them.

There is a Bengali proverb where the role of the woman is placed below that of the man's livestock. "The one whose wife dies is lucky; But not so the man whose cow dies." (Bhasin & Khan, 1986: 7) In Bangladesh, eighty percent of the women are illiterate and have been taught for centuries that they are to be slaves to men. It is a difficult task to attempt to change their minds, to make them aware of such unnecessary oppression and to give them even a minute sense of the possibility of their independence. Of the hundreds of children abandoned each year in large cities such as Karachi, ninety-nine percent are girls. Of the thousands of abortions performed each year in these same cities, approximately the same percentage of girls applies. Any feminist movements must start from within the community, but the lack of education makes it difficult to achieve any type of awareness. The only way to accomplish any changes from the outside is to expose, through the aid of mass media,

the atrocities committed in such countries and the miseries experienced by these women and girls.

The experience and sheer joy of moving can also engender feelings of entitlement and empowerment. Dance is an art form that uniquely promotes greater personal awareness through our bodies and, by means of a very primal activity, reaffirms an essential and shared humanity. (Durand, n.d.)

My creation, *REturn*, was brought to life to share not only an experience but also an important issue close to my heart. Domestic violence is a widespread concern which can only be tackled through knowledge and acceptance that such a problem exists. It is my choice to spread the word through the medium of dance.

My initial goal was to take my audience on a similar journey to the one I had experienced through my field study in the shelter, my creative process, and my own personal expression. Because of this choice, I found it extremely difficult to write out every aspect of my creation since many elements revolved around emotions, many of which were subconscious.

The group of women in the shelter was a diverse mix of characters and yet there were many similarities between them, pertaining to their needs and requests. Stress was a common emotional state, resulting in the need for breathing exercises and other forms of meditation. Their bodies were appreciative of easy stretching and low-impact activities. My focus was towards the women's bodies, both internal to external and external to internal, through the bodies' actions or reactions.

In general, I noticed that the women needed me to provide them with specific guidelines and directions. If they were given too much opportunity for interpretation, they became hesitant and unable to complete the task. Throughout the few weeks I

spent with the women in the shelter, I found that the women individually remained intimidated but as a group, they became energized and more powerful.

The creative process and the field study were the most fluid components of my thesis. The hands-on approach with the women in the shelter was one way I could share the healing aspects of my art-form with those who have never had the opportunity to explore dance. The creative process was one way I was able to express myself through the rehearsals, choreography, and the creation as a whole.

The movement vocabulary began as an expressive outlet for the Strong Women as each woman used gestures to share her thoughts. I gathered the movements from each of the women from the shelter, transferred the gestures or sequences onto my body, I guided each dancer through her own interpretations, and then finally returned to my own body during my solo. It would be a wonderful experience to have a reunion with the original Strong Women from the shelter to fully finish off the movement cycle.

It has taken exactly one year from the creation of *REturn* to open my eyes to the depth of this creation. I always believed that movement has been my personal form of expression. Dance class or rehearsals are a safe place where I could share my emotions and stories with others. While physical movement or body language as a form of healing may not be suitable for everyone, I have seen the positive outcome of such activities and believe that some individuals can truly benefit from movement sessions.

My creation has brought awareness to more individuals crossing cultures, countries, languages and age groups. *REturn* has helped to develop new skills for and open the minds of the dancers, videographer and lighting designer. The creative process gave me the opportunity to explore and express myself through a variety of mediums with

the focus on the body and movement. The women from the shelter have since informed me that they are now on a different path leading to further independence and a desire for healthy lives. They received much gratification from having watched their stories interpreted in *REturn* and hope that their stories can help others on similar journeys. I believe that my research study and creative outlet, geared towards finding a physical voice through movement, achieved its goal; to expand the participants' ability to express their emotions and to share the topic with a larger group of individuals who may not be accustomed to the language of contemporary dance.

## CONCLUSION

I began this research project with an idealistic concept: if I learned as much as possible about Domestic Violence and the South Asian community, I would be able to use my art to make a positive change. I took into consideration the women's backgrounds including religion, culture, tradition, societal influences and their environments as a whole. With my understanding and experience of body language and expressive movement, I was able to guide my students and clients through layers of non-verbal communication. What I was not able to do was to end violence. However, my goal in this research project was not to change the larger picture, but rather to support a few people in need along the way.

From my own perspective, the field study was the most defining aspect of this project as a whole. It became the center of my focus and a source of inspiration throughout my creative process. The sessions in the shelter opened my eyes to unconventional methods of education and introduced me to a community receptive to expressive movement.

I used a base of research to enrich my knowledge of this subject matter, the journey in the women's shelter and twenty five years in a dance community to help build my creation, *REturn*. The concept of the video was to show the vulnerability of the body through film. The video production added to my camera skills and my development with the editing process. I combined dance, video, costumes and a fluid soundtrack to develop a movement-based information announcement regarding the issue of Domestic Violence.

What I have established with my research and creation is a depth of understanding in my role as a Canadian woman and dance artist. It is my duty as a teacher and

choreographer to guide individuals through emotional states which are not easily verbalised or understood. I believe that I was successful in my goal to build a solid creation, representative of my journey with three South Asian women in a New York shelter. This was achieved through the emphasis of positive outcomes from a negative experience, leading to new relationships, new directions, freedom, choice, opinions, and the ability to express oneself. I truly believe that dance is an inclusive art and should be accessible to all.

### APPENDIX A – Observational Chart

FOR OBSERVATION	SW# 1	SW# 2	SW# 3
Today's mood			
General movement quality			
Subconscious gestures: Hands: Upper body: Hips: Feet: Head: Eyes: Shoulders: Other:			
Individual's chosen gestures: Hands: Upper body: Hips: Feet: Head: Eyes: Shoulders: Other:			
Qualities of movement			
Sounds associated with the individual or the session			
Words or phrases representative of their experience			
Colours worn or created by their mood			
Symbolism- movement or gesture or concept			
Body motion while drinking chai			
Stance			
Space – personal and group			
Basic notions of Laban: Body: Effort: Space: Shape:			
Other			

## APPENDIX B – Questionnaire for the Strong Women

- 1) What is your favorite type of music?
- 2) What is your favorite colour?
- 3) What is your favorite shape?
- 4) What is your favorite outfit to wear? (describe)
- 5) What is your favorite spot on stage?(to be or to watch others)

audience

- 6) How do you like to move? (slow, fast, smooth, choppy)
- 7) What is your favorite sound?
- 8) What is your favorite time of day?
- 9) Name some moods that you might be feeling at any given time?
  - a. What moods change the way your body feels?
  - b. How does your body change with these moods?
  - c. What mood are you in today?
  - d. How does your body feel today?
- 10) What purposes does our body have?
- 11) What does your body represent to you?
- 12) Does your body ever act or react before your mind?
- 13) What does the ground/floor represent to you?
- 14) What does the word *beautiful* mean to you?

APPENDIX C – Program from the presentation of *REturn*

**PROGRAMME**

**Partie I**

Vidéo (prélude) : *The Unspoken Ugly*

**Participant·es** : Mélanie Bernard, Annick Lavelle-Benny, Lavinne-Hélène Césari-Grenier, Annie Zielinski, Anne Dryburgh, Amelia Dryburgh-Bouchard, Rachel Dufour

**Musiques** : Alice Russell, James Brown, Blahzay Blahzay

**Interview** : Arundhati Roy

**Partie II**

*SAD* - Amelia

**Musiques** : Me'Shell NdegéOcello, Ani DiFranco

*17 years* - Martine

**Musique** : Nitin Sawhney

*Ashamed Legs* - Amelia, Martine, Julie Anne

**Musique** : Nitin Sawhney

*Can you hear me?* - Amelia, Martine, Julie Anne

**Musique** : Teika

*From the outside in* - Sameena

**Musique** : Me'Shell NdegéOcello

**Partie III**

Vidéo (finale) : *Up, up and away*

*"If I could be any animal in the world, I would be a bird so that I can be free and fly far away."*  
(anonymous, women's shelter NY, 2006)

**Musiques** : Me'Shell NdegéOcello, Rebekah Del Rio, Caetano Veloso, M.I.A.

**Interview** : Arundhati Roy

Mémoire de création  
Sameena Mitta



Le Département de danse de l'UQAM présente le cadre du programme de maîtrise, présente

**RETURN**

Septembre 2006

Les 21, 22 et 23 à 18h30  
et le 24 à 14h00

Département de  
**DANSE**  
**UQAM**

À la Piscine-théâtre d  
Pavillon de danse

APPENDIX D – Postcard from the presentation of *REturn*



Département de  
**DANSE**  
**UQAM**  
**re turn**

Un essai chorégraphique de **Sameena Mitta**  
basé sur l'analyse des mouvements des femmes  
d'Asie du Sud victimes de violence.

Mémoire de création dirigé par Andrée Martin et  
présenté par le Département de danse de l'UQAM  
dans le cadre de son programme de maîtrise.

**Du 21 au 23 septembre à 18h30**  
**et le 24 septembre à 14h00**  
À la Piscine-théâtre (local K-R380)  
Pavillon de danse  
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