Sometimes for purely humanitarian reasons, sometimes because of general globalization, but at other times, for the sheer need for cheap/docile labor power, the Northern European states have increasingly opened their doors to refugees, immigrants and guest workers from much less developed parts of the world. These new comers, whether from Southeastern Asia, Northern Africa or the Middle East, have brought with them many aspects of their rich traditions, arts, belief systems, customs and strong family values. Occasionally, a few have also brought with them some of the most problematic aspects of their intrafamilial violence. In fact, the level of violence has turned their host countries aghast and horror-struck. The pattern which Wikan explores is called ‘honor-kilings,’ and the case study she explores in detail is the 2002 murder of Fadime Şahindal, in Uppsala, by her biological father.
In Honor of Fadine is divided into seven parts, each with several chapters. Wikan first explores some aspects of the lives immigrants/refugees lead in Sweden. Although it is clear from the start that her main focus will be on Fadime, she takes an early detour and discusses two earlier honour-killings (Sara’s and Pela’s), which made “Swedish history” (p. 27), but not brought about an international outcry like Fadime’s murder. Wikan’s next step is to discuss differential conceptualizations of ‘honor,’ especially (but not exclusively) amongst the Kurdish newcomers, and their countries of origin. Wikan then launches into the details of Fadime’s murder trial. The fact that the transcripts of Swedish trials are open to public, coupled with the fact that Fadime’s case has drawn extraordinary attention have allowed Wikan to provide detailed profiles. The profiles of the older and the younger sisters of Fadime (Songül & Nebile), as well as the parents (Elif & Rahmi) are complex and even paradoxical. The profile of Elmas (another sister) and Mesut (the brother who has attacked Fadime in at least two other occasions, and has likely tipped the father about her whereabouts) are less clear. In general, brothers are major players in honour-kilings, a fact which is not adequately emphasized.

In Part IV, Wikan takes another detour, and discusses additional honor-killings from neighboring states (Norway). She meticulously tries to find parallels between killings, but is also careful to highlight some important differences amongst the cases (i.e., what is not an honour-killing). In Part V, she returns to Fadime’s case, but this time, the focus is on the (unsuccessful) appeal of Rahmi’s sentence. In the last two Parts (VI & VII), the readers are presented with Wikan’s almost superhuman effort to put these heinous and monstrous crimes into a continuum of humanity, responsibility and ‘love.’ Her efforts are so intense that I often felt she was trying more to convince herself than her readers in trying to find some humanity in these inhuman crimes against young women.

Overall, Wikan’s book is timely and important. Indeed, troubles transplanted by some immigrants/refugees have shattered the comparatively ‘mundane’ problems of affluent Northern Europe. Indeed, it is time that the Western world takes a good look at what else exists outside of its own much acclaimed Western ideas and ideals, human rights, democratic principles, values of equity/equality, and individual freedoms. It is indeed time to look at the savage remnants of illiteracy, poverty, misery, socialization into cultures of violence, the overt inequalities against women and children that lurk in some other parts of the world. Once, it may have
been much easier to ignore these naked truths when they reigned unabated in their places of origin. But, now, it is happening in the most modern cities of the most affluent countries of the world—including North America. Wikan acknowledges the new emphasis when she points out that Fadime’s murder may not have drawn the international attention it did, if she were not a ‘Swede.’ Wikan addresses these disturbing murders to lay the path for a higher level of awareness, and better policies, for the sake of all women, regardless of where they live.

Understanding calculated, premeditated and often brutal killings of young women by their male kin (fathers, brothers, uncles, cousins), is indeed a tall order. Wikan promises (and delivers) the point that her goal is not to condemn, but to understand. Indeed, it is absolutely crucial to understand the Eastern honor systems and their aberrations, if any state wants to counterbalance some of the latter’s socially and morally reprehensible consequences. We need to understand the crippling talons of (patriarchal) honor systems that dig deep into the behavior, activities and even the bodies of women. We also need to understand, so we can attempt to change, the vicious cycle of how women themselves (as wives, sisters, mothers, and even victims) end up buttressing these systems that victimize them. Wikan argues correctly that it is not Islam (or any other religion) that underlies the atrocities committed in the name of ‘honor.’ It is indeed, cultures and collectivities that lay the ground for the manifestations and continuation of these crimes. Moreover, she is also correct in arguing that cultures have a way of hijacking (my word, not hers) religious proclivities, and spin them out of control to serve their own ends. As it turns out, although honor-killings happen in many cultures and by the followers of many religions (Moslems, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and Christians), culture and belief systems are ensnared so much so that they become inseparable in their combined effects. Wikan is exceptionally careful in not pointing the finger at Islam (although the vast majority of the cases she reviews were Moslems, including Fadime’s family). She is also careful not to point the finger at Kurds (although many of the cases she reviews/cites have involved Kurdish victims and perpetrators). Indeed, neither women/young girls, nor the Western countries which have witnessed their honor-related murders will gain from scapegoating any single group or religion. However, I wish Wikan had extended a similar sensitivity in avoiding loaded terms such as “Turkish-Kurdistan” in her book.
In Honor of Fadine is important for bringing to the attention of Western readers/states a systemic gendered violence, readers who may be caught unprepared for this kind of violence. Unspeakable crimes, such as fathers/brothers killing their daughters/sisters, are no longer happening only “out there,” but materializing right in the midst of the affluent cities. Canadians and Americans also have a lot to learn from the European experiences with these crimes, since some similar crimes have already crossed the oceans. Yet, there are numerous aspects of the book which are not quite complete, not quite accurate, and maybe even misleading. On the one hand, these small deviations are understandable given the fact that Wikan is a total “outsider” trying to “look in” to the most complex and convoluted aspects of honor systems. She is also an outsider of the language which is so crucial in understanding the concepts of honor (i.e., “şeref” as well as Fadime’s last name “Şahindal” are misspelled throughout the book). Of course, spelling is not that important in and of itself. However, along with spelling, misinterpretations of the meanings/culture/language triangulation are unavoidable. Even small misinterpretations, I fear, may have serious consequences for policies, given the fact that honor killings take the lives of many women every year. Each killing also terrorizes countless other women. In trying to understand these crimes, there should be no degree of freedom for making errors.

One particularly problematic overgeneralization Wikan makes is that “exile” is an effective way to prevent honor crimes. At the outset, Wikan introduces the concept of exile, and also comes back repeatedly to the same argument: if only Fadime had stayed away from Uppsala, her life may have been saved! She also draws the same “conclusion” in some other cases she reviews, attempting a generalization which needs much more caution. In reality, for some cases, an “exile order” may save a life, and who knows, it may have saved Fadime’s life! However, there are at least a couple of dozen honor-killing cases I reviewed, where self or kin-imposed exiles have not worked. Women/girls were literally hunted down by male kin, even after years of staying away and establishing totally different lives for themselves. I believe, there is some danger in suggesting that “exile” is a panacea for honor crimes.

Another aspect which I found less than satisfactory in the book, is the lack of a grounded feminist critique in understanding these crimes. Undoubtedly, Wikan’s heart and soul is on the side of the victims, like Fadime, and her noble efforts are on the side of preventing others (like
sisters Nebile and Songül) from falling victim to a similar fate. Yet, I had the distinct unease that, at times, her proclivities to care for “all concerned” in these vicious murders are a bit too generous. It is true that the tragically warped conceptualizations of honor do put limitations, cause embarrassments, and induce shame on many members of the families/collectivities that share those conceptualizations. However, we should never, ever forget that the real victims in these heinous crimes are women. Murderers, and many of their (male) kin do have a choice, but they do decide to kill and carry out their ghastly deeds in the way they see fit. The victims have no say in what happens to them, or when and where. They not only live in terror and fear, but they get ambushed, often at the prime of their lives. In some cases, their families refuse to retrieve their bodies and/or refuse to give them a dignified burial (an immense insult amongst followers of Islam). Understanding murderers is important, but is not contingent upon sympathizing with them.

Last but not least, I felt uneasy with Wikan’s approach to the role of women in the unfolding of tragic honor-related crimes. In Fadime’s case, the mother (Elif) refused to testify on her daughter’s behalf during the trial, although her daughter was killed right before her eyes. Moreover, she testified to support the husband’s totally unbelievable concoctions/lies during the appeal. The little sister (Nebile) and one of the older sisters (Elmas) were also quite damning of Fadime, at least during the police interviews. Songül supported her sister, but this is rather the exception than the rule. In many other cases of honor killings, women (including mothers and sisters), act as the ears and eyes of the patriarchs of the families. It is true that women are not the ones who give or execute the murder orders, but it is also true that when it would really make a difference, they stand behind the murderers rather than their fallen daughters. In the regions from which many of these honor-crimes are spurned, it is a fact that women have little power, and not much say. To borrow Deniz Kandiyoti’s term, they often make a ‘patriarchal-bargain’ with their oppressors, and find some niche for themselves in the status quo, rather than finding themselves at odds with it. After all, they know—they may have seen—what happens to those who challenge the social order. Moreover, most are poor, poorly educated, and economically dependent. They may also be socially/linguistically dependent in the new lands they may find themselves in (like Fadime’s mother). So, there are many factors that will help us understand women’s own complacency in these crimes.
However, despite many of their actions/omissions to the contrary, trying to ‘prove’ how loving and dedicated these mothers/sisters are is misleading. They may be loving, they may be sorry, but they are rarely helpful. Acknowledging this paradox rather than denying its existence will go a long way in really understanding the matrix of these crimes.

Wikan’s discussion of “integration” (last two parts) are very thoughtful, and she invites us all to think outside of the box. She encourages the reader to re-think what can be considered a successful integration or lack thereof. In addition, the insights Wikan offers at the conclusion of the book will resonate with multicultural countries like Canada and the United States that receive immigrants/migrants/refugees from the four corners of the world.