

**Rachna Mara's Cosmopolitan
(Yet Partial) Feminisms**

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In the summer of 2005, I visited a mountain resort in Pakistan with some friends. We stayed at the expensive Pearl-Continental Hotel in Bhurban and often walked on the various trails nearby.¹ One day, my friend and I found ourselves slowly approaching a fence. As we got closer, we noticed that our spouses were chatting with two young women on the other side of the fence. Class loomed large between us like the fence, which simply was not penetrable. In Pakistan, upper-middle-class women dress very differently from working-class village women. Mahjabeen and I wore jeans and shirts (*kurtis*), our hair uncovered, our faces cosmetically enhanced, while the women on the other side had freshly-washed faces and wore traditional *shalwar-kameez* with *dupattas* covering their hair.

Although there didn't seem to be any reason for us to feel threatened, Mahjabeen drew my attention to the situation by wondering aloud if those villager women were flirting with Salman, her partner. "Why on earth would you think they were flirting?" I asked Mahjabeen in complete disbelief. Then, I immediately reproached my own bafflement. Why wouldn't young women who lived in villages and covered their heads flirt with attractive urban upper-middle-class men? As I heard the talkative woman invite us all to her village for a meal, I asked myself if I were a worse orientalist for assuming that it was her "villager hospitality" or her "villager designs on our men folk." My ambivalence continued as I realized that even though as an academic I worked on South Asian women because I felt a certain kinship with them, the fence between us divided us just as class did, and now my own orientalism was coming between us as well.

As I tried to pinpoint the ambiguities in this seemingly unambiguous situation, I realized that the talkative one was telling each one of us which Bollywood movie star we looked like. She then proceeded to

ask us which movie star we thought she looked like. I thought about it and then announced: "Sonali Bendre." Of course I didn't just want to answer her question. I wanted to show her that despite our differences we did have one thing in common: an interest in Bombay cinema. But she seemed unimpressed. I'm not sure why. Maybe she didn't want a response from me. Maybe she didn't know who Sonali was: Sonali's last film did come out in 2000, which was at the time five years ago. Either way the exchange was unsatisfying to both of us. As we thanked them for the dinner invitation and walked away, Mahjabeen whispered to me, "They shouldn't be watching Indian movies; they should be watching Pakistani movies." "Do you watch Pakistani movies?" I asked her pointedly. "No," she replied. "Then, why should she?" I wondered.

Since the October 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, I've thought again and again about that brief encounter and my inability to bridge the distance between my academic work and the actual women whose representations I think and write about. Ideally a diasporic or cosmopolitan feminist would have been able to connect with those women despite class differences, orientalism, and nationalism. Both diasporic theories and theories of cosmopolitanism imply a certain worldliness, an ability to connect with people across borders, boundaries and fences. Whereas diaspora describes the dispersal of populations across the globe and their supposed ability to grasp more than one viewpoint, cosmopolitanism implies the same multiple allegiances and viewpoints without necessarily the migrations. Both theorists of diaspora and cosmopolitanism are concerned with autonomy or agency in terms of human rights in an increasingly uneven world. Diana Brydon has commented that we need to rethink postcolonialism in dialogue with globalization by examining "the key words that function pivotally (but sometimes implicitly) within both discourses . . . autonomy, cosmopolitanism, and diaspora" (691). The pitfalls of each of these terms have been documented by a number of critics. Among these, Timothy Brennan has noted that diasporas are not as post-national as theorists of diaspora claim. Brennan opines,

One tends to forget the meticulousness with which these working-class exiles to the metropolitan centres of Europe and the

United States follow events in their countries of origin, visit those countries regularly, and distinguish among themselves in ways that the white majorities of Europe and the United States typically do not (a 'Latino' in the United States is first of all Colombian, say, rather than Ecuadoran, just as an 'Arab' is Syrian rather than Jordanian). (*At Home* 45)

Brennan's larger point is that such theories of diaspora and cosmopolitanism emphasize a supposedly idealized vision of the world that upon closer examination is neither based on people's lived experiences nor ideal. It merely hides the workings of global capitalism as well as the revolutionary movements that resist it. This is an important critique of cosmopolitanism that I do not intend to diminish.

Another important critique of cosmopolitanism relates to the issue of universal human rights. Inderpal Grewal has noted that the debate about autonomy and human rights has centred on whether or not human rights can be considered universal:

Within the transnational connectivities of human rights discourses, the first rationality of the ethical regime of human rights is the division between the universal and the particular, so that the debate on human rights has often centered around its universal application and challenges to this view. Yet the debate on the universal applicability of human rights did not diminish the power of this discourse to become disseminated; rather it encouraged its entrenchment, since it produced cosmopolitans and their detractors at many sites. (134)

Thus, those who believe in the universal applicability of human rights are cosmopolitans who, Grewal implies, simplify the complex and very specific relations between people, cultures, races, and nation-states. Again, I completely agree with this critique of the word "cosmopolitanism" as it is currently used.

In simplifying relations between peoples, cosmopolitans are also guilty of orientalism as my encounter with the goat-herding girls illustrated. According to Edward Said, one of "the principal dogmas of Orientalism

[is] the absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior” (300). In assuming that the goat-herding girls would not flirt, I assumed that they were absolutely and systematically different from me. Caren Kaplan warns that, “in certain globalized feminist discourses in this postmodern moment a kind of cosmopolitanism is generated that produces and recuperates forms of orientalism, old and new” (220). Here, Kaplan is referring to Hillary Clinton’s orientalism when dealing with her less fortunate sisters in North Africa. Thus, the larger ramifications of cosmopolitan oversimplifications are racist orientalism.

Literary critic Gillian Gane writes, “postcolonial writers are often seen as divided into two groups: deracinated cosmopolitans . . . and nativists engaged in the project of retrieving precolonial histories and fostering indigenous identities” (28). The implication of this divide is twofold. First, it implies that even though nativists understand racial conflict, they cannot move beyond third world nationalism to a more cosmopolitan perspective. Mahjabeen cannot help but want (some) Pakistanis to watch Pakistani films. The second implication is that, because cosmopolitans spend so much time insisting that there is no such thing as race and nations are not important, they end up providing overly easy resolutions to race and class conflict. They are much more likely to orientalize the other. And, they are much more likely to discount nativist alternatives to westernization. In looking at several anthologies of world literature, Brennan has found that “many of the stories seemed geared precisely to expose the failures of alternatives to Westernization, even though such alternatives form a prominent and respectable theme in non-Western writing” (*At Home* 50). While I take seriously each of the critiques of the ways in which cosmopolitanisms are currently at work, I find it useful to use this word “cosmopolitan” to describe diasporic fiction that presents indigenous cultures as viable alternatives to westernization along with all the conflicts and difficulties that arise out of this situation. One such diasporic text that provides a way out of the polarity of deracinated cosmopolitanism and insular nativism is Rachna Mara’s *Of Customs and Excise*. Even though Mara is a woman writer of South

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Asian descent currently residing in Canada and even though two of her characters, Mala and Bridget, cross a number of national boundaries, her book provides a perspective that gives value to nativist positions and, in so doing, provides a true cosmopolitan perspective. As I see it, the word "cosmopolitan" should be reinscribed not only as anti-orientalist but also as a diasporic perspective that critiques the dominant metropolitan cultures by simultaneously fostering indigenous identities.

Rachna Mara's collection of ten interrelated short stories, *Of Customs and Excise*, provides first-person narratives by a mother and daughter, Parvati and Mala, as well as Parvati's mother-in-law, Mrs. Ungoli, Parvati's doctor, Bridget, and Bridget's servant, Asha. These five women have lives that are so joined and intertwined that this book could have been written as a novel. By choosing to write it as a collection of short stories, Mara gives ample space to differing and multiple subjectivities, especially because the stories traverse space (from England to India to Canada) and time (from colonial England and India to contemporary Canada) and pays close attention to each of these contexts. All of the narrators in this book are South Asian except one. Bridget is English and was born in India under British rule to parents who sent her back to England when she was six years old. Through the experiences of Bridget, Mara's cosmopolitanism displays just as much attention to indigenous postcolonial realities as to transnational and diasporic situations. Bridget returns to India for four years as an adult to work as a physician in a small village. While there, she is dumbfounded when her fellow physician, Dr. Kamla Naigar, who is trained in western medicine, chooses to use the leaves of the Pipal tree to treat the boils on the back of a six-year-old boy. Bridget assumes that antibiotics are "the most effective treatment" but the boy's back heals in a week (10). The antibiotics, Bridget learns, are inappropriate for the boy's mother. Dr. Naigar explains, "His mother cannot read. She has five other children, and she is working in the fields, washing clothes, fetching water, grinding flour and cooking. She will not remember instructions about medicine. Then she will be afraid to tell us, so she will give him the rest of the tablets all at once or she will be throwing them out" (9–10). Here, Mara's fiction, despite the fact that it is written in the diaspora with a cosmopolitan perspec-

tive, presents a viable alternative to westernization in the form of herbal medicine. It simply works. This, in particular, shows Mara as a true cosmopolitan, one whose attention to multiple contexts does not privilege one context over another.

Often critiques of cosmopolitanism are directed at metropolitan diasporic writers who publish with large mainstream presses to critical acclaim. Brennan argues that metropolitan writers of fiction such as Salman Rushdie do not really critique the colonizer as Sara Suleri's literary critical work on his fiction shows. Brennan writes that Suleri finds that "there is no fundamental difference in the reading problems presented by an English novel and a South Asian one—a proposition that works better, needless to say, if one chooses Salman Rushdie rather than, say, Hasan Manto, a chronicler of partition writing in Urdu" (*At Home* 57). Brennan's use of Manto, a writer who lived first in British India then in Pakistan, is interesting because it implies that Manto's sensibilities are different from Rushdie's because he did not live in London and New York. We assume that while Rushdie is western, Manto is not. However, as Grewal has shown, there are many different kinds of cosmopolitanisms even in the metropolitan centers. She argues that, "while some versions of cosmopolitanism can be understood only in terms of 'western' subjects, histories of colonization and of transnational connectivities have produced postcolonial, feminist, and national as well as racialized and ethnic versions" (38). She goes on to show how three authors living in the United States each sought diverse cosmopolitanisms: one nationalist, one multicultural and one anti-colonial.

Brennan and Grewal critique the cosmopolitanism of writers such as Salman Rushdie and Bharati Mukherjee who have been published by mainstream presses rather than small presses. I have selected Rachna Mara's fiction because I believe that the cosmopolitanism she espouses avoids some of the traps into which other writers of fiction have fallen. Her work resists orientalism as well as the premature romanticization and celebration of diaspora, hybridity, and westernization. While I understand that these critics choose to discuss mainstream fiction so that they can engage with books that are widely disseminated, I want to engage with a book published by a small, alternative, Canadian femi-

nist press. In so doing, I hope to increase its circulation. Since writers struggle to gain acceptance from academics and since this leads to more sales because students will buy books that are taught in university classes, I want to discuss a book that will engage with feminist, anti-orientalist, and anti-racist issues in the culture at large. I would also argue that mainstream presses look for content that is more marketable and sometimes that content doesn't address the issues I find most important. In a telephone interview, Rachna Mara told me that the major publisher HarperCollins did see *Of Customs and Excise* but told her that, "it wasn't what they were looking for." Mara grants that perhaps she sent them the manuscript too early, implying that if she had sent it later it would have been more polished. But the response from HarperCollins did not mention polish and therefore it is possible to assume that it was the content of the manuscript that was rejected. In this paper, I argue that Mara's collection of short fiction, *Of Customs and Excise*, provides a kind of cosmopolitan perspective that avoids the traps I outlined earlier because it is partial. The cosmopolitanism that Mara puts forth is feminist, anti-orientalist, and grapples with class and racial conflicts without minimizing them. In addition, she provides alternatives to westernization and doesn't dismiss the power of various nationalisms. I argue that a cosmopolitan feminist can do what a proponent of global sisterhood cannot: pay close attention to the historical and geographical contexts of orientalisms, nationalisms, class and race.

Allow me to begin with some definitions and clarification. Whereas orientalism assumes an unchanging orient absolutely different from the west, nationalism assumes that one's nation is above all other nations. I put both of these ways of thinking or discourses together because both lead to exclusionary practices that I believe can be overcome by a cosmopolitan perspective. What do we know about a cosmopolitan perspective? These days cosmopolitanism is often associated with the desire to grant basic human rights to all peoples, not just the people in one's own community. As Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, Carol A. Breckenridge, and Dipesh Chakrabarty have pointed out, "cosmopolitans today are often the victims of modernity, failed by capitalism's upward mobility, and bereft of those comforts and customs of national

belonging. Refugees, peoples of the diaspora, and migrants and exiles represent the spirit of the cosmopolitical community” (Pollock et al. 6). Interestingly enough, Mara’s fiction deals with characters who are refugees (Asha and Sundri), peoples of the diaspora (Mala), and a migrant who is an exile wherever she goes (Bridget). The critics I mentioned earlier go on to say that the “exercise of bringing feminisms to bear on cosmopolitanism, however, remains” (9). Mara’s book develops a cosmopolitan feminist stance that is anti-orientalist and carefully delineates instead of minimizing class and race conflicts. All of Mara’s main characters are women. Her fiction resists orientalist stereotypes of both South Asian women such as Asha and Mala and English women such as Bridget. Mara shows the ways in which people don’t fit into neat and tidy categories of nationalist and orientalist identity. Her fiction forces the reader to take a cosmopolitan feminist perspective, to critique patriarchy while taking multiple locations and contexts into consideration.

Mara’s cosmopolitan stance is decidedly feminist because of the way she depicts patriarchy, marriage, and women in India. Asha in *Of Customs and Excise* perceives marriage as oppressive to women. But this depiction has to be read in the context of racist orientalist stereotypes that still pervade certain kinds of global feminisms where first world feminists condescend to women in poorer countries. In “Under Western Eyes,” Chandra Mohanty has critiqued an image of third world women that develops in the feminist scholarship that she studies. Mohanty writes, “this average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being ‘third world’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)” (337). The last four stereotypes about third world women are especially prominent and can be traced back to nineteenth-century ideas about the colonized woman. Uma Narayan writes, “the figure of the colonized woman became a representation of the oppressiveness of the entire ‘cultural tradition’ of the colony” (17). The assumption from the colonizers’ standpoint was that the colony’s cultural tradition was so oppressive that patriarchy victimized women in the colony more than in Europe.

One could read this as a nationalist stance as well: My country is so much better than your country. That's why in your country, women are oppressed, but in my country, women are free.

In *Of Customs and Excise*, Mara depicts women living in India, England, and Canada. Even though she shows how the institution of marriage can be oppressive to women, she does not fall into the trap of depicting South Asian women as necessarily more victimized than their western counterparts. This is a trap that, according to Grewal, has to do with the fact that third world women's rights not to be battered by domestic partners are considered human rights whereas first world women's rights not to be abused are considered merely a health issue. The cosmopolitan orientalist assumption is that women are more abused elsewhere. Grewal insists that the discourse of

global sisterhood misrecognized the ways in which many women were treated in the first world itself. For example, even though domestic violence was acknowledged as a very large problem in the United States, it was framed as a 'health' rather than a human rights issue. Strategies to address domestic violence included the training of hospital and health workers, police, and judges but did not rise to the level of a human rights claim in the national or international legal system. (152)

To consider the same atrocities of domestic violence a human rights issue was reserved for women in the third world whose rights not to be battered by domestic partners was seen as a human right. Moreover, the discourse of global sisterhood assumes not only that third world women are worse off but also that they cannot rescue themselves from the patriarchal conditions of their lives. But in Mara's book, Asha, an Indian character living in India, is more than capable of analyzing the difficulties she faces and rescuing herself from patriarchy. She is aware of the restrictions on movement that can result from marriage because she watches her sister, Sundri. Preferring to work rather than marry, she decides, "she'd go to Najgulla where plenty of families needed servants. She'd never be forced into marriage, have children. Look at Sundri now, so worn" (33). Asha considers herself sly for avoiding marriage. Mara

writes, "*Chalak*, she was sly. You had to be in this world. Look at her, free to come and go, and look at Sundri, already big with her third child. Sundri had the same glazed eyes their mother used to have, worrying, worrying, over children" (23). Asha is very different from the average victimized third world woman that the discourse of global sisterhood presumes to rescue. She is a complex character who does not fit the stereotype of the passive woman in need of empowerment.

Asha's awareness of marriage as oppressive leads her to murder her brother-in-law, not in self-defence and not even because it is her sister's wish. She kills him because his alcoholism is keeping them from saving money. She also keeps her sister from remarrying after Tilak's death. Not only is she capable of violence towards others, but she is also capable of violence towards herself. Mara reveals that Asha's life of poverty on the streets in India may not be that different from a life of poverty on the streets anywhere else. She cuts herself repeatedly to feel alive. Mara writes, "You must stop doing that,' Dr. Kamla Sahib says, bandaging the gashes on Asha's arms and legs. Asha says nothing, later, does it again. She feels only a fierce exultation as the knife cuts her skin" (21). Asha trusts no one and is willing to do anything to get what she wants. She does not fit any preconceived images of South Asian women. She cuts herself, not because she is a victim and suicidal, but because she is alive. She lives by her wits, actively not passively. Mara's cosmopolitan feminist perspective makes it possible for her to depict a character such as Asha, who is too complex to fit the orientalist stereotypes about women from non-western countries.

According to Rana Kabbani, these orientalist stereotypes are not simply those of victimized women: there is also an element of revulsion. The other woman is both evil and desirable. Kabbani writes, "Europe's feelings about Oriental women were always ambivalent ones. They fluctuated between desire, pity, contempt and outrage. Oriental women were painted as erotic victims and as scheming witches" (26). In Mara's book these opposites are depicted in Mala's dating in Canada. Mala is a character who was born in India and raised in Canada. Because she is of Indian descent, she has peculiar issues dating mainstream white Canadian men. Mara writes, "there were guys who'd never go out with

her because of her colour and others who wanted to because of it, anticipating an exoticism she didn't have" (39). Both situations can be traced back to the assumptions of orientalism, and Mara chronicles its debilitating effects on Mala. Mara's style is subtle, sometimes conveying through irony the difficulty of Mala's situation. During a meeting with her best friend after many years, Mala tries hard not to admit how difficult dating has become for her. While she hints to her friend of casual lovers, she thinks to herself about how long it has been. Mara writes, "actually, it's been a while; the last one was Brad, who said the morning after how he loved dark girls, really he did" (57). Mala eventually finds happiness after moving to England where she finds a lover who does not exoticize her in this way, but Mara's narrative makes it clear that her early dating disasters are related specifically to her race. Thus, Mara depicts ways in which orientalist stereotypes about other women as desirable and repulsive have contemporary repercussions. And Mala is the ultimate cosmopolitan feminist character because she lives in three different countries and is fully aware of the ways in which her life is affected by the dominant ideologies of each of these countries.

Her father, Mohan, who in India was relaxed and easy-going, becomes a patriarchal tyrant in Canada because of the racism he has to endure. He clings to his Indianness because of his bruised ego and makes Mala's life miserable. When Parvati, Mala's mother, asks Mohan if Mala can go to Montreal to major in French, Mohan's refusal to allow it is based on race. His own insecurities about living in Canada as a man of colour are the real reason for his refusal. He holds Mala's friends responsible for her supposed lack of respect for her parents:

'Her friends, her friends. I don't want to hear about her friends. They are the problem. Teaching her to look down on us.' His voice rose to a shriek. 'What is Mala thinking? She should be going out with white boys? Does she think she is too good for a *kala admi*?' There was a long silence. Mala leaned her head against the window sill. *Kala admi*, black man. She picked at a grimy, dark fuzz ingrained in the corner of the window frame. Mould. It was too deep. (45)

The mould is deep, just like the conflicts arising from race, conflicts that are not diminished or erased in this book. A cosmopolitan feminist perspective allows us to see Mala's father's over-protective and controlling behaviour in the context of his diminished status, as a man of colour, in Canada. This, of course, does not excuse his tyranny, but it does complicate stereotypes about the extremely patriarchal brown man and provide a cause that can be understood.

Because Mala is born in India and raised in Canada, her cosmopolitan perspective allows her to foresee the problems of people with a mixed heritage in Canada. While flying from London to Toronto, she meets a new bride from India on her way to Canada to join her husband. Mala wants to tell the new bride what lies ahead for her children but chooses not to: "How can she understand what it'll be like having children there? Watching them fit in, spat upon, rejected, rejecting their parents to fit in. Set apart, little brown tiles in a mosaic, twirling with the other tiles, exotic costumes, dances, food. *Gee I love your culture. What country are you from?*" (104). Because she was raised in Canada, Mala is aware of the context of Canadian multiculturalism and the varied conflicts arising from it. Rachna Mara's book shows us the pressures on both the children and their immigrant parents. The nationalist and orientalist answer—that Indian patriarchy is the only evil—is too simplistic. Only the cosmopolitan feminist perspective shows us the complexity of the situation.

Last, but certainly not least, I want to talk about the character of Bridget. Born to a British couple living in India under British rule, she remains in India until the age of six. At that point her parents send her to an English boarding school because they want to stop her from becoming too native. But after spending the first six years of her life in India, she is traumatized by the racism of her English schoolmates against her, even though she is English by blood. As a child in India, she is very attached to her ayah, Heera, who treats her with great compassion. Bridget reflects, "I'm big now but Heera still holds me when I need her, never says I'm too old. My mother is kind but remote" (67). When her mother sends her to boarding school in England, she tells her dorm monitor, Sylvia that she cries at night because she misses Heera. The

torment that follows includes everything from the boarding school girls chanting, "Bridget Parkinson was suckled by a wog" (71) to Sylvia actually bringing her a golliwog and insisting Bridget will grow up to be an ayah. Mara writes, "see, it's starting already. You were suckled by a wog so you've got black milk inside you. When you grow up, you'll be all black and you'll be an ayah" (75). Bridget's childhood tormentors, their cultural context, and Bridget's own background combine to create the kind of racial conflict that succeeds in erasing Bridget's love for Heera. Mara writes, "that night I creep out of bed, run to the lavatory, and vomit. I've had a horrible dream. A dream that will recur throughout my childhood. I'm whipping someone while they scream. I don't want to see the face of the person I'm whipping, but occasionally I catch a glimpse. Sometimes, it's a thin face with pink-rimmed eyes, strangely familiar, sometimes unknown. But usually it's Heera" (75). Later, when Bridget hears of Heera's death, she realizes, "for me, she died long ago" (78). There is no easy resolution to the love and conflict caused by Bridget's attachment to Heera. The contexts of colonialism and racism are present in Mara's book in disturbing and thought-provoking ways that subvert orientalist assumptions. As the only white main character in the book, Bridget could have become someone who, along with the mainstream reader, learns about India from various native informants. Mara avoids this kind of plot entirely, giving Bridget her own demons, misunderstandings, and conflicts.

Mara's larger point is not that we should allow conflict to paralyse us. That is why Bridget goes to India as an adult. But like Mala in Canada, she faces more and more conflicts. Mara does not provide easy resolutions to orientalist and racist conflicts between South Asian and English characters in Canada and England. Without easy resolutions, we as readers are forced to face these issues without minimizing them. For instance, on the one hand, as I mentioned, white mainstream Canadians plague Mala, a woman of South Asian descent who lives in Canada, by demonizing her and simultaneously exoticizing her. On the other hand, Indians living in India plague Bridget, a woman of English descent, with their prejudice against her. When Bridget goes to India to work, she has nightmares because the Indian doctor she works with de-

spises her.² Mara writes, “she sat up, wet with perspiration, heart pounding. Wisps of the nightmare lingered; Dr. Naigar’s dark face, the veiled hostility replaced with open anger” (7). Both Bridget Parkinson and Kamla Naigar try to understand each other, try to communicate, but their relationship never develops warmth. While Bridget is aware of Dr. Naigar’s hostility towards her, she is completely unaware of the hatred her servant, Asha, has towards her. At one point Asha thinks to herself, “What a fool, this Doctor-sahib, a slug with weeping eyes, pathetic” (35). Both Dr. Naigar and Asha hate Bridget because she is white. Dr. Naigar tells her to leave. “Listen, Bigshot White Sahib, you don’t find things modern enough, you go home. We don’t want interfering. You British have caused enough trouble already” (10). Asha’s dislike stems from a similar prejudice; she believes that “Angrezi-log . . . never trusted anyone” (31). And she is convinced that the British were responsible for the fact that her family had to flee from Sind when it became a part of Pakistan. Bridget is kind to Asha and polite to Dr. Naigar, but the history of British colonialism in India cannot make her good intentions clear or even relevant to these women. And in the case of Asha, Bridget cannot know the resentments of class combined with those of race. In Mara’s book, we see racism against Bridget in India as well as racism against Mala in Canada and we see Indian women fighting patriarchy in multiple countries and contexts. Mara’s attention to the contexts of these conflicts subverts orientalism and also Indian nationalism by showing the damage to Bridget, who really does have the best of intentions. In doing so, Mara’s book forces the reader to take the view of a cosmopolitan (yet partial) feminism.

One way to critique patriarchy within specific contexts, rather than through sweeping generalizations, is to advocate a partial feminism. Ien Ang calls for a partial feminism, which I find in keeping with Mara’s work. Ang points out that a partial feminism would take the limits of global sisterhood into account, and certainly Bridget’s experiences in India as a physician point to the limits of global sisterhood. Ang suggests “that these moments of ultimate failure of communication should not be encountered with regret, but rather should be accepted as the starting point for a more modest feminism, one which is predicated on the

fundamental *limits* to the very idea of sisterhood (and thus the category 'women') and on the necessary *partiality* of the project of feminism as such" (60–61). Bridget eventually leaves India and returns to England. The conflicts with Kamla and Asha are not resolved. However, during her time in India, she helps Mala's mother, Parvati, who remembers her kindness and writes to her annually. Parvati's cards are neither intimate nor dismissive of Bridget's work in India. Mara shows a partial cosmopolitanism and a partial feminism in this section. On the one hand, Bridget is not comfortable enough to spend the rest of her life in India. On the other hand, she is able to make a small difference in the life of some of her patients. Similarly, on the one hand, Bridget and her fellow female doctor, Kamla Naigar, do not form a cohesive team in the manner of global sisterhood. On the other hand, Bridget does come to respect Kamla's use of herbal remedies. By choosing a partial feminism, Mara resists hegemonies of all kinds—feminist ones and orientalist ones.

In a similar vein of partiality, R. Radhakrishnan has been careful to point out that the diasporic perspective should not become all-encompassing either: "Just as much as I have been contending against the morphology of national identity as basic or primary and the diasporic as secondary or epiphenomenal, I will also assert that the diaspora does not constitute a pure heterotopia informed by a radical counter-memory. The politics of diasporic spaces is indeed contradictory and multi-accentual" (173). According to Radhakrishnan, both national identity and diasporic identity should be considered partial; one should not replace the other as primary. This point is particularly important in light of the premature metropolitan celebrations of diasporic and cosmopolitan critique, which assume its superiority to all other forms of critique on the basis of its double consciousness. But, as Radhakrishnan points out, "it is futile and counterfactual to contend that ideas and movements are rooted and monolocational" (xxv). Since all ideas and movements are multiple, including diasporic ones, I agree with Radhakrishnan that we must insist on partiality and relationality in our thinking.

Moreover, it is important not to let theories of diaspora become dehistoricized. As Radhakrishnan writes, "the context of the diaspora has the

capacity to exacerbate the disharmony between utopian realities available exclusively through theory and agential predicaments experienced in history” (173). Even though I do not believe that diaspora theory represents reality per se, I do believe that theories are representations that relate to the real. Thus, it is crucial that concepts like diaspora and cosmopolitanism shouldn't lose sight of history or the losses that accompany displacement. I think it is important to contextualize not only the fiction I study but also the theories that inform them. Mara's cosmopolitan feminism reveals the losses and gains of diaspora in an arena of partiality and relationality, which are modes of thinking that simultaneously break not only orientalist, east and west binaries but also the binary of cosmopolitanism and nationalism that continue to plague so many of us.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank my colleagues at Western Illinois University for their encouragement of my writing and research. I am also grateful to the anonymous reader at ARIEL whose insightful comments continue to shape my thinking on cosmopolitanism.
- 2 The description of this nightmare, like the later description of the chowkidar, is quite disturbing. “She climbed the stile separating the field from the road, and there she was, in Barundabad. Dust swirls, scratching hands, dark faces. Amongst them was Dr. Kamla Naigar, listening to the heartbeat of a cow. Huddled under the cow, a purple-clad figure, face covered in the *pulloo* of her sari. Dr. Naigar turned towards Bridget, held out a dish of *gulab jamun*. ‘Here, Bigshot White Sahib. Eat this.’ Bridget shook her head, but Dr. Naigar forced her face upwards, dropped towards her mouth a blob of feces” (7).

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