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Departures from Karachi Airport: Some Reflections on  
Feminist Outrage

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# Departures from Karachi Airport

## Some Reflections on Feminist Outrage

*Prefatory Note:* This essay revisits an experience—my encounter with an airport border control official as I was leaving Pakistan—that occurred in October 2000. At first, this otherwise trivial incident seemed to me illustrative of several postcolonial and feminist concerns, such as the regulation of national and gender identities at sites of border crossing, or the patriarchal oppressiveness of state power and practices. But as I retold the story, I began to realize that there were additional dimensions to it that called for something else, that required me to re-examine, though not altogether repudiate, my initial indignation. This encounter then became a cultural text calling for a somewhat different critical analysis, leading me to reflect on feminist (and postcolonial) outrage, on how we might complicate our gender-based reactions, and how such a feminist politics may be responsibly practiced. (Much of this essay was written before September 11, 2001. I have not returned to Pakistan since then and can only imagine that airport security has greatly increased.)

### “Why Don’t You Come Back and Teach in Colleges Here?”

Darkened shades of glass barricade this jostling drop-off area at Karachi airport, visually as well as physically dividing those leaving from those staying behind. Guarding the only doorway are armed men in uniform, allowing none but ticket-holding passengers into the check-in area. One of them holds out his hand toward me. “Passport. Ticket.” A statement, not a request. No question of “please.” Sometimes they don’t even say anything, as if their sheer stern presence self-evidently expresses its demand. I hold out my travel documents. He flips roughly through, stares intently at my

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photograph, and thrusts them back toward me. “Better not put them back in my bag yet,” I tell myself, “I’ll need to show these again at least three or four times.” But I have forgotten, and underestimated the series of “security” checkpoints by half. Before walking through that doorway, I turn one last time to wave goodbye to my parents, their quietly forlorn faces now only intermittently visible beyond the shifting crowds of people in-between. Abrupt as such farewells must be, they are not helped by one’s sense of becoming an object of random scrutiny. As in almost any public place in this country, most of the bystanders present seem to be here expressly to gawk. As an academic, returning to teach postcolonial literature at an elite U.S. liberal arts college, I understand only too well the distances that separate us, the glamor of affluence and privilege that envelops those able to leave; yet as a woman subjected to this relentless, unwavering staring, I am nevertheless unsettled.

I turn back to the door. Meantime, a troupe of my compatriots has jumped the line to brush ahead of me—for here I am just a young woman travelling alone—the men swaggering along with their accompanying womenfolk, loads of baggage and hefty self-importance. It is strange, I think, how Pakistani men manage to cut ahead, carefully not looking at me as if I simply wasn’t there—the same men who would get into lines without being told to once they reached London or New York. My body becomes something at once both intensely visible and invisible, something to be looked at, through, or pushed aside, something of which I become intensely self-conscious. And then the porters accompanying the white foreigners pompously puff past us mere brown natives, as if the superior whiteness of their charges had somehow rubbed off on them. (The only two black Africans I can see have no such vanguard.) It might be almost amusing, I tell myself: the unspoken gender discrimination; the colonial racial legacies; the pointlessness of it, since we’re all getting on the same airplane; or this unashamed need to declare, “I’m bigger, better, if even by association; you lesser people, get out of my way.” Every time I leave, I have to struggle to leave my annoyance behind as well. My departures are always ambivalent, oscillating between sadness at leaving family and gladness at shedding some of the strain produced by these visits “home.”

Well, here I am, past that first post. The bewilderment and nervousness that this space engenders! One can see no signs indicating what to do next. No wonder people look so harassed. Somehow you are supposed to know.

Just follow those ahead. There is tight security, as always, or at least the officious appearance of it. At one security point my breasts and buttocks are gently patted by the female security officials who inspect all “lady” passengers. (Later, when I finally get to my seat on the plane, my garrulous fellow passenger confides proudly that her husband knew the security officials, so she didn’t have to go through any of this.) Here, another group of uniformed men cluster menacingly about. One beckons to me, peremptorily crooking his finger, and slightly jerking his head. Tentatively I move my cart towards him. “Where are you going?” he asks. “Boston,” I reply briefly. “What’s in here?” he says, waving at my suitcase. “Books, clothes, shoes,” I answer. He thumbs through my passport and green card, and waves me on. The luggage of a woman travelling alone is not opened. Nor, for that matter, am I expected to lug my heavy things on and off Karachi airport escalators. Ample underpaid men are standing by to do that. It is x-rayed, and bound with rope. Then I see the line at the check-in counter.

The group ahead of me seems to have an astonishing number of accompanying suitcases, several times more than the two allowed per person. A wife—expensively done hair, heavy jewelry clinking—stands imperiously aside. Her husband looks a bit sheepishly at the lengthening line of passengers waiting behind him, and turns back, pompously addressing the officials at the counter. Some of his underlings have obviously been able to enter this high-security zone just to check in this important family’s excess baggage—without excess charges. The airline officials kow-tow to them, ignoring the rest of us. When I finally get to the desk, they decide it’s time to rush. I have no excess bags, I offer no bribes. I have no accompanying male. My documents are checked, my luggage checked in, my boarding pass hurriedly handed to me. Before I can put my things away, the check-in official tells me roughly to step aside. My next stopping point is the emigration counter, where I offer my passport and green card yet again to a man seated high above my head. “Embarkation card?” he barks, glowering down at my temerity. “Where do you think you’re going without it?” I realize that the check-in official who rushed me through after fawning over the over-loaded man forgot to give me an emigration form. “They didn’t give me one,” I say indignantly. No use saying this. Irascibly he waves me off, not even looking at me, pointing exasperatedly at another desk, where lies a pile of forms.

Having got past this crabby old man, my temper rising, for I have grown

unused to such treatment, I find myself facing yet another group of armed officials, this time with quite a young man in charge, ready to paw through my papers. He gazes at the first page of my passport. “College professor,” it reads, right below my age and my name. “Miss Hai” is how my countrymen have chosen to define me—not “Ms,” nor “Dr.” I am 36, it tells him, “daughter of Mr. Hai.” (Every Pakistani woman is identified on her passport and national identity card as some man’s daughter or wife. No man, of course, is identified as any woman’s husband or son. A woman’s nationality and citizenship become thus dependent upon her belonging to a man.) Since I can only belong to a father or a husband, and since my husband’s name (and hence my married status) are not registered on my Pakistani passport, this becomes a document testifying to what must be the burden of my desiccating virginity. I am used to gazing back unflinchingly at their pitying, sometimes familiar looks, ignoring that curious undercurrent of insolence. How does one rebut the unspoken? And do I want to be drawn into this fruitless combat? But this man seems to have decided that this is an occasion for a little free conversation. “What do you teach?” he opens. “English Literature,” I reply as briefly as possible. (To add, “And sometimes Women’s Studies,” would only invite trouble—“What’s that?”—a spectrum of responses from incomprehension and laughter to lascivious curiosity. Our British colonial legacies have ensured that even this official understands “Literature” as an academic subject of study, but not “Women’s Studies.”) As a matter of course, on the way to the United States, I have occasionally been questioned by security officials in European airports. One is never subjected to such security checks or interrogation either when one leaves the United States or if one holds an American passport. It is only the entry of “aliens” into the United States that is heavily policed. But at least they tell you that they are asking questions for security reasons, and usually with impassive courtesy. That is not the case here. All the other passengers ahead and behind me have been silently waved on. Gazing at me with a wolfishly challenging half-smile, this official in Pakistani costume says: “So why have you gone to teach there, why don’t you come back and teach in colleges or universities here?”

I hear so many familiar sub-texts burgeoning behind that question that a tart reply forms itself and leaves my tongue before I have fully processed either the situation or the wisdom of my answer. Underlying his question is first the obvious patriotic guilt-trip: why have you abandoned the soil

that nurtured you, to give of your learning to others, to that Western nation already saturated with brain power? Why not stay here where our need is greater? Implicit in it is also the woman guilt-trip: why are you not at home with your parents, serving family, community, nation—above and beyond your self? How can you live there, a woman alone, incomplete, unsheltered by a husband? The daughterly guilt trip: you should stay at home as is proper—for you are after all property—until you have been appropriately disposed of by parental agency into husbandly hands, instead of remaining that unspeakable burden, the unmarried daughter, undutifully obstructing your parents' function in life, which is to be relieved of you. Much remains unsaid on my part too, that must perforce remain unsaid. His desire for random exchange is incommensurate with my impulse to round on him with all the collected detritus of my years of struggle against familial and societal demands. Was he really prepared to hear my answer?

Only two days ago at this very airport I had watched my brother and sister-in-law depart for Bali, en route to San Francisco. (Bali was ironically where they were headed for their honeymoon, as the only predominantly non-Muslim island in Indonesia, and hence—at that time—a tourist hot spot: no bans on alcohol, no apparent political troubles. Since the 2002 bombing, that is of course, no longer the case). In Karachi airport, they were both marked by their air of upper middle-class respectability and clearly conjugal status: he, calmly authoritative, responsibly in charge of their luggage and travel documents, she, despite her stylish jeans and unostentatious black shirt, identified by the clink of bridal gold and hennaed patterns on her arms that signaled the recentness and traditional nature of their wedding. This was the wedding that I had come to Pakistan to attend. Now, on the eve of my own departure, I could not help recalling the deference with which she was treated by the same officials, lowering their eyes before her confident calm and aura of sanctioned male protection. Her independent status as a feminist and banker working in New York remained invisible and irrelevant to them. I knew, as I heard this man asking me this question, that he would never have dared to address, let alone question, her when she passed through this very same gateway with my brother—not because of her class, but because he saw her as an accompanied wife. Not that I desired such protection or deference—what bothered me was that a woman should be treated with disrespect just because she was unaccompanied and apparently unmarried. Why should

that make a difference? And my anger rose. I was not marked—for him—as sacrosanct; I did not have a clearly demarcated place. Why didn't I come back and teach here? His question contained its own answer. His very act of brash, leering, haranguing demand, so exploitatively knowing of its own advantage, indicated, could he only see, why I had had to leave.

So what was it I said to him? Flaring up, clumsily turning upon him the force of my conjoined outrage at a culture, nation, and officials that had no respect for either women or education, I said: "If there were any colleges or universities left worth teaching at in this country I might think about it!" Silence for a moment. "No need to get angry," he rejoined reprovingly, immediately drawing upon an available discourse of men rebuking women for being unduly quick to take umbrage at purportedly innocuous advances. The force of my political sarcasm had been deflected, and recoded as female tetchiness. A little startled at myself, I scowled at him, refusing to be needled into saying any more. After a pause, he handed back my passport, and there, for the time being, the matter ended, as I walked on, a little shaken, to yet another security checkpoint.

## Respecting Gender—and Class

Back in Massachusetts, I described this encounter to various South Asian women friends as one of several anecdotes about my trip. The airport official represented then to me—and us—that last straw in a series of minor irritants that nevertheless embodied the demeaning power of a patriarchal postcolonial nation and society, the final gatekeeper harassing me on my return to freedom, taking advantage of the fact that I could not really do much about his abusive use of gender and state power. But it took a few retellings before I could process the complications of this otherwise not very unusual event—at least, not unusual for those of us who travel frequently across international borders, and indeed across the lines of cultural, gender, and class-constituted roles—shifting constantly, as I was in this instant, from two weeks as "good Pakistani daughter" visiting parents, to "feminist" "woman" "academic" "of color," returning to husband and profession. We swap such stories all the time, perhaps because we need them to learn to negotiate these multiple uncharted territories of being. My Pakistani friends would nod knowingly, or express surprise at my daring but silly riposte. "Thanks to a bad bout of food

poisoning, I'd been throwing up just before I left home, so I could barely stand, and was in no state to take the harassment," I explained. We all knew that he would not have challenged me had I been in the charge of a father, brother or husband. Nor did he stop any of the rich expatriate Pakistani businessmen going through to ask why they weren't doing their patriotic duty at home. As expatriate (and relatively privileged) women, we built solidarity upon our shared experience and understanding of "them." At that point, to us the gender injustice was uppermost. And it was not difficult to focus on the outrage we felt as women, for indeed this was a familiar kind of harassment, salt upon an old wound.

But that was not all it was. As always, there were many layers of history sedimented beneath this fraught interaction. What I could not acknowledge right away was that of course his question had hit home, that he had asked casually, unknowingly, as a nosy and obnoxious stranger who had the institutional power to do so, a question that nevertheless echoed the reproach I often heard in Pakistan, and that I had often asked myself—why was I not teaching and working where I was really needed? An old trap, pitting devotion and self-sacrifice against self-interest—though, I would plead, mine was a self-interest of a muted kind, a hope not of self-aggrandizement but of unharassed self-realization. For such reproaches conveniently forgot that when I wanted to do graduate work, those very same voices had also condemned me for even seeking that higher education. Behind us lay a personal history of bitterness and struggle, of the years I had spent as a single woman, refusing to submit to an arranged marriage, working for an American Ph.D. while battling the relentless Pakistani middle-class cultural ethos that denied women intellectual or professional aspiration—articulated through the importunate demands of my parents, their relatives, and friends. Most middle-class girls in Pakistan submitted to arranged marriages between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. And beyond this was the broader context of a postcolonial "Islamic" nation that allocated almost nothing of its budget to education (2.7 percent of the GNP in 2002), so that, unlike India, in 1998, Pakistan's overall adult illiteracy rate was 60 percent and 73 percent for women,<sup>1</sup> while its institutions of higher learning were in severe decline. The latter was the reason why, upon winning scholarships, my siblings and I had left home for educations abroad. Yet, as the oldest daughter, I still carried the pain of knowing that because of my insistence on shaping my own life, and

because of my refusal to subordinate my intellectual self to the cultural expectation of marriage and progeny, my parents had been regularly mocked and humiliated for failing to control and appropriately dispose of me. My eventual “late” marriage to a non-Pakistani of my own choosing—my husband is a British national, of mixed European and South Asian descent—was still culturally coded as an embarrassment to which my suffering parents had had to reconcile themselves. My question to myself was, therefore, cast in different terms than the airport official’s: he asked, why don’t you come back to serve “our” country (the very country that had, among other things, legally defined my female testimony as worth half that of a man’s); whereas I questioned such nationalism, and instead asked myself why I didn’t go back to teach, to fight for and with the women who live there. And so perhaps my irritation was induced not just by a man harassing a woman who could not simply walk away; it was also a displaced response that carried in it an accumulated anger, on edge from the gender discriminations of the previous two weeks brought to the fore by my brother’s five-day wedding, that a culture and country that did not treat its women with much respect should presume to demand that those very women return and devote themselves to a self-sacrificing patriotism.

For what had been bothering me throughout, I realized, was ultimately a matter of respect, or rather, of suffering continuous disrespect as a woman. I became aware of it the moment I arrived in Pakistan—it would descend upon me like a weight in the air, that subtle aura of dismissiveness, that expectation that I must humble myself, and retreat to my proper “place.” It was apparent not just in the legal, institutional, or religious structures of our lives, but also embedded deep in the cultural ethos, in the minutiae of the everyday. Perhaps that was why I had not returned for seven long years, until my father developed cancer. It was in the course of the several visits I made to my parents’ home during his illness, just as I was developing a new identity in my new American home—no longer an indigent graduate student, yet to prove herself, but as a scholar and teacher—that I realized most acutely for the first time that in the comfortable shelter of my parents’ upper middle class status, I was accorded respect as a “lady,” but not as a woman. Shopkeepers would kowtow to us, servants would cater to us, repairmen coming to the house would lower their eyes—for to them I was my father’s daughter, an English-speaking, economically comfortable, protected being, belonging in a well-known

niche. (Language reflected this too. Few English speakers in Pakistan refer to middle class women as “women.” In Urdu, the equivalent, “*aurat*,” somehow connotes something shameful and sexual as well as a lack of class position and respect—or respectability. Other terms carry more respect because they indicate status, such as “*begum*” or “*sahiba*.”) But ignorant male relatives and family friends would still dismiss my views (or not expect me to have any) about Clinton, the war in Bosnia, the economic crisis, or the environment. When someone mentioned that their servants (unusual even for villagers working in the city), were educating their son in a local school, and I asked about the daughter, who was kept illiterate at home, ridicule greeted my question. “Who educates daughters?!” My question apparently evinced only my foolish loss of perspective after my time in “America.” And yes, I understood that given the scarce resources of a poor country and its people, and the cultural disadvantages of educating daughters, a girl’s education was not a high priority, but no, I did not think mine was a foolish question.

But most recently it was my brother’s traditional wedding that had brought these issues searingly to the fore, reminding me again of how deep the gender discrimination lay, and of how normalized it was so that even the most “westernized” of us did not see it. In itself this wedding was an emotionally fraught family event. My father had been physically transformed by his treatments for the metastasis, and only my brother, sister, and I had been told by his doctors that he might not make it to the wedding day. It was miraculous to us that he could be present at these festivities, valiant despite his weakened body, yet heart-wrenchingly unable to participate fully. I was willing to put up with a lot to ensure him this last happiness. It was his only son’s wedding, an occasion of immense pride to both my parents, and even more precious because this would be the only child’s wedding that they would host at their home. My sister and I had forfeited the cultural traditions and fanfare of the family wedding by getting married in the United States. I was only too aware that our nuclear family was “at home” together for perhaps the last time—all three siblings had flown in from the United States. And yet inevitably, as is the case with family reunions, old histories and unresolved tension points created minefields amidst the celebration.

In Pakistani culture, a woman’s family celebrates her marriage, but with some restraint and humility, for it is ultimately an achievement for her

parents that they have cleared their obligations, and ensured that she is settled, or provided for. The wedding is not really about her. For a man's family, however, his wedding is an occasion for triumph and pride: his family is expected to behave like victors in some contest, the prize they bring home being the bride, as if they have done her family a favor by taking her off their hands, relieving her parents of their greatest responsibility. The "girl's" family ingratiate themselves to the "boy's," often submitting to demands for a dowry, giving in to most negotiations about place, time, number of guests, etc. There is no question who has the upper hand. This is because from the moment they are born, daughters, however much they may be loved, are assumed to be liabilities for their parents, while sons are clearly assets. Despite my decision to go along with much traditionalism on this difficult family occasion, I was only too aware that many seemingly innocuous wedding rituals stemmed from this general cultural devaluation of women. And unlike many women, I was unwilling to bask in the reflected glory of being a woman on the side of power (the bridegroom's family) when I abhorred the logic that endowed me with power (over the bride's family) only through the systemic depreciation of women. One day, for instance, the bride's mother sent us all individual expensive gifts—heavily embroidered *banarsi* saris for my mother, sister, and me, suits for my father, and even for my absent husband. But we, the bridegroom's family, I discovered, were not supposed to reciprocate by sending the bride's siblings or their spouses such gifts in return. When I asked why not, I was told harshly not to mess with tradition or to try introducing fancy foreign ways. "Tradition" dictated that the bride's family were supposed to appease the groom's relatives, buying their goodwill to ensure that she was not mistreated in her new home; there was no question of our reciprocation because there was no symmetry of power. And, I understood, as a woman even from the bridegroom's family it was not my place to protest against this system, even when it conferred upon me a momentary privilege. I may have married outside the community, and abandoned its traditions, but I was not allowed to tarnish my brother's wedding. (I had nothing against my brother—I was entirely happy for him, and understood his anguish at my father's condition—but even he had no choice but to follow familial expectations, imposed frequently by older women. His protests, for instance, were to no avail against the ostentatious exhibition of clothes and jewelry, my mother's gifts for the bride, laid out for the inspection of guests.)

I had not quite realized that the sisters' role at their brother's wedding—whether older or younger—was to serve as subsidiaries, as errand-doers under constant command, or as attendants flanking his glory. As the bridegroom's older sister, I was granted a sudden importance altogether new to me. And yet as the sister, I was still expected to stand in attendance, to observe rituals that I felt demeaned both myself and his bride—as women. When we arrived at the reception, my sister and I were supposed to walk my brother up to the stage, and sit there on either side of him, the cynosure of all eyes—until the bride was brought in by her sisters. (Later we were supposed to attend to her and escort her home with us, as if she had now become ours. Children, who internalize such cultural lessons only too well, made this explicit. “She belongs to us now,” the ones from the groom's side would declare jubilantly. This custom that she must be led in and out by others reflects, to my mind, both her lack of agency and her position as object of exchange, though it is no more embedded in patriarchy than the Western one of fathers giving away their daughters as brides.) Once the moulvi arrived (the Muslim priest—in this case, a large uncouth man with an unkempt beard reaching his paunch) we the “sisters” were supposed to clear off the stage while the men of the family gathered upon it to serve as witnesses for my brother's marriage vows. Women, of course, cannot be witnesses to a Muslim marriage. None of this was new to me, yet it was brought home with sudden starkness as I returned to experience rituals from which I had become happily distant. And this knowledge was reinforced by small things, such as the moulvi who would neither look at us nor greet us, nor stand aside as my sister and I stepped off the stage for him. His large silent body rudely striding forward literally barred our descent from the stage, so that we had to sidestep awkwardly around him, epitomizing for me again that obtrusive sense of male self-importance and zeal, that disregard for us as mere women getting in his way. It reminded me of another incident at an airport several years earlier, of another encounter with pious officiousness, when, at the age of eighteen, I was returning from my first year at college in the United States, as yet unaccustomed to traveling alone, and was stopped at a security checkpoint at Dubai airport by a man in flowing white Arab robes. Using hand gestures, he took my bag, but would not speak to me nor answer my questions, until a female security officer arrived to check my bag. It turned out that as a pious Muslim, he (supposedly) could not speak to a woman who was not kin. Even though I had been raised in Pakistan, I

did not understand that, so it only intensified my alarm at being stopped in this layover airport by a man who could (or would) not deign to address me.

Over this two-week sojourn in Pakistan, then, it was perhaps this accumulation of disrespect for women, to which I had become unhabituated in my years abroad, that triggered my reaction to the airport official as I was leaving. But it took yet another retelling before I saw further layers to this story. In re-vision it has become a text to which I am impelled to return, because to me it calls for much the kind of scholarly (self)critical analysis I devote to my more conventional literary-critical essays. For I was not the only one fighting a displaced battle. The airport official was too. Yes, I was fighting a *gender* battle, one that I'd been fighting for years with my family (much though I love them), and now with him as representative of a state, society, and religion (much though I fight Western misrepresentations of them) to which my family by and large subscribed. But he, meanwhile, was also fighting a *class* battle.

I probably would not recognize this man if I saw him again. I can only guess that he stands at that airport gate everyday checking the passports of people who pass through his hands, heading off to their surely more comfortable jobs and homes in America, Europe, or the Middle East. I imagine he is from a fairly poor, lower middle-class family, with perhaps a wife, young children, aging parents, and younger siblings to support, a sister to "marry off" and settle respectably, a brother to educate. With a fixed low state salary, and few opportunities of getting bribes to supplement it, he probably goes home at night chugging down poorly lit, potholed streets on an unreliable motor scooter, to an unsafe, distant, dusty part of the city, probably without adequate water, sanitation, or electricity. And I wonder how much education he managed to acquire. He probably does not come very often across passports that say "Occupation: College professor." He probably sensed that I—looking past him, dressed quietly but defiantly in Western slacks and loose sweater, my body not rendered respectably shapeless in a ballooning *shalwar-kameez-dupatta*—couldn't wait to get on that plane. Perhaps he sensed that I, by contrast, had been raised in a nice house with a nice garden in a nice neighborhood, educated in English by convent nuns, that I had never taken public transport. It may have surprised him, though, to learn that actually my family was by no means affluent (certainly nothing compared to the obscenely rich we went to school with), that my father strove to acquire his education and eventual salaried job starting from extremely strained circumstances,

and that my siblings and I had “done so well” in part because my parents had diverted a large proportion of their resources into our early education. And so why should he not try to halt me after all, as I followed people like me in a hurry to leave, in every sense, this speedily disintegrating country, to delay me, perhaps to rethink this exodus. And to that extent, I think, he succeeded.

And yet he was also a man stopping a woman who was unable to protest or lodge complaint, at least there, a man who chose to accost someone that he knew was disadvantaged, instead of picking a woman accompanied by a man, or simply, another man. He was, in other words, using *gender* advantage to fight a *class* battle. And I, equally unwittingly caught in these contradictory intersections of power axes, was using *class* privilege to fight a *gender* battle. He held my passport in his hands, but I had a “green card,” that magical ticket to the green pastures of permanent residency in the United States, backed by the green of American money and suggestive also perhaps of the enviable green of the other side of the fence that he had never seen. He could detain me briefly in Pakistan, to which I had chosen briefly to return, but, as I reflected later, I could leave, and live permanently where he could not. His threatening officialdom, familiarity and veiled sexual aggression were all part and parcel of his struggle to fight and make demands with the only weapons he had in a battle of material and symbolic resources that he had already lost. I think I knew at that moment when I bridled at his questioning that I could afford to be outraged by his familiarity, his misuse of masculine, uniformed power because I also knew that he could not really do me much harm. He fought my class privilege with the weapons of his gender and I fought back with those of my class. And these different class and gender positions in turn affected how we understood our postcolonial national duty: uncaring of the discriminatory ways that Pakistani law and culture positions women, he chauvinistically demanded a patriotic loyalty and effort at rebuilding a country that I felt had little validity, little claim on me, given the way that Pakistan’s institutional and cultural systems positioned and disenfranchised me.

## Privilege and Outrage

In itself this was no unusual event. It was one of myriad experiences that reflect the ironies and complexities of multiply constituted identities, when

the underprivileged hold some form of power over the relatively privileged: every time armed dacoits in Pakistan break into middle-class homes to demand goods at gunpoint; every time the menial state official is rude to the citizen whose papers he has the power to handle; every time the underpaid policeman threateningly extorts a bribe from the cavorting couples he stops at night on lonely beaches. And these complicated battles occur every time the affluent or white woman is nasty to men of the underclass or non-white race, precisely because as a woman, less powerful than men of her class or race, she is more threatened by their politics of resistance. That is why, in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, the Anglo-Indian women are more obnoxious to Indian men than the white men are, or, in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the evil aunt Baby Kochamma is threatened by the Communist class politics—coded as sexual virility—of the Untouchable Velutha. It is an example of what Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have called “displaced abjection,” when the relatively powerless pick on those even more powerless than themselves (Stallybrass and White 1986, 19, 53). However, here there is no vertical ladder of power, but precisely the more of some and less of other forms of power that produce the complicated dynamic I describe. But these experiences are important cultural texts that require decoding, working through, understanding, as perhaps the necessary first step towards amelioration of such systemic problems. I describe my experience here as an occasion, then, that required two or three retellings before it took me past the initial outrage to some more complicated insights. Not that I want to use this as a “lesson,” least of all, an experience from the “third world” to enlighten those of us who live in the “first,” but I think there are several important points to be noted here, regardless of where we live, and perhaps many more that I cannot yet see, particularly as we attempt to ground our theoretical understanding in the practice of everyday lives. In writing this autobiographical account I am not, then, I hope, indulging in what has been called navel-gazing, nor merely attempting to work through an occasion of ethical and political self-instruction. Rather, as Sherif Hetata writes in a recent PMLA issue, autobiography, especially by women, reveals how a self is constructed in a society, and therefore can be illuminating about that society and more generally about the conditions of our lives (2003).<sup>2</sup>

As feminists located in the United States, postcolonial or otherwise,

many of us have come to experience outrage as a learned knee-jerk response, as an immediate, unthinking, and self-righteous reaction to what we perceive as sexist or racist behavior. I have known only too many zealously feminist colleagues who have been a little too apt to pronounce other colleagues' actions or attitudes either racist or sexist—or both. (Class or other forms of prejudice usually do not figure in these allegations.) Not only does that claim victim status, demanding some kind of restitution for grievance, and enabling a self-fulfilling satisfaction at being proved right, but also, it misreads and overlooks the complex dynamics and histories that underlie human motivation. “Sexism” and “racism” are easy labels ultimately inadequate for the more complicated power dynamics that we must in fact learn to decode. Outrage can be useful if it instigates political action and commitment to a just cause, but it can also be pernicious if it stems from complacency and forestalls fairness in our treatment of others.

Though this is terribly obvious to some of us, it bears insistent repeating: at no time is there ever operative a singular gender battle or class battle or race battle—culture, nation, religion, ethnicity, and the rest of these multiple determinants of identity are always there rolled in together, *whether we know it or not*. But what is perhaps less obvious is that we are always enmeshed in the conflicting dynamics of different lines of power that constitute our identities not only in the terms in which *we* perceive ourselves, but also in the terms in which *others* perceive us. To the airport official I did not represent simply a woman he could torment, but I was a representative of the privileged classes that he could, for once, address. And I was unaware at the time that my class position, which I took for granted, was more salient to him than it was to me, just as he was probably unaware that his gender power, which he took for granted, struck me with more force than his social or economic status. To me, he did not represent a person who probably lived a difficult and disadvantaged life, debilitated by the inequities and lack of opportunity pervasive in an impoverished postcolonial country like Pakistan, a nation burdened by inter-ethnic strife, communalism, nepotism, mind-boggling corruption, political apathy, increasing religious fanaticism, economic dependency, and years of military rule. To me then he seemed just one more in a series of men who enforced and enjoyed an unjust system that empowered them and disempowered me. But we are always all that and more. Moreover, as I

continue to realize, the asymmetry or disparity of power is felt with far more force by those who are disadvantaged by it. The white middle-class man may not see his privilege in relation to even the white middle-class woman (who can see and resent it), just as the brown middle-class woman may not see hers in relation to, for example, the white working class woman (who can also see and resent it).

Despite all our theoretical advances and self-awareness, in contemporary academic practice and popular discourse we still tend to talk and think about “women” in and across national borders as if they were undifferentiated by varying determinants such as class, ethnicity, age, religion. And even when we do talk about these different dimensions of identity, we do so as if each were just another angle, another aspect of their disempowerment, without considering how differently each of these factors can at once both endow and undermine power. It is not simply the case that women of, say, a higher class can have certain advantages despite their gender. Interestingly, sometimes women of a certain class or age gain certain privileges *because* they are considered lesser as women. As feminists, postcolonial or otherwise, we also need to attend to the ways some women are unduly *advantaged* by their gender status. There are sometimes oddly contradictory advantages to be noted even in contexts where “women” of all ages, classes, races, and so on are understood to be “oppressed.” Part of my point in describing the scenario in detail above is to suggest the strange privileges that accrue to (some) women precisely as the less-than-equal side of a patriarchal binary structure. As a woman travelling alone through Karachi airport, for instance, I have found that my luggage is rarely scrutinized or opened. I have never had to open my bags for customs officers (who are always male). Perhaps there is a strange reluctance to peer into the contents of feminine privacy, or an old-fashioned, paternalistic or courtly disinclination to harass. Nor am I allowed to lift my own luggage, though I insist on doing so, and usually offend eager helpers who jump forward, impelled by either gallantry or hope of pecuniary reward. If a middle-class Pakistani woman were to overcome deeply inculcated injunctions against making a scene in public, there is also a strong likelihood that, though there may be little police protection, there would be an immediate public gathered to assist, to take up arms against her tormentor. (And in fact once long ago I was helped by complete strangers when I raised an outcry against a policeman who was about to

tow my car because he wanted a bribe.) This is by no means to idealize or validate what I recognize as a system of privilege that accrues from a perniciously over-protective and classed system that regards (some) women as incapable and therefore in need of special assistance. (Poor women are not helped by affluent men.) But it does mean that “oppression” is not a crudely monolithic thing, that patriarchy accrues invisible benefits that some of us take for granted, benefits—such as unmerited deference from members of the underclass—that we might first need to recognize and then to reject. And it also means that third world women are not subjects for the unalleviated pity and sympathy of their first world peers, that they are not all equal sufferers of torment and injustice, and that some may be themselves complicit in systems that bring them—us—undue advantages.

It would also be well to remember that sexism, racism or patriarchy are systems that operate over and beyond the intentions or agency of individuals or groups, drawing all into their wake. While some women can be privileged by patriarchal systems, some men can actually be burdened by them. As a teacher at a premier women’s college in the United States, I remain astonished at how many of our students disavow feminism because they believe that feminism simply entails blaming men, in holding men as a biological group responsible for all ills that afflict female lives. (Hence, by way of this bad logic and impoverished definition of feminism, many refuse to be “feminist” at all, or to believe that men can also be feminist.) This misapprehension also produces a defensiveness and backlash on the part of young college educated South Asian men in the United States who feel unduly and individually blamed by what they take to be “the” feminist position. (Their reaction then is to claim that they personally are not sexist, rather than to examine how they are positioned within a system that induces certain patterns of behavior, based upon certain implicit gender assumptions.) Perhaps it needs to be said again and again that patriarchy is a system that also privileges some women and places undue burdens upon some men. Men of all ranks and races under patriarchy can certainly be empowered but also burdened by the unshared responsibilities of being sole breadwinners and decision makers in a system that certainly gives them power but that also allows no recourse for assistance, no safety valves, setting impossible standards and imposing pressures that in turn can induce abusive behavior. It is often because they have to bear the entire

burden of supporting an extended family that some South Asian men take it out on their more sheltered wives, who can make demands while oblivious to the struggles, barriers, or ignominy those men have to face on their behalf. The problem remains the system, and the ways in which systemic social forms structure human behavior. In fact, both men and women can be feminist in their efforts to achieve equity and to diminish the perniciousness of such systemic problems.

Keeping these complexities in mind, feminist outrage, then, needs to be carefully considered and rethought, not in order to reject feminism or outrage, but in order to integrate into a transnational feminist perspective and politics an understanding of the various factors that complicate gendered power. It is salutary to recall that such outrage is itself a reaction that often stems from privilege and a sense of entitlement, from having learned to expect better and from having enough of a sense of security to protest. (While, for instance, I could feel outrage and respond to the airport official, impoverished Pakistani women living in rural areas who are the victims of truly tyrannical feudal codes of honor have neither the luxury of feeling outrage nor can they take the risks of expressing it.)

Feeling outrage is rather different from feeling rage, although the two are often conflated, precisely because outrage carries an element of surprise, a surprise that springs from the expectation that things should be otherwise. Outrage is tied to a moment, it is a response to a particular insult or injury, whereas rage is more cumulative and continuous. Rage and outrage, though obviously related, are actually linked to slightly different etymological roots. Rage comes from the Late Latin “*rabia*,” connoting forceful, violent anger, even madness. Outrage comes from the classical Latin “*ultra*” via Old French “*oultre*,” or beyond, and carries the sense of both excess, the crossing of boundaries, and of exceeding resultant anger, “out” + “rage” (Neufeld et al., 1988). As a noun, “outrage” denotes both the act of inflicting an extreme insult or injury, something beyond bounds, and the legitimate grievance of someone responding to that act. In this essay, I use the term “outrage” in this latter sense, as an indignant response to an event, to some infringement of rights.

The concept of righteous rage has often been deployed by U.S. feminists and race theorists to describe the legitimate emotions of those disempowered by pervasive, systematic discrimination on the basis of their putative race or gender. In the 1981 anti-pornography documentary film,

Not a Love Story, the white feminist Robin Morgan adapts James Baldwin's statement, "To be black and conscious in America is to live in a constant state of rage" (see note 3), to: "To be female and conscious, anywhere on the planet, is to be in continual state of rage."<sup>3</sup> (One problem, of course, with such a formulation is that it assumes a uniformity of responses. Some women may be angry about the way feminism positions them, while others may not be able to see what they should be enraged about.) Laura Kipnis, the feminist theorist and video artist, takes as a given the pervasiveness of female rage against men in both her 1987 video "A Man's Woman" and the 1993 Introduction to her book, *Ecstasy Unlimited*. More recently, the black feminist bell hooks has attempted to recuperate black rage as a healing and necessary process (1995, 8–20, 21–30). Instead of regarding that rage as illegitimate or pathological, restricted to angry men of the underclass (as the popular media would have us believe), she argues, we need to understand it as a more widespread and "appropriate response to injustice" (26). Black people in the United States, even those who have been "successful," she writes, have learned to repress their rage at the continuous racism they experience. But, she insists, their passivity, silence, and self-repression become complicit with that racism. Allowing oneself to feel rage, for hooks, is not destructive but constructive: it is psychically healing; it asserts the subjectivity that has been historically denied to African Americans; and it can allow middle-class black people to build solidarity with working-class black people and work toward revolutionary movements that demand change.

An important difference between the kind of outrage I am urging wariness of, and the rage that hooks describes, is that they occur in different kinds of situations, and imply a somewhat different politics. The rage hooks identifies is felt by those who are clearly helpless and have little recourse against the power that acts upon them. Even as a black middle-class professional woman hooks could not do much about the taxi driver who refused her entry into his cab, or about the airline officials who barred a black woman friend from taking her ticketed first-class seat. (Interestingly, hooks' title essay, "Killing Rage: Militant Resistance," which I had not read until I had written most of this essay, also takes as its starting point an occasion of mistreatment—both racism and sexism—that she experienced on an airplane. Encounters with strangers in the course of travel seem to heighten such experiences, perhaps because our identities—

national, racial, ethnic, class, or gender—are perceived more simply as marked upon our bodies.) However, unlike the rage hooks describes, the emotional and political reaction of outrage I am trying to problematize and think through more critically is directed at those with more of some kinds of power and less of other kinds than the person feeling outraged—like the upper middle class woman harassed by a relatively less privileged but more powerful state official. Citing a Buddhist monk, hooks argues that the “self-recovery” of allowing oneself to feel rage enables those victimized to “see [more] clearly” (18). But seeing clearly surely also involves seeing complexity, a complexity that includes being able to see how one may be simultaneously advantaged and disadvantaged by a social system. That is not to recommend negating or repressing the outrage (or rage) that we might feel as postcolonialists and feminists, but rather, to school it: to fight against injustice, but also to understand that there may be more than one kind of injustice operative at one time.

Thus, feminist or postcolonial outrage is not a reaction to be disavowed entirely, because it can also create a sense of legitimate grievance in response to some form of violation. In fact it is precisely its frequent grounding in privilege that suggests that we need to revalue and rethink our understanding of both outrage and privilege. In making place for a schooled outrage, we might also reconsider privilege and its unexpected links to responsible political practice. Lately, in postcolonial exchanges there has developed a rather dismissive attitude toward those who hold certain forms of privilege because their difficulties cannot compare with those of the “true” subaltern. But those privileged in certain ways still experience discrimination or injustice in other ways, and sometimes it is that very privilege that enables them to recognize the problem and to protest. To return to my story, for instance, one reader of an early version of this essay drew attention to my “class privilege” as if that somehow undermined my credibility, as if I had been somehow guilty of disingenuousness in eliding or glossing over that privilege. For one thing, as I hope to have shown, such “privilege” is itself highly contingent and relative. More to the point, since my effort was precisely to foreground that “privilege” and to suggest that it takes an act of will and of imagination to see and understand the position of those less privileged, especially when they may hold power over us in other ways, this objection struck me as rather strange. This tendency to denounce the insights of “privilege” *a priori*

seems to me then not only a little glib and self-righteous, but, more importantly, it risks ignoring something quite crucial. As I thought about that reader, I realized that I was interested in analyzing the incident I describe in this essay not simply because it argues for a “class based understanding of gendered interactions,” but rather, because it reveals how privilege—in some cases—can actually enable us to see and respond to injustice.

Interestingly, if surrendering to a sense of outrage can blind us to the complexities of others’ situations, having the privilege to feel outrage can conversely also enable us to see and react against injustice. In my case, it was my relative class privilege, my location in the United States and my ability to travel to and from Pakistan, that enabled me to see and question the gender injustice. Many poorer women who are more habituated to mistreatment, or those who are more compliant because they are hegemonized by a system that instills in them the seeming propriety and inevitability of their positions, can neither see that systemic oppression nor question the ways in which they are denied respect or made to matter less. Moreover, it was ironically my class privilege that enabled me—by affording me the education and opportunity to learn differently elsewhere—to see my class privilege. (Such a move toward self-critical understanding is not usually the case with other forms of privilege.) The irony about privilege then is that it can produce both blindness and insight. In most of the cases that we are familiar with, privilege leads to blindness, where the privileged cannot even see the benefits that their privilege brings them (being white, male, etc.). But at the same time, sometimes it is precisely those who are privileged in some ways who are able to identify certain forms of injustice and can afford to contest them. If this dual quality of privilege, and the outrage it produces, enables us to identify injustice and to act against it, then the *a priori* antipathy to critiques that come from privilege runs the troubling risk of disallowing and foreclosing more complex political reactions. What we need ultimately then is a sense of outrage that is able to see the complications of its own position in relation to others and yet also act against the injustices it sees.

As I look back now to my encounter with the airport official, I realize that I needed to question my initial sense of outrage, and complicate it with an understanding of the other factors that fed the official’s behavior, such as my education, location, and class privilege relative to his. But at the

same time I also know that I am not willing to let that outrage go altogether, or to disavow my initial reaction, because in some ways it was legitimate—as a reaction to an inappropriate and gendered use of official power. Moreover, it was that outrage that induced me to act, both to refuse to submit to the harassment, at least without registering some protest, and, by writing this essay, to reflect on the broader problem of crafting an appropriate political response. Ultimately it was not in spite, but rather because of the privilege of my education that I was able first to identify something wrong with the official's behavior, then to investigate my own reaction, and finally, I hope, to move productively beyond it.

Having said that, of course, I recognize that the encounter itself was not a success—which is perhaps why I keep returning to it. In retrospect, we always like to rehearse what we could or should have said. I doubt if another such opportunity will arise again, but if it does, perhaps I can ask him a question instead: “And what if I was to return, would you let me teach your daughters?” I wonder, though, given what I might teach them, if he would.

#### NOTE

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1. EduMAG, 2003. Islamabad, Pakistan. <http://www.edumag.com/statsliteracy.html>. (Source: Pakistan District Census Report (DSR), Population Census Organization, Statistics Division). Estimates vary somewhat, depending on the source, but the picture remains generally dismal. World Bank figures are even lower. For 2002, according to the World Bank, female literacy in Pakistan was 26 percent and male literacy 52 percent. Of course aggregate figures do not show the variation by region or age; in some rural areas of Baluchistan the female literacy rate is as low as 8 percent. (<http://education.guardian.co.uk/Print/0,3858,4060827,00.html>)
2. See also Nancy K. Miller.
3. Morgan misquotes Baldwin slightly. See his essay (1955).

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