



Barbaric Brown
Three Respon





Men and Civilized White Ladies: Responses to Vic Sarin's "Partition"

AMINA RAI, USAMAH ANSARI AND SUMAYYA KASSAMALI

As diasporic South Asians, the event of Partition has left a salient mark on how we imagine history. Vic Sarin's *Partition*, starring Kristen Kreuk (as Naseem Khan) and Jimi Mistry (as Gian Singh), is not only offensive to this history but contains a colonialist discourse concerning the supposed barbarity of South Asians. Yet in discussing this film, one must begin by asking why was it made? Due to the large number of "Partition films" that have already been made in Bollywood and Pakistan it is clear to us that *Partition* was made to give a western audience an essentialized vision of our inherent bar-

barity. More so it aimed to present a longing for a colonial past – something these other films could not accomplish. Casting Kristen Kreuk to play a South Asian woman and of course using inconsistent Indian accents are just two examples of how the film betrays its intended audience

The story revolves around the romance of Naseem (a Muslim) and Gian (a Sikh) during tumultuous times. Gian finds Naseem after she escapes the massacre of her Muslim caravan traveling to Pakistan at Partition (in an obvious West Coast Canadian rainforest meant to somehow represent the Punjab). He keeps her in his house and eventually marries her. Soon after, she goes to Pakistan after a lingering signifier of colonialism –

Margaret Stilwell (Neve Campbell) – tracks down her family in a village near Lahore. Naseem’s brutal Muslim brothers, however, do not let her return to India with her Sikh husband. Only by fleeing to the civility of England does Naseem find solace. Though anthropologist Veena Das has revealed that many women who were left on the ‘other side’ of the border did not wish to be repatriated with their kin, Das importantly links this to the desire of the modern nation state to purge the Other – not an abhorrent and essentialist construction of religious communal identity that this film posits.

The following offers three readings of the film from three distinct diasporic positions. Our alternative readings will problematize Vic Sarin’s claim to legitimacy and authenticity through his being Indo-Canadian. We will not focus on the historical inadequacies—of which there are many, for example the ridiculous scene of Muslims praying to the call to prayer and Muslims being identifiable by colourful kafiyahs – but will instead examine how the film reproduces a racialized hierarchy and ignores the colonial roots of Partition. One of us will also reflect on being pawns to the film’s production.

Kristen Kreuk’s Fair and Lovely Face: The New Image of South Asian Women

AMINA RAI

As a Pakistani woman born and raised in Canada, my connection to the India-Pakistan partition is derived from the personal stories told amongst our families. Accessing these emotional histories of hardship that our grandparents and their families faced during the critical period of Pakistan’s inception has been one of the most personal ways in which our cultural and ethnic identities are maintained in the diaspora. This is further complimented by Bollywood partition films through which our diasporic generation is provided visual imageries of the experiences of departing and relocating across the border.

When I was contacted by the production team of Partition to talk to Kristen Kreuk about being a South Asian woman, I believed that perhaps I could play a part in bringing this important history close to home. However, my participation in a focus group with Kreuk resulted in the filmmakers violating the lived experiences of our families.

These experiences were used in the film to visually hijack South Asian women’s identities. As noted above, the desire to reach out to the intended audience obviously required the ensuring of a relational connection between the actors and the audience. Through this process, the lines between colonizer and colonized become obscured as the western hegemonic popular culture asserts its power to contort and manipulate the visual history of the Indian-Pakistani partition. The film clings to its claims of ‘authenticity’ because the filmmakers decided to talk to a few South Asian women. The result is a sense of a malleable history where there appears to be no violation in giving the lead role to a western woman pretending to be South Asian.

Being implicated in the process of legitimizing Kristen Kreuk’s credibility to play the role of a south Asian Muslim woman through the focus groups we held with her, has been a frustrating realization of identity appropriation. I have ultimately realized that our superficial correspondence with Kreuk and her role as researcher has given her the ability to defend the legitimacy of playing the character of Naseem. Our focus groups (which consisted of two sessions) achieved no in-depth unfolding of our positional identity as young Muslim diasporic women and our relation to the India-Pakistan Partition. Never was it discussed that Kristen Kreuk is not a South Asian woman (but rather has a Chinese and Dutch heritage). Ultimately, the focus groups were only logistical formalities designed to legitimize Kristen in her role. In doing so, I was positioned as the unheard voice of humbled South Asian diasporic communities who were showered by the great privilege of having our families’ experiences of Partition shared with Kristen; how very benevolent of her.

This sense of being used, exploited and having our identities hijacked was complimented in the film itself. Our introduction to Kristen’s character emerges through a large pool of Muslims journeying to Pakistan. In a sea of brown skins the camera zooms in to the white purity of Naseem (Kristen Kreuk). Albeit trying to portray matted brown, her appearance reflects nothing less than a western woman playing a lowly role (playing the subordinate Other). Further disturbing are the images of brown skin exploited and exposed – the epitome of which is a dead South Asian woman’s naked nipple in full view as a baby tries to suckle it for milk. These im-

ages mirror typical Orientalist themes that produce knee-jerk reactions with the use of shock and awe tactics to further dehumanize the Other. Within the film's construction of South Asian conflict, racial profiling (using racialized markers to signify a subject) was extenuated to reaffirm white vs. brown trappings. Of Naseem's brothers, for example, the darker skinned Akbar (Arya Babbar) was the villainous character who beat Gian mercilessly while the other brother, lighter in complexion, exerted limited aggression in relation.

In watching the film, then, I was again forced to reflect on my role in the film's production. Participating in the focus group was only one of a checklist of tasks the production team undertook to access our community. We received emails asking us to help find members of our South Asian community to play specific racial characters. We were asked, "Do you know of any woman 60 to 70 years of age that would be willing to attend the focus group? How about an old South Asian man that can play an Imam and recite the khul? What about young Sikh men adorning turbans?" This is clearly a calculated attempt to gain access to our community and exploit our knowledge to produce some sense of 'authenticity'—something the film desperately required. This example is best illustrated by my Sikh co-worker who fulfilled the stipulations and was asked to be an extra for a scene being shot in Langley, British Columbia. He however was, , turned back because he did not have a full-grown beard. This emphasis on categorical racial markings of Sikhs and Muslims thus reveals the stereotypical and essentialist interpretation tightly maintained by the production team. What is particularly ironic is how this desire to have physical 'authenticity' was conveniently dismissed when determining the lead role for the movie. Indeed it was awarded to the most 'exotic', non-white looking western actress who could attempt to – with the stretch of our imaginations and at the expense of not knowing better – pull off a lead role as a South Asian woman without needing to be one.

I left the movie theatre feeling angry and betrayed at being duped into aiding the very process through which this ethnic-appropriated film was created and through which it gained notoriety for its 'authenticity'. Just as Margaret had felt so at home in India, a place where her whiteness and colonial roots car-

ried status and superiority, Kristen Kreuk's ability to perform the role of Naseem was based on her western celebrity status that provided her the ability to access and play the racial Other. And just as Naseem was rescued and taken to a place of refuge in England (the ultimate act of white benevolence), we too are being "saved" by Kristen Kreuk's graciousness in telling the western world our histories.

Our Barbarity and Their Burden: The Longing for Colonial Bliss

USAMAH ANSARI

Central to the rhetoric of "Partition" is the idea that the Partition of India and Pakistan was natural to the irrational character of South Asian communal identities. Because, after all, these are people that simply cannot get along without the civility of a colonial administration. Thus the film begins with a caption claiming that "Islamic Pakistan" and "Secular India" were partitioned to prevent bloodshed. These captions do indeed set the stage for the film by saying two important things. Firstly, they implicitly claim that the modern nation state is not produced through violence but is something that is needed to prevent the barbaric violence inherent to the backward character of South Asians. This also serves to produce India as less villainous than Pakistan, because it is named 'secular'. As a diasporic Indian Muslim, it is clear that the violence of Hindu-hegemony on Muslim and Sikh minorities in India problematizes what this 'secular' actually means. The second thing the captions do is ignore the historical unfolding of the Partition. But like the rest of the film, they particularly obscure how colonialism itself produced the notion of coherent and closed communities based on religious identity and was thus deeply implicated in Partition.

After the captions, we see Margaret (the white helper) peering onto a polo field. So the framework of the film is set: the white audience can see through Margaret's eyes at the blissful colonial orchestra on the polo ground where whites and browns are playing together, drinking together, and wearing their colourful regalia. This contrasts with the chaos that comes later in the film, when the irrational browns have taken control and from which bloodshed is a necessary product. We are thus constantly reminded of the bliss and harmony colonialism once provid-

ed. For example, Margaret constantly reminisces about the legacy of her father who was a British administrator, a legacy she uses to help the two protagonists save themselves from the barbarity of their people. Another important signifier of this longing is the deceased soldier Andrew. He is Margaret's brother and was Gian's close friend in the colonial Indian army. Gian constantly clings to Andrew's whistle, and there are often flashbacks to Andrew's death in Myanmar fighting for the British. This is produced as heroic camaraderie; nothing like the barbaric and irrational communal violence that comes with post-colonial chaos.

And indeed Gian himself represents the civility of the British. His refusal to partake in violence against Muslims and taking a Muslim bride is directly linked to his memory of serving the colonial army. Indeed when he travels to Pakistan to try and take Naseem back to India with him, and her Muslim brothers brutally beat him, he exclaims that in the British Indian army he "fought for India: for Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims – for everyone!" Thus the experience of colonial military service is premised on a deeply benevolent colonialism that serves everyone's interests and formulates friendships across difference (between, say, Andrew and Gian) and does not use violence for imperial rule. This contrasts the irrational and brutal violence that comes when the colonial apparatus is dismantled. For, if we are left to our own devices, we just erupt into violence. The colonial army thus civilized Gian; a civility the film clings to through certain markers (Margaret's dad's legacy, Andrew's whistle, Gian's enlightenment). And indeed to make this civility more recognizable, Margaret rushes to Gian's rescue when Naseem's brothers are beating him. Because, after all, only through Margaret and her colonial legacy can our characters ever protect themselves against their barbaric communities.

But perhaps I am harping too much on colonialism. There are other ways that 'our barbarity' is signified. Indeed the way the nation state (especially India) is normalized is important in producing religious or cultural identity as irrational and violent. Thus the Indian state's complicity in violence is never approached. Indeed the caption stating India is secular is complimented with the lack of Hindu characters, obscuring India's underlying Hindu basis. The question, then, is why do only Muslims and Sikhs (two mi-

norities within India) engage in brutality while the group who becomes dominant in India can walk away with bloodless hands? The only two identifiably Hindu characters, the bureaucrat Sharma and Gian's store-keeper friend, are neutral to violence; indeed the store-keeper is one of the only enlightened people in his village who prevent the murderous Sikh community from taking Naseem from Gian. There are thus parallels between the Hindu character's benevolence, the citation of Gandhi in the beginning of the film (as a caption), and the obscuring of India's state violence. Pakistan, however, as the 'Islamic state', is far more implicated in violence.

The message, ultimately, is clear: our religious and cultural identities are the origins for our brutal natures. Clinging to markers of colonial civility and depending on the 'secular' Indian state are our only hopes for redemption. It is no surprise, then, that the saviour white characters – Margaret and her beau Walter – share a glance when Margaret is taking Naseem on the train to escape her brothers in Pakistan (and go to England). Their glance at once lets the western audience know that their burden has not yet been lightened since the brutality of South Asian culture was not quite stamped out by their administration; there is, indeed, work to be done.

Under Those Turbans and Kafiyahs: Contextualizing "Partition" in post-9/11 Canada

SUMAYYA KASSAMALI

Although my family is rooted many generations ago in Gujarat, I come to the South Asian diaspora via the trade routes and passages of the East African coast. Thus originally of India and yet Muslim, my relationship to Partition is unstable and distant, focusing not on attempting to reconcile cultural identity with a nation-state to call "back home", but on co-implicability. I seek to draw out the connections: how the colonial histories of India connect to those of Canada, to the racism I see our communities subject to here, and how this film's representations of Partition may be further implicated in these processes. Sarin's *Partition* was created not in 1947 India but in 2007 Canada, and regardless of directorial intention, it is impossible to separate this film from the social and political context into which it was released. That *Partition* is a visual representation of

Sikh-and-Muslim; brown-on-brown violence in a context where, soon after 9/11, turbaned Sikhs were attacked due to their assumed association with Muslims and thereby “terrorism”, therefore, is of great importance. Partition is catered to a western audience – already bombarded with images of violent Muslims and their patriarchal and barbaric culture – in a country responsible for detaining, imprisoning, and deporting Muslims to torture perhaps epitomizes the ironic and reductionist nature of its underlying racist tendencies.

Despite claims to “neutrality” because gory acts of bloodshed are attributed to both (and, notably, only) Muslims and Sikhs, the particular portrayals of Naseem’s family and Gian’s conversion in the film clearly reinforce an Islamophobic rhetoric that is already pervasive in the contemporary Canadian climate of racial profiling and war. A recent Georgia Straight review described Kristin Kreuk’s character as “a frequently teary Muslim woman”, referring no doubt to the many trials Naseem faces as she is subject to the external violence of Sikhs first and the internal violence of her Muslim brothers after. As mentioned above, the opening caption describing the partitioning of “secular India” and “Islamic Pakistan” to prevent bloodshed immediately identifies Pakistan and its violence with Muslimness. This is illustrated in the film by Pakistan’s corrupt officials, degrading jails, and fortress-like border. Furthermore, Naseem’s patriarchal and violent brothers – to whom both her mother and herself are subject – take centre stage as the primary representation of Muslim males within the film. Their barbarity, notably gendered in its patriarchy, is intense enough to be directed not only against Sikhs but also against their own sister, and even after Gian presents himself as a Muslim convert.

Gian’s conversion serves as another deeply disturbing and pivotal moment within the film. Two months after Naseem was meant to return to India, Gian travels to Delhi in an attempt to obtain permission to cross the border into Pakistan to find her. Told that “it is impossible, only Muslims can go into Pakistan”, Gian goes to a mosque to become (or at least appear) Muslim. While this trivialization of religious conversion may be justified given his desperation to find his wife, it still serves to reinforce a notion that the violence of Partition was simply about religio-

cultural animosity and not linked to (colonial) histories, politics or economic contexts. Furthermore, it conveniently suggests that South Asian peoples would be able to get along if they could only see how they are the same in the end; under the cloth of the turbans and kafiyahs, and with a bit less hair. Indeed apart from a brief aesthetically appealing glimpse of Gian and Naseem praying in respectively Sikh and Muslim ways, there is no mention of Naseem’s religion. Does she simply give up her Islam in order to marry Gian? Does she convert to Sikhism? Does she pass any of her traditions on to her son? Apparently these are all unimportant details; for if we could all see (as Gian does, thanks to his colonial civilizing) the potential for love across these trivial differences – and ignore the structural divisions within a communalism wrought by colonial practices – peace and harmony would reign supreme.

The actual scene of Gian’s conversion highlights this. The image of Gian entering a mosque, unwrapping his turban and slowly chopping off his long strands of hair is a deeply violating portrayal of the destruction of a sacred marker of his Sikhism. It recalls a notable similarity to the western fascination with unveiling the Muslim woman, an Orientalist erotic and racist fantasy that is wrought with desires for conquest, control, and making her accessible to the violent western gaze. And the ‘tsk-tsk-ing’ audience, disgusted as they are by the irrational violence, are further freed from linking this violence to colonialism through the figure of Margaret. We find her being interrupted from watering her roses when a radio announcer mentions how the cities of the Punjab “are burning” and there appears to be “no semblance of law and order” therein. The sudden radio announcement again decontextualizes this violence – a context that Margaret is deeply implicated in. Indeed, it is starkly similar to the ways in which Afghanistan and Iraq continue to be described today, with a focus on warlords and inter-sectarian hatred and with no mentions of western implication in decades of war and occupation. Thus Sarin’s film and its problematic portrayal of Partition enters a world where the representations it employs are heavily laden with connections to post 9/11 racism, Islamophobia, and the so-called “War on Terror” – connections that should make us all extremely uneasy.