

**Teaching Bharati Mukherjee's "The Management of Grief":  
the recuperative power of fiction**

**March 22, 2016 – the day of the ISIL bombings in Brussels**

Teaching Mukherjee's story "The Management of Grief" is always humbling, and on this day more than ever. On this day of another terrorist attack. This time, those behind the attack are not Sikh extremists but a different religious extremist group. On this day 35 are killed and more than 300 injured, 62 of them critically. This is the deadliest act of terrorism in Belgium's history.

How will the mourners for these Belgian victims manage their grief?

In class today we are scheduled to discuss Bharati Mukherjee's story, written in the aftermath of the June 1985 Air India disaster, the deadliest act of terrorism in Canada's history, its largest mass murder ever, and the deadliest terrorist attack involving an airplane anywhere in the world before 9/11. Mukherjee and her husband Clark Blaise had already written an investigative account of the disaster, published in 1987: *The Sorrow and the Terror—the Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy*. In their introduction to that book, Mukherjee and Blaise say they were "driven to write this book as citizens bearing witness [to] fundamentally an immigration tragedy with terrorist overtones" (ix). One thing that bothered them enormously was that "Politically, the tragedy was 'unhoused,' in that Canada wished to see it as an Indian event sadly visited on these shores by uncontrollable fanatics, and India was happy to treat it as an 'overseas incident' with containable financial implications" (ix). But the last words of the book are for neither country and for all countries—they show how the particular must always also be recognized as having universal implications: they are the words of a bereaved father at the Irish coastal memorial a year after the disaster: "Mr Clark and Mrs Mukherjee, tell the world

how 329 innocent lives were lost and how the rest of us are slowly dying” (219).

Tell the world. So, first *The Sorrow and the Terror*, for which Mukherjee says they “interviewed all the terrorist cells, including an interview with the guy who financed the bombing.... We talked to the bereaved also. The book was a nonfiction bestseller in Canada. We were under death threat for two years.” But during that time of great threat, in 1988, also a story. In a 2006 interview, Mukherjee reflected on her personal response to the disaster:

When I sat down to write *The Middleman and Other Stories* as a collection of stories about diaspora, ‘The Management of Grief’ came out in one sitting. It was a very sad story to write. I would have been on that plane if I hadn't left Canada for the U.S. five years before—that's the plane we used to take to India, the first one after school closing. I lost a friend on that flight. (PowellsBooks.Blog)

Why a story, as well as a whole book of investigative journalism filled not only with factual evidence about the bombing, the retrieval of 132 bodies from the ocean, the search for more evidence via an underwater robot sent down to the ocean floor at 6,700 feet, the piecing together of how the perpetrators were able to make this disaster happen, but filled also with many individual stories of the victims and their grieving families? What can a fictionalized story have to add?

### **Why fiction?**

In that interview in 2006, Mukherjee says, “‘The Management of Grief’ is ... probably the most anthologized of all the [stories] I've written.” She notes that readers have

long forgotten the nonfiction book, which was dangerous to write, but the story lives on.

The persuasive power of fiction was heartening. The nonfiction book ... tracked all the cells and the ways in which money is raised, the carelessness of CSIS versus the RCMP

versus the local cops.... The story of individual families or individual victims lived on and spoke to people in ways that the statement of facts didn't.

All narrative, nonfictional or fictional, makes our lives into stories and organizes our experience in time (Kearney 129-130). But fictional stories have a particular power. "Aristotle ... claimed that fictional *mimesis* ['creative retelling'—Ricoeur] can disclose essential truths of life closed off to the empirical historian" (26). *Mimesis* "re-enacts the real world of action by magnifying its essential traits" (Aristotle, qtd in Kearney 131). This is one pole of the fictional response. At the same time, in recounting horrific events, "Stories bring the horror home to us. They singularise suffering against the anonymity of evil" (62). Here I'm quoting Irish Catholic philosopher and literary theorist Richard Kearney. He argues cogently that, when approaching traumatic events, we need *both* the empirical evidence of history *and* the symbolic structuring of fiction (148). He maintains that "it is through the *quasi*-experience of loss, which fiction solicits, that we may even acquire a certain cathartic licence to reconnect with truths from which we were protected in everyday existence" (26). If that's the case, then people who initially knew nothing about the Air India disaster could connect deeply with the essential substance of this event through a fictional story, at the same time that they could experience the suffering as singularized; the way in which reported crises can seem distant and anonymous could be radically circumvented. Empathy for specific individual situations together with an awareness of essential patterns and meanings in human life could then profoundly alter the readers, by enlivening their "vicarious imagination" (137) and thus changing their response to real world encounters.

Which is why, in this short paper, I'd like to describe the experience of looking at this story, "The Management of Grief," on March 22 with a group of undergraduate students in ENG

376, *World Literature Written in English*; all but one of these students previously knew nothing about the Air India disaster. The one who did know about it was Mary, a mature student, American with a background from continental Europe, who is herself a writer and producer in television and public media; she suggested that “[t]he lens of fiction perhaps allows for the diversity of voices to be heard with greater nuance than a factual retelling—and the theme of grief, a universal experience, offers a glimpse of where culture, identity and religion converge and diverge....” What Mukherjee’s story does is to chart the response of one Torontonian woman, Shaila Bhave, to the loss of her husband and two sons in the Air India disaster. Many of the details—the way the crash is reported, the response of the Irish near to the crash site, the memorabilia floated out to sea by grieving relatives, the “duty to hope,” the flatfooted attempts to help the bereaved in Toronto—are taken straight from the non-fictional accounts. But a fictional story, which “re-describe[s] reality according to the symbolic structures of the fiction” (Ricoeur, qtd in Kearney 136), will shape the reader’s as well as the protagonist’s experience: it has an arc of meaning; it has a particular perspective, a particular voice; everything included is there for the purpose of the story; it can choose to move seamlessly and omnisciently from the outer to the inner world; it will work for the exact phrasing or imagery needed to convey an emotion, a complex response, a paradox. And, as Aristotle was most famously aware, there is also the possibility of universalizing from the particular: this story is fundamentally about the Air India disaster, and yet there is a sense in which it is not only about the Air India disaster. On the day I am teaching this story, the Belgian bombings hang in the air. And the Paris attacks, of 13 November 2015. And right back to 9/11, 2001.

### **The fictional encounter**

So in class I ask the students to write down their first impressions of this story. One 2<sup>nd</sup>-year

student, Lauren (white Canadian, Dutch immigrant grandparents, majoring in English and International Studies), writes, “What struck me most about this story is the significant impact the Air India bombing had on so many families and individuals, but that I had never even heard it mentioned in any of my history classes (or any subject) (or ever) before this story.” Donna (another 2<sup>nd</sup>-year student, Philippino Canadian, doing a minor in English) also writes, “The first thing that struck me was the fact that I had never heard of this tragedy until I read the short story.... [T]his tragedy is not recognized enough.” And she says specifically, “I think this issue is not just about the Air India bombing, but covers a lot of matters we [still] face today.” Matters, I’m guessing, to do with race, cultural translation, justice, the public response to violent acts of terrorism, and so on. Lauren adds, “The specific perspective of one lady impacted by the loss of her sons and husband makes the tragedy very personal.” Emily (4<sup>th</sup> year Science Studies major, minor in English), had a similar response: she writes,

The first thing that struck me in this story was the very beginning when the reader is slowly given the details about what has happened. Because the actual events are only revealed partially, I could put myself in the place of Shaila as she tries to understand what is happening while being completely shocked about the loss of her husband and sons. Essential insights into the human condition, plus the singularized suffering of a specific human being. Another white Canadian student, Andrew, says simply, “Because it’s a story, I can get inside Mrs Bhave’s head.”

Andrew is one of the two who have been tasked to introduce the story to the class today: they give us historical pictures and historical facts as well as commentary on the story itself. I watch the faces of students in the class as they learn for the first time about the Air India disaster. I watch them being horrified, moved, dumbfounded. They want to know more. About the roses

from Irish gardens. The memorial on the Irish coast, and then only twenty to twenty-five years later those in Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa. About Canadian Sikhs and Hindus in Toronto. We talk about cultural difference within a culture as well as outside of it. About family and tribe, created by disaster. We talk about the different concepts of duty in Canadian white culture vs. Sikh & Hindu cultures. The place of the spiritual as opposed to the rational. Perhaps hope is more important than Judith Templeton's systematic treatment of grief. Grief is universal, but the management of grief is particular: "We must all grieve in our own way."

### **Managing grief**

Mary had written, "the *theme* of grief, a universal experience, offers a glimpse of where culture, identity and religion *converge* and *diverge*." Lauren writes: "This story reveals how there are a vast number of ways to deal with grief—but that every human no matter their background experiences grief. I think this is a fascinating idea, and this story revealed to me just a few of the major differences in managing grief between ... different cultural groups." Daniel, father of four young kids, writes: "This story is fascinating. It has opened my eyes to the uniqueness of the Indian cultures, also their complexity. Often we stereotype the Other into one big category and overlook the diversity within it. Shaila recognizes that her [frozen, calm] reaction is [culturally] unnatural and that the hysterics of the other Indians are actually more suitable for their culture." Donna also recognizes how trauma may produce a break with cultural convention—she writes: "The way that Mrs Bhave managed her grieving resonated with me because every culture has their own standards or conventions, but when she was faced with this tragedy, I saw it as Mrs Bhave needing to break out of her culture. For example, at the airport, when she yelled at the staff and was surprised with her own reaction." (Shaila is accompanying her friend Kusum back to India from Ireland, with the bodies of Kusum's family; the Indian customs official is

obnoxious and unsympathetic.) And Andrew writes:

What struck me the most about this story was the kindness of the Irish .... They did not look at the Indians as [just] another culture that suffered a loss and it was not [the Irish people's] problem, but as fellow humans who felt the same loss and grief they did. The monument they built in Ireland is a testament to this familiarity, and the Irish who helped in the cleanup of the disaster will never forget this tragic event.

Kim was more struck by the miscommunications around the management of grief in the story. She is a Jamaican Canadian student, who during the time of our class was managing her own grief at the death of a close friend in a car accident. She writes,

In ... "The Management of Grief," readers are introduced to the other as the one who is unable to [com]prehend. In this case, it is the social worker ... who ... [is] incapable of complete empathy. Much of this is lost in translation, not literal but [in] the translation of grief, causing unforeseen friction. Much of the story ... expresses the nuances of negotiation, and the differences between irrational faith, such as 'a person's duty to hope,' and the rational nonsense of making sense out of the catastrophe.

"Irrational faith" vs. "rational nonsense": here's a binary that sums up the bind of the Torontonion social worker rather neatly. Kim is not the only student to be struck particularly by Mukherjee's troubling picture of the inability of the social worker, well-meaning but clueless, to read the semiotics of grief in her bereaved Hindu and Sikh clients, or to understand the culturally-determined psychic mechanisms associated with trauma. As Stef Craps pointed out yesterday, Shaila Bhave is wrongly perceived by Judith Templeton as "coping very well" because she is shocked into a preternatural calm. Daniel writes, "Oddly enough the [white] Canadian, Judith Templeton, is drawn to Shaila because she sees her as in control and logical,

not realizing the turmoil underneath. This is a case of not knowing or appreciating the culture for what it is.” Lauren writes that she finds it “striking how the Canadian social worker, despite her best intentions, has no idea how to connect to the Hindus and Sikhs.” And then Lauren jumps straight from the fictional encounter to a real-world indignation: “Surely Canada could have responded to this issue of cultural clashes differently?”

While Judith Templeton looks at the categories in the “textbooks of grief management”—the stages of rejection, depression, acceptance, reconstruction—and wants the bereaved to consider taking courses (“Management” 192); while the Irish respond with immediate overflows of emotion and offer flowers, hugs, and tears (186-88); for the Indians there are different responses. “It’s a parent’s duty to hope,” says Dr Ranganathan, when asked days after the disaster if he really thinks it’s possible any of the victims may have survived the crash (186). Back in Toronto, an elderly Sikh couple whom Judith Templeton wants to help are working from the same deep paradigm as the Hindu bereaved—for them, “God will provide, not government,” and “I will not pretend that I accept” (195). Shaila can empathize across the Sikh/Hindu cultural divide in realizing that for them too, “it is a parent’s duty to hope” (195). Meanwhile the Indian relatives in India are working with a very practical social code: they are anxious to see their sons remarry, for “It is the duty of a man to look after a wife” (190). But in fact the story shows how Shaila must manage her grief in her own way, which involves a literal and spiritual journey to India via Ireland and back again to Canada, where the voices of her dead family encourage her forward.

For Shaila and Kusum the most significant way in which they manage their grief is spiritual: their families appear to them in visions, in dreams, in unexpected manifestations. “How do I tell Judith Templeton that my family surrounds me, and that like creatures in epics,



they've changed shapes? ... I cannot tell her my days, even my nights, are thrilling" (192).

Judith, in 1980s post-Christian Toronto, suggests no spiritual resources—it seems they are not on her radar. Given the astronomical rise to prominence since then of the sociocultural and therefore political role of religion, things would likely be different if the social worker's task were to be set in 2016. But at the very end of Mukherjee's story, Shaila's family speaks to her one last time, from high in bare trees in a downtown Toronto winter: "Your time has come... Go, be brave" (197). The narrative arc that Mukherjee has given to her story privileges the metaphysical over the rational, the spiritual over the purely material. She is able to take her readers not only through the universal experience of grief but also through a particular management of grief that stretches us beyond Western secular cultural norms.

### **Thirty years on and counting**

Some of the students were anxious to go here too. Sarah-Ann, a final-year student, quotes from the beginning of the story, where one of the first responders to the disaster is bitter about a bland American preacher on the background TV and Shaila says, "I want to tell him we're not that important .... You know they care about nothing" (180). Sarah-Ann comments, "This makes me wonder how we should respond to disasters like this. Do we respond in a way that conveys to the people involved just how important they are (keeping in mind God's love for the people He has made), or do we respond carelessly?" Reading a story that still comes to life years after the event which triggered it means that the temporal distance from the actual event, and the working of the story's multi-dimensional symbolic structures, provide a new perspective that is at once empathic and detached. Sarah-Ann writes from this kind of perspective. She is an Honours major in French, who studied for the last academic year at the Sorbonne in Paris; perhaps unsurprisingly, then, her further comment is this: "I think ... of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Paris bombing [of

November 2015], and how many people showed support [following] that, but somehow forgot/didn't consider ongoing disasters in Syria and other countries. How do we categorize the importance of disasters?" She is working with what Kearney calls the "curious conflation" of the particular situation and the universal pattern or meaning that Aristotle sees it as the unique role of fiction to reveal (13). If that is indeed the case, there is more fiction to be written, on particular and universal issues that continue to be pressing, troubling, and indeed dangerous. In face of the Air India disaster, and of every other traumatic and violent event we encounter, "Catharsis is [of course] a matter of recognition, not remedy" (142). But in Mary's comments, she concludes, "our universals run very deeply through each of us—despite color, race, religion, country—and ... through fiction we can make a start towards this greater understanding."

### Bibliography

- Blaise, Clark, and Bharati Mukherjee. *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy*. Markham, ON, & Harmondsworth, UK: Viking Penguin, 1987.
- 'Dave.' "Bharati Mukherjee Runs the West Coast Offense." Interview with Mukherjee. *PowellsBooks.blog*, October 10, 2006. <http://www.powells.com/post/interviews/bharati-mukherjee-runs-the-west-coast-offense>
- Kearney, Richard. *On Stories*. 2002. London & New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Mangat, Jyoti. "Culture, Gender, Representation and Response: High School Students Interacting with Texts." *Canadian Social Studies* 36.3 (Spring 2002): [http://www.educ.ualberta.ca/css/Css\\_36\\_3/ARculture\\_gender\\_representation.htm](http://www.educ.ualberta.ca/css/Css_36_3/ARculture_gender_representation.htm)
- Mukherjee, Bharati. "The Management of Grief." *The Middleman and Other Stories*. New York: Grove, 1988. 179-97.
- Ricoeur, Paul. "Can Fictional Narratives Be True?" In *Analecta Husserliana*. Ed. A.-T. Tymieniechak. Dordrecht, Reidel. vol. 14, 1983. 5-17.

**Deborah Bowen** is chair of English at Redeemer University College, where she teaches two senior courses in postcolonial literature as well as courses in contemporary fiction, British modernism, literary theory, and literature and the environment. Almost twenty years ago she published a paper on Bharati Mukherjee's story about the Air India disaster; she has been haunted by this tragedy ever since.

*Abstract:*

**Teaching Bharati Mukherjee's "The Management of Grief":  
the recuperative power of fiction**

Mukherjee's 1988 story about the immediate and longer-term aftermath of the Air India disaster gives a troubling picture of the inability of western social agencies to understand the culturally-determined psychic mechanisms associated with trauma. I regularly teach Mukherjee's story in a World Literature class where my mainly WASP students, born years after the Air India disaster, have usually never heard of this disaster before. They are intrigued and shocked by the factual accounts (and Mukherjee wrote one such account, with her husband Clark Blaise), but it is the story that speaks to them most profoundly. Their experience of reading this story years after the event makes it as real and visceral to them as if it had been yesterday, but now with an added awareness of the personal and political significance of the shaping of public memory.