

“History, Memory, Grief: A 30th Air India Anniversary Conference”

Teaching Bharati Mukherjee’s
“The Management of Grief”:
The recuperative power of fiction

May 7, 2016

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(March 22, 2016: ISIL bombings in Brussels)

June 23, 1985: Air India 182 bombing over SW coast of Ireland

“Mr Clark and Mrs Mukherjee, tell the world
how 329 innocent lives were lost and how the rest of us are slowly dying.”

1987: *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy*, Clarke Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee

1988: “The Management of Grief,” in *The Middleman and Other Stories*, Bharati Mukherjee

Why Fiction?

- “Aristotle...claimed that fictional mimesis can disclose essential truths of life closed off to the empirical historian.” (Kearney, *On Stories*, 131)
- “Stories bring the horror home to us. They singularise suffering against the anonymity of evil.” (Kearney 62)
- “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.” (Kearney 26)
- “The 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.” (Mary, class response winter 2016)

Student responses (1)

- “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.” (Lauren)
- “The first thing that struck me was the fact that I had never heard of this tragedy until I read the short story...
I think this issue is not just about the Air India bombing, but covers a lot of matters we [still] face today.” (Donna)

Student responses (2)

- “The first thing that struck me in this story was the very beginning where 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.” (Emily)
- “Because it’s a story, I can get inside Mrs Bhave’s head.” (Andrew)

Student responses (3)

- “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.”
(Daniel)
- “Readers are introduced to the other as the one who is unable to comprehend. In this case, it is the social worker ... who ... is incapable of complete empathy. Much of this is lost in translation, not literal but the translation of grief, causing unforeseen friction. Much of the story also 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.”
(Kim)

Managing grief

- “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.”
(Shaila Bhawe in “The Management of Grief,” 192)

- “Then as I stood in the path looking north to Queen’s Park and west to the university, I heard the voices of my family one last time. *Your time has come, they said. Go, be brave.*

I do not know where this voyage I have begun will end. I do not know which direction I will take. I dropped the package on a park bench and started walking.”

(197)

Student responses (4)

- “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?”
- “I think ... of the 2nd Paris bombing [13 Nov. 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?”

(Sarah-Ann)

What next...

- “Catharsis is a matter of recognition, not remedy.” (Kearney 142)
- “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.” (Mary)