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Classifying Ethnicity for a Multicultural Nation: Representing the Air India Tragedy

Family members of victims, scholars, filmmakers, and creative writers have long pointed out how, in the months and years following the bombing of Air India 182 in June 1985, a silence about this Canadian event seemed to descend on the Canadian mainstream. And, given that the bombing of this flight and the massacre of all its crew and passengers represented the greatest act of terrorism in Canada's history, this was a striking and telling silence, a silence that clearly spoke loudly about Canadian assumptions regarding its immigrants, Canadian values, and the much-vaunted but now clearly questionable Canadian ideal of multiculturalism. But into this silence, two years after the plane went down, Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee published *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy*. In the late 1980s, precisely because of this silence, this was an extremely important book. Having a personal connection myself to the Air India disaster and eager for anything that would help me to make sense of it, I read it cover-to-cover when it first came out. Without a doubt, it led me, a young scholar at the time, towards a critical analysis of a public sphere I was only just beginning to recognize, the public sphere of a country – my country – which proclaimed itself a place accepting of all peoples, but actually harboured a subtle and highly unsettling form of racism that undermined so much of what I'd been taught to value as a Canadian. *The Sorrow and the Terror* helped me to

develop and to articulate a critique that would become central to my future research and pedagogy.

Significantly, its basic paradigms have also formed the bedrock on which most scholarship on the ramifications of the Air India tragedy has built itself. Blaise and Mukherjee's reading of the event as "unhoused" (see Blaise and Mukherjee IX, Bowen 48, Soni and Varadharajan 186), that is, as one that, for years, neither Canada nor India wanted to claim; as an "intra-communal' crime" (201), which set Sikhs against Hindus; as evidence of the failure of the Canadian policy of multicultural diversity" (174); and as a narrative in which a model minority was damaged by another unassimilated and unassimilatable immigrant group – all of these interpretive templates are commonplace now in essays that examine policy, personal testimonies, governmental apologies, films, novels, dances, and poetry that try to come to terms with the historical and political forces that caused the bombing and the emotional and cultural fallout from it. *The Sorrow and the Terror* is clearly a seminal book; in some ways it can be called a founding text or ur-text.

But it is a book that also seriously faltered, falling victim to its authors' own personal prejudices, which were influential because these were tied to larger politics and because one of its authors, Mukherjee, was India-born herself and in the '80s, when the Canadian mainstream accommodated so few South Asian voices, her voice stood out as authoritative. Behind its careful and detailed research and its often eloquent expressions of a righteous rage were assumptions about which communities were valuable and so deserved sympathy, support, and admiration and which were worthless or dangerous and so should be jettisoned, shamed, or shunned. But in the

absence of virtually any other representation of the Air India bombing and considering the potential significance of the critique it offered, it seemed at the time that it would be counterproductive to point to its shortcomings. Why call into question a book that was launching a critique about racism in Canada that very much needed to be heard?

Now, over 31 years later, an increasing volume of effective scholarship has grown up around this pivotal event in Canadian history, so it is surely time to challenge this persuasive book. Its underlying promotion of a Hindu nationalism that in 1987 was only just beginning to achieve a respectability, in India as well as globally through certain of its diasporic populations, definitely needs to be exposed and opposed. But what I plan to do in this paper is draw your attention to how *The Sorrow and the Terror* uses its nascent Hindutva principles to racialize class, ultimately indicting an entire class of people with a determination so single-minded that the argument the authors strive to make is grounded in contradictions and ugly assumptions, both of which should be uncovered and analyzed. That there are alternative, less harmful and more ethical ways to represent working-class people will be apparent when I finally and very briefly look at two other texts from the creative archive that has arisen from the Air India disaster: Anita Rau Badami's novel, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* and Renée Sarojini Saklikar's poem "un/authorized interjection" from her collection *children of air india*.

Blaise and Mukherjee's bias in favour of Hinduism emerges in this book cumulatively and subtly: in the way, for instance, that they suggest that India is foundationally a Hindu nation through repeated phrases such as the one that describes the area east of Punjab as "the Hindu heartland of India" (xv); in the naming of only positive things as Hindu – "a Hindu stoicism" (107), the brave and eloquent critique of a

Hindu journalist (5) – in the association of innocence with Hinduism when the “smart, ambitious children” of Flight 182 are described as progressive in their cultural hybridity and then the mention of a “Hindu rosary of *tulsi* beads” (108) seems to identify them all as Hindus, and in the refusal to name Hindus as in any way responsible for or as enacting a Hindu nationalism during the 1984 Delhi massacre of Sikhs (5). Instead, the book identifies the perpetrators of the killings only as “a goon-squad of thugs and petty criminals” (5).

Towards the end of the book the subtlety disappears and the authors openly declare their alliance with a by-now untainted Hinduism, which they range against a Sikh community infected with “time-bombs” created by what they describe as a badly thought-out and short term immigration policy. Isolating 1969-1973 as a time when the Canadian government “experimented with near-open immigration” (175), which permitted visitors to Canada to file for immigration on arrival, the authors insist that the consequences of this policy was “staggering, as thousands of uneducated, ill-equipped and technologically unemployable young men arrived in Canadian ports as tourists and promptly applied for immigration....Later, they were allowed to bring over family members. Among these immigrants were Sikhs from the villages of Punjab” (175-76). Described as “pious...illiterate, feudalistic and violence prone” (175), the people of this community are all condemned for being uneducated villagers, but Blaise and Mukherjee go on to specifically identify them as Jat Sikhs, all of whom are said to practise a patriarchal code of honour called *izzat* that simplistically divides the world into those who agree with them and those who don’t and that attests to their own emasculation as

disadvantaged men in a world that has become too complicated for them to understand or negotiate (see 177).

The book contrasts the immigration misstep that brought these people to Canada and allowed them to join a longer standing working-class Sikh community in British Columbia with a seemingly much more intelligent “point system that favoured education and aptitude” (204), which, the authors claim, shifted the East Indian Canadian population to one that was predominantly “Hindu, professional, and Ontario-centred” (204). Blaise and Mukherjee call this latter “Hindu” group a “model community” (204) because it was, apparently, full of educated, skilled, and multi-lingual people who quickly established themselves in Canada “in medicine and the professions, as bureaucrats, teachers and entrepreneurs” (204), contributing to the nation in ways that, the book implies, the working-class Sikhs of B.C. could never do. Finally, the book ends with a stark image of these two groups locked in a fraught, oppositional relationship to one another that is likely to continue for generations:

Air India 182 was not just a jumbo jet on its way to India when tragedy struck; it was also a symbol of Canadian immigration policies, failed and successful. The two communities of Indian immigrants met that morning off the coast of Ireland; the financially successful and professionally assimilated Canadian suburbanites in the plane, and the unilingual, desperate Canadians on the ground. Those families died for their continued attachment to India; these terrorists killed for the same reason. (205)

Families are opposed to terrorists here, Hindus to Sikhs, the successful to the failed, the urban to the rural, and the normality of middle-class aspiration with working-class

desperation. Significantly, to maintain such a glaring difference between these two groups, Blaise and Mukherjee are forced to contradict the findings of their own research. Although virtually every Khalistani extremist they interview or whose history they recount is described as bearing markers of middle-class status – one is called a “suburban professional” (192), another is described as a “executive” with a multinational company (3), yet another “would-be weekend terrorist” is said to have a “six-figure salary” (192-93), and others who were actually arrested for their actions are referred to as “successful property owners and small businessmen” (193) – the authors of *The Sorrow and the Terror* nevertheless insist that a nameless, faceless horde of illiterate and skill-less working-class Sikhs are responsible for the Air India crash. And this despite the fact that the only working-class Sikh whom Blaise and Mukherjee seem to have interviewed for their book, a “young machinist” from Toronto (212), is labelled “moderate” and is depicted as having actually been attacked by Khalistani extremists with field-hockey sticks (212) for daring to speak out against extremism, details which undermine the class dichotomy they stage. Clearly, such a dichotomy can only be created through recourse to massive overgeneralization. Speaking about similar kinds of overgeneralizations that Mukherjee, now an American citizen, has presented as truth in a public interview with a well-known American journalist, Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai remark that these sorts of “outrageous statements would be hilarious if she were not considered such an exemplar of model minority discourses” (83).

A good deal has been written about the dangers of engaging in a rhetoric, as Blaise and Mukherjee do, that insists on there being a difference between ‘good’ immigrants and ‘bad’ immigrants; much of it in Canada has been in relation to the

bombing of Air India and the long history of its effects (see Puar and Rai, Failler, Busse, Dhamoon). As Angela Failler has argued, this kind of discourse has been used by, for instance, the recent Harper government to rationalize the increased surveillance of Canadians generally and the criminalizing of certain groups of us as potential terrorists. Failler, Cassel Busse, Maya Seshia, and others have all pointed out that constructing racial dichotomies, such as the one Blaise and Mukherjee engender in *The Sorrow and the Terror*, actually works to cover over the racism in Canadian history and government policy that contributed to the bombing of Air India in the first place and the ineffective response to it in the second. These scholars have amply demonstrated the dangers of this discourse for racialized communities.

But I'd like to suggest that this discourse also deploys assumptions about class that marginalize groups, creating detrimental effects for those groups and for the nation generally and normalizing class prejudices that already exist within the nation and between nations in this era of global capitalism. After all, what is it that makes model minorities 'models'? It's their middle-class status or their desire to achieve such status because of the rewards associated with it, one of which is the right to be regarded as valuable to the nation rather than as threatening to other Canadians or a drain on the public purse. The model minority version of social reality in Canada contains an unacknowledged understanding of Canada as essentially a middle-class place. But in a capitalist economy such as ours it's simply not possible for everyone to be middle class; hence, not all immigrant groups have moved into the middle classes or will in the future because the working classes are necessary for the functioning of the nation; capitalist nations need service workers, taxi drivers, labourers, tradespeople, mechanics,

nannies, etc. But though necessary, their importance to the nation is called into question by a rhetoric that celebrates by naturalizing professional ambitions, educational excellence, and elite salaries. This kind of rhetoric is undermining of working-class immigrants and their descendants. By not fully acknowledging class as a factor in the construction of the model minority but instead simply assuming that readers would naturally value professionals over labourers, scientists and educators over skilled tradesmen, Mukherjee and Blaise's book contributes to an already existing neo-liberal capitalist discourse about class that disavows class as a category at the same time that it normalizes middle-class, particularly urban middle-class, social aspirations and realities, the effect of which is to render working-class positioning as dangerous to the nation and undermining of its ideals.

In light of this imperative to marginalize working-class racialized others, Badami's novel and Saklikar's poem seem to me to be striving after a more complicated understanding of this difficult and disturbing moment in Canadian history. Two of the central characters in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* are working-class Sikhs: Bibiji and Nimmo, both of whom are products of the Punjabi villages that Blaise and Mukherjee demonize, though both also eventually become city-dwellers, Bibiji in Vancouver and Nimmo in Delhi. We follow them through decades of their lives, which are historically bound up with the interconnected history of India and Canada, watching them make hard choices as a result of this history. The novel expects us to recognize Bibiji's egotism, but also to appreciate her compassion, her capacity for hard-work, her intelligence, and her desire to atone for selfish actions that inadvertently left her sister in danger. When towards the end, after enormous suffering, Bibiji moves from being a

denouncer to a supporter of the Khalistan movement, the novel leaves us little space to condemn her, since we've come to see her as caught in the hinges of a history that controls her far more than she can control it. Nimmo, on the other hand, is entirely blameless and entirely the victim of, first, the Partition massacres and then of the Delhi pogroms. Nor do either of their husbands fit the role that Blaise and Mukherjee carve out for working-class Sikh men: that of the illiterate, unilingual, unskilled, feudalistic, and violence-prone extremist. Nor does the novel's one sustained portrait of a Khalistani supporter confirm Blaise and Mukherjee's biases, despite the fact that this character is a young male. Instead, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* suggests that Jasbeer's turn to Sikh extremism is, in part, the consequence of his experience of racism in Canada.

A fearless poem, Saklikar's "un/authorized interjection," similarly stands as a clear refusal to engage in a class and racial prejudice that could so easily be justified in a person who lost family members in the Air India crash, as the poet did.¹ The subject of the poem, though never named, is Inderjit Reyat, the only person convicted for his involvement in the mass murder of the passengers of Flight 182. Identified as "this bomb builder boy" (26) and admitted only reluctantly into the series of fragmented memories, government documents, and dramatic dialogue that characterizes the poetry collection, which commemorates especially the children who died in the Air India crash, Reyat is imagined appropriately as a child in a Punjabi village, then a young man fishing

¹ I would like to thank the following former students of mine – Alison Earls, Brier Pomfret, and Chelsea Rose – who collaboratively wrote an essay on this poem as a final assignment in a research learning course on Indian literature and film, which I taught in 2015. Our discussions about this poem and their essay on it formed the foundation of my interpretation of this text here. I invite you to read their essay, "Managing Grief: An Analysis of Rene Saklikar's poem 'un/authorized interjection'" on the Scholarship@Huron website: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=iie>

on Vancouver Island and being careful to make “only a small fire,” unlike the great and fatal fire we all know that he eventually creates, (26) and finally as a worker:

in the woods outside Duncan, on the island named Vancouver,
Swedish/Cornish/Punjabi/Chinese/First Nations/Irish/Scottish/Black men work.

Show us the mines, the mills:

sharp, the screeching lathe, sister to a cutting machine

on the green chain, men feed in timber:

cedar, Douglas fir,

the lifeblood of the province

flowing inside a century’s worth of work—

mill, mine, marine electrician’s shop.... (27)

Because it incorporates the rural South Asian working-class Reyat into a Canadian tradition that includes previous historical working-class communities, Saklikar’s poem works against the marginalization implicit in the model minority discourse. Instead of disavowing him, the poem posits the bomb-maker as part of a long line of workers whose work had “worth.” Reyat betrays that history, the poem suggests, by participating in the murder of other Canadians and causing the enormous suffering, the horrendous grief, that their loss initiates for their families and for the nation from which they and all their potential have been eradicated.

Badami’s novel and Saklikar’s poem show us alternatives to the easy and damaging dichotomies that *The Sorrow and the Terror* constructed in 1987. Both of these texts suggest that, even in relation to an event as fracturing as the Air India tragedy, there are other, more effective ways to understand how class and ethnicity interact. Perhaps too

they point us towards a conception of a multicultural national reality in which all kinds of differences are embraced.

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