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“Prosthetic” memorialization: Revisiting Bharati Mukherjee’s literary responses to the Air India Flight 182 bombing

Erika Doss argues that “sites of memory are, at their core, sites of struggle, with stakes in larger cultural struggles over national collective identity”. In this paper, I’ll apply this contention about the politics of public memory to two interconnected texts concerning the Air India Flight 182 terrorist attack of 23 June 1985: Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee’s non-fictional account, *The Sorrow and the Terror* (1987), and Mukherjee’s short story, “The Management of Grief” (1988). The latter is the most anthologized of all her tales, yet *Sorrow and the Terror* remains out of print and largely overlooked within Mukherjee scholarship. Addressing such critical questions and gaps, I’ll contend that these literary works act as mnemonic sites. They are “prosthetic” memorials in the sense that they record a permanent loss *and* make up for the absence of official North American commemoration after 1985.

Beyond their testimonial purpose, these texts stake their claim to “national collective identity” by responding to injunctions from grieving relatives to “tell the world” about the tragedy, to quote the conclusion to *Sorrow and the Terror* (219). Creating a secure literary and rhetorical space for this event and its immediate aftermath, these polysemic texts do the crucial, painful work of remembering through visual, historical, political, forensic, imaginative, exophoric, and affective means. And as protest works, they belong to Mukherjee’s career-long project of writing South Asians into North America.

I turn first to *Sorrow and the Terror* as a prosthetic memorial. Despite its status as a permanent document, its publication history and scholarly reception suggest it has not

enjoyed as rich an impact as it deserves. Reacting to an ongoing ignorance of the Air India bombing, Mukherjee, in a 1999 essay, assumes that her readers don't know about it, commenting "if you can find a copy of ...*The Sorrow and the Terror*, which my husband and I co-authored in 1987 ...you'll understand some of the urgency that has motivated both of our writings since that tragic event" (75n). Blaise and Mukherjee had already collaborated on the autobiographical *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977), a text that's neatly divided into two halves, one by each writer. By contrast, the authorial lines of *Sorrow and the Terror* are much more blurred. Given the wealth of academic interest Mukherjee's writing has attracted since the 1990s, this sense of not knowing which parts were written by whom – as well as the lack of reprintings it has received – may explain some of the critical neglect that still attends *Sorrow and the Terror*.

The five-part structure of the study seems to suggest a drama in multiple acts. Its title echoes *The Sorrow and the Pity*, Marcel Ophüls's celebrated 1969 documentary about French collaboration with the Nazis. (This intertextuality is in keeping with Mukherjee's tendency to take inspiration from Indian and Western filmmaking for the titles of her works). Early in *Sorrow and the Terror*, Blaise and Mukherjee state that "politically, the tragedy was 'unhoused'" (ix), so their response is to "house" or "rehouse" the tragedy: namely, to secure a safe place for these events, their prehistory and their immediate aftermath. They address a contemporaneous silence about the terrorist attack when "much of the world ...was preoccupied with the prolonged TWA hijacking" (43). Approaching this subject from a British standpoint, I'd argue that in the national consciousness of my own country, the Air India attack was also subsequently overshadowed by the Lockerbie bombing.

In *Sorrow and the Terror*, Blaise and Mukherjee have crafted a meticulously linear narrative out of an intricate, sometimes impenetrable context. They demonstrate a scrupulous attention to the complexities of this tragedy through a dizzying cast of characters and the sheer degree of often technical detail that they include, thereby proving their authority to discuss it. Writing so soon after the tragedy, the authors can capture its visceral impact and the urgency of the rescue operation. *Sorrow and the Terror* is about faithful testimony to the events shortly after they happened, thereby making it a lasting part of the Air India 182 legacy.

In Part 2, Chapter 4, the authors pay tribute to the immense courage, professionalism and compassion of the Irish medical and emergency services. They note, moreover, that “the grim visuals of disaster were what the hospital committee hoped to spare its regular patients” (54). The 23 photographic images which comprise an additional site of memory within the text document the rawness of family members’ grief and the horror of the airplane wreckage. They include two pictures of the official Irish memorial at Dunmanus Bay, and the poignant effect created by family photos, showing the stability and happiness of a number of Indian Canadians before their lives were turned upside down or brutally terminated. Particularly graphic and gruesome images are described rather than presented visually, with the reader forced to imagine, for instance, the horrendous corporeality of recovered bodies, although they state that “most relatives who had come to Cork would have no body to grieve over or cremate” (74). This material privation further compels the need for prosthetic memorialization.

Why do the authors adopt this taboo-busting approach? I’d contend that for political, moral and rhetorical purposes, they feel a duty to shock the reader by speaking

the traumatic truth of the attack. This must be grim reading – harrowing, demanding, difficult to process – in order to make wider arguments about geopolitics, religious fanaticism, and Canadian racism, and to express a righteous rage at the evil and barbarity of such senseless killing. Rightly positing from the start that “the Air India disaster was a truly national tragedy” (xii) and that “Canadian racism” warrants “serious self-examination” (x), this national memorial in literary form is deliberately designed to prompt difficult political and ethical questions. It reveals the authors’ sense of obligation to the families so horrifically affected by these events and also points to the cross-border nature of the attack. With its various references to Detroit-based victims, *Sorrow and the Terror* highlights that this is a North American tragedy and that the United States, too, has failed in the task of public commemoration.

Blaise and Mukherjee face aesthetic challenges familiar to all artists publicly remembering traumatic events. They quote Kiran Doshi, the then Indian ambassador to Ireland, as saying ““this was hundreds of tragedies rolled into one”” (66), and they refer to “the limits of ...our language in confronting unsurvivable disaster” (148). How *can* the authors commemorate death on this scale? Struggling to find an appropriate lexicon, they produce as comprehensive a version as possible at a time when for many readers, this was an untold story. Hence the level of detail and range of techniques they bring to bear, from historical accounting to scientific reporting to extensive interviews with a range of players in this drama. This is a study written with passion and precision, courage and empathy.

While its gritty details highlight the dehumanizing effects of the atrocity, *Sorrow and the Terror* seeks to commemorate the exact opposite. Hence the decisive shift from

forensic pathology and the recovery operation to remembering and humanizing the Canadians lost in the disaster. Through sensitively written human interest stories, Blaise and Mukherjee offer each of the victim-families included in the text their own separate chapter, creating miniature, individualized memorials. But the wider effect of these chapters is a *collective* site of memory attesting to the achievements and sheer vibrancy of those who were murdered. Thus the authors honor the hard work and commitment involved for the first generation in their relocation from India to Canada. They also return time and again to a particular refrain: the special status of the young people killed on the flight, “a perfected version of Canada and India” (29). The authors present this lost generation, mostly members of the Hindu community, as exceptional in their sparkling ability to combine cultures and thrive in Canada, declaring that “the Air India families ...have generated millions of dollars in savings, or in income, for Canada. The children might have accomplished even more” (204-205). This point is connected to a broader exceptionalism: the hitherto unique and unprecedented nature of the tragedy, referred to as the “bloodiest” terrorist attack of “the modern era” (n.p.).

The final section of *The Sorrow and the Terror* discusses the unveiling of the Irish memorial to the tragedy one year on. It notes the individual family members present, it registers their own recording processes, and it quotes them, so that this conclusion becomes its own commemorative site. It bears witness to those most directly affected by the attack and ultimately allows their voice pride of place. But the agonized words which close the text – “tell the world how 329 innocent lives were lost and how the rest of us are slowly dying” – also resist any sense of “closure”.

Mukherjee's short story, "The Management of Grief", is a different kind of prosthetic memorial. Beyond its fictional status, a key distinction is that it's told throughout from the point of view of Shaila Bhave, a person directly impacted by the story's unnamed terrorist attack, rather than by investigators deeply invested in the South Asian Canadian community, yet operating at one remove. Narrated in the first person and the present tense, "Management of Grief" offers an unfolding story. Thus it draws attention to the intensity of the present moment, as its characters seek to process, if not neatly "manage", their grief. The story's differing pronouns – "we", "I", "they", "you" – suggest moments of solidarity, engagement and disengagement, insider and outsider status. Early in the story, an Indian Canadian man at Shaila's house complains about a US TV evangelist, who seems to represent a normatively white, Christian, North American populace either ignorant of, or indifferent to, the tragedy. Shaila imagines telling him, "we're not that important. You look at the audience, and at the preacher in his blue robe with his beautiful white hair ...and you know they care about nothing" (180). Yet the story contests this perceived lack of importance by positioning community members and their grief center stage. It's those from outside Shaila's culture – Judith Templeton, a white provincial government representative in the story; Mukherjee's non-South Asian readership – who are placed *in medias res* and forced to make sense of these events.

"Management of Grief" is strongly exophoric. A kind of companion text to *Sorrow and the Terror*, it draws, to an almost startling degree, on many real-life details from the non-fictional account. While not hiding the factual context of the Air India 182 attack, beyond an early, unofficial allusion to the "Sikh Bomb" (179-180), it is also not

fully explicated, however. As Judie Newman has noted, this withholding technique universalizes the story's themes. It can also be compared to Mukherjee's use of circumlocution and ellipsis, whereby – rather like the problem of linguistic representation in *Sorrow and the Terror* – certain ideas remain unspoken or may be only partially expressed. It relates, furthermore, to a similar strategy of non-naming in Srinivas Krishnas' 1991 film, *Masala*, reflecting, as Manjeet Ridon has argued, the failure of the Canadian authorities to “acknowledg[e] the tragedy as a Canadian loss” (103). In “Management of Grief”, the use of temporal and narrative breaks and the absence of specificity – alongside a realism and verisimilitude born out of the direct knowledge which shaped *Sorrow and the Terror* – force the informed reader to engage and imagine more fully, while the uninitiated reader is required to go away and fill in the gaps.

The story's use of real details gives it authenticity and is, of course, grounded in Blaise and Mukherjee's actual research for *Sorrow and the Terror*. This is also key to the text's work of prosthetic memorialization: that is, the production of remembrance in the place of real-life Canadian and American memorials, as Mukherjee brings these events to a wider North American audience through fiction. The story has been repeatedly anthologized. Indeed, it appeared as recently as last year in the latest edition of *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, along with a brief analysis of the text by Mukherjee's fellow novelist, Richard Ford. Largely US-focused, this collection exemplifies the project of nation-building Joe Lockard and Jillian Sandell have identified in relation to American literature anthologies. They correctly recognize that each such volume is “a political and educational tool” (249). Despite the controversies provoked by anthologies and their respective inclusions and exclusions, it's instructive to think of “Management of Grief”

in light of its anthologized status and therefore the continuing testimonial and memorializing function this allows. Through the conferring of a kind of canonical status, it has reached all manner of readers. It has therefore enjoyed a different afterlife and assumed an alternative position, artistically and politically, from *Sorrow and the Terror*, arguably forcing readers, especially US ones, to reformulate their ideas about terrorist attacks. Still fulfilling a prosthetic function in the absence of cross-border commemoration, it invites, even shames, such readers into knowing more about the Air India 182 bombing.