

HOMING SORROW: BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S "THE MANAGEMENT OF GRIEF" AS METADIASPORIC NARRATIVE AND INSCRIPTION OF POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

This paper reads Bharati Mukherjee's short story "The Management of Grief" as an uncompromised critique of Canadian Multiculturalism at its early stage in the 1980s. Without neglecting the crucially humanist component of Mukherjee's investment in writing this story, the article demonstrates how, through subtle strategies of representation, "The Management of Grief" presents Canada as a country where whiteness-as-power is pervasive, and where ethnic minorities are perceived by mainstream society as exogenous, and made to feel as such. Together with this, the story as an archetypal representation of the predicament of diasporas, understood, pace Vijay Mishra and others, in the sense of the diasporic condition perceived as dominated by melancholia. The story evokes the diaspora experience in several other ways, most notably with its emphasis on the in-between status of such communities in an identitarian, affective and political sense. The analysis eventually focuses on how the story underscores and subtly illuminates the process of a political empowerment, an awareness-raising process which, accompanied by a coming-into-political-agency, marks a turning point in the increasingly relevant political role played by diasporas within the multicultural nation state.

Keywords: diaspora literature, Bharati Mukherjee, Air India 182, diaspora studies.

Resumen

Este artículo lleva a cabo una lectura del conocido cuento de Bharati Mukherjee “The Management of Grief”, entendiéndolo como una severa crítica de las políticas multiculturalistas canadienses de principios de los años ochenta. Sin descuidar el importante elemento humano que impulsa a Mukherjee a escribir esta historia, el artículo demuestra cómo, mediante sutiles estrategias de representación, “The Management of Grief” presenta el Canadá de la época como un país donde la estructura de poder dominante revela una estrecha conexión con la cultura blanca, y donde las minorías étnicas son percibidas por la opinión pública como exógenas, y como tal se les hace sentir. Por otra parte, la historia se ofrece como una representación arquetípica del predicamento de las diásporas, que, según Vijay Mishra y otros críticos del área, sería una condición dominada por la melancolía. El cuento de Mukherjee evoca la experiencia diaspórica en otros sentidos, entre los cuales destaca el énfasis en la situación de *in-betweenness* de estas comunidades en un sentido identitario, afectivo y político. El análisis finalmente muestra el modo en que este cuento enfatiza el proceso de empoderamiento político de las comunidades diaspóricas en Canadá, retratando una paulatina toma de conciencia en que la protagonista se torna agente de su propio destino. Según la lectura que lleva a cabo el artículo, el desenlace se muestra como punto de inflexión de este proceso, a la vez que pone en evidencia el papel cada vez más relevante que juegan las diásporas en el contexto del estado-nación multicultural.

Palabras clave: literaturas diaspóricas, Bharati Mukherjee, Air India 182, estudios de la diáspora.

We, who stayed out of politics and came halfway around the world to avoid religious and political feuding, have been the first in the New World to die from it.

B. Mukherjee, “The Management of Grief”

1. Introduction

Published in 1988, the same year the Canadian Multiculturalism Act was passed by the Canadian Parliament, Bharati Mukherjee’s short story “The Management of Grief” (henceforth TMG) dissects the diasporic condition, illustrating it in several ways. The story was inspired by the attack Air India flight 182 suffered on 23 June 1985 when, on its way from Vancouver and Toronto to London, Delhi and Mumbai, it was blown up in the air off the coast of Ireland, shortly before its scheduled arrival at Heathrow Airport. 329 persons died in this tragic event, as it happens, most of them Canadian citizens of Indian origin.

This paper discusses TMG both in reference to the real event and to the context in which it took place (namely, early Canadian Multiculturalism), and as a metaphor for the condition of diasporas. It is pertinent to mention at this stage that my approach is made with the utmost respect for the victims and for their relatives, and that my theoretical approach does not intend to trivialize such a terrible tragedy.

Mukherjee's story enacts an ontologically diasporic narrative. To begin with, in her tale all the characters except for one, are members of the Indian diaspora in Canada. Together with this, the story portrays a diaspora within a diaspora, in the sense that through the painful process of mourning described in the story, those characters feel they have been "melted down and recast as a new tribe" (Mukherjee 103), as Shaila Bhavé, the focus of the story, formulates it. Further, this new tribe crystalizes around the need to mourn those who have died. At a symbolic level if nothing else, all diasporas can be said to coalesce around a feeling of mourning, that is, they are inevitably "haunted by some sense of loss" (Rushdie 1991: 10; Mishra 1996; Cho 2007a and 2007b). Finally, also in terms of its poetics TMG is representative of the in-between condition of diasporas. The story structure reproduces diasporic groups' troubled relationship with space, which also echoes a complicated relationship with any straight, conventional sense of identity. Thus, the narrative plot shifts between the home-land and the host-land, as the meta-diasporic community (that is, the mourners) travels from Canada to India and back to Canada again. Between both territories they visit Ireland, and through the uncanny echoes evoked there they delve into that in-between territory which symbolically operates as the "third space" defined by Homi Bhabha, where the diasporic identity is bound to drift, forever disrupting the poles of the here *vs.* there, the home- and the host-land, the present and the past.

The story invokes that "homing desire" inevitably at the heart of the diasporic condition. As Avtar Brah has explained, "the concept of diaspora offers a critique of fixed origins, while taking account of a homing desire which is not the same as a desire for a 'homeland'" (Brah 1996: 180). How can we decode this haunting and much quoted statement? In the midst of a plurality of systematizations of diasporic features, Rogers Brubaker suggests a three-feature chart which effectively synthesizes much previous literature on the matter. According to the British sociologist, it is possible to identify three core elements that are constitutive of diasporas, a certain confusion in semantic and conceptual terms notwithstanding. The first one is dispersion, which can be forced or traumatic, to one or to several places, inter- or intra-national; the second one is homeland orientation; and the third is boundary maintenance, that is, the keeping of a sense of difference from mainstream society and a sense of common identity, however vague (Brubaker

2003). In our century, the second of these criteria, homeland orientation, is no longer as strongly emphasized as it was in the past (cf. Safran 1991; Cohen 2008; Esman 2009), but it is still accorded much importance. Indeed, whenever there are problems or fluctuations in the host nation, the sense of homeland orientation tends to increase, as “The Management of Grief” exemplifies in the character of Kusum, who decides to remain in India after losing her husband in the attack. In contrast to the emphasis placed by early Diaspora Studies on the place of origin as identity focus and political marker, James Clifford tempers the strong importance attached to the idea of homeland by emphasizing that a more compound set of extradiasporic relations needs to be considered, thus claiming that “decentered, lateral connections may be as important as those formed around a teleology of return” (Clifford 1994: 306). As to the third feature, boundary maintenance, its function is “to preserve a distinctive identity vis-à-vis the host society” (Brubaker 2003: 6). It is the feature which most clearly accounts for the paradoxically necessary *homing desire* of diasporas: as long as the dividing boundaries exist, the diaspora experiences a homing desire which is, of necessity, always deferred, perpetually unfulfilled. Should this homing desire ever be entirely satisfied, the idea of diaspora would lose its meaning: in the absence of a sense of difference, the distinctiveness of the group would cease to exist.

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Mukherjee’s short story illuminates two crucial aspects of diasporas: fragility and diversity. On the one hand, it highlights how delicately fragile diasporas are in political terms: how they can precipitate, catalyse or loosen up depending on changes in the political situation either in the home or in the host country. This is the case with the community of mourners, who after the tragedy suddenly see themselves deeply and inextricably bound to one another. Together with this, “The Management of Grief” allows a glimpse of the fragility inherent to any diasporic sense of identity, which, again, is bound to be neither simple nor definitive. On the other hand, the story illustrates the crucial idea that diversity is inherent to diasporas. In any diasporic community coexist a huge variety of backgrounds, experiences, and reactions to both the experience of migration and the everyday reality. In the story, the presence of people of different creeds within the Indo-Canadian community, and also the variety of reactions to the tragedy, is emphasized. Thus, both from the point of view of politics and of identity, TMG shows that boundaries within and around diasporas are constantly shifting; they lie in a very unstable terrain, always drifting (to use the same word again), always in the making, and hardly contained by their “moveable margins” (Kanaganayakam 2005). All in all, as Stuart Hall has suggested, TMG foregrounds the crucial fact that “the diaspora experience [...] is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference” (Hall 1992: 235).

2. Extradiegetic Factors: the Background and Aftermath of the Attack

Sikhism was founded in Punjab in the 16th century as a response to the coexistence in the region of the Hindu and Muslim faiths, allegedly selecting and combining the best of both religions. Through the 17th century it gained practitioners, until in the 18th century it attained maturity and had its principles systematized by the revered Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth guru (Taylor and Pontsioen 2014). It was also in this century that allegedly a Sikh Empire emerged, taking advantage of the weakening and final dismemberment of the Mughal Empire (Singh 2007: 556-557). After supporting the British in the construction of the Raj, with Sikh soldiers serving in both World Wars, on the eve of Indian independence Sikh communities suffered greatly with the partition of the Subcontinent. The Punjab was ruthlessly severed and millions of people were forced to leave their homes and cross the newly-drawn border amidst havoc and mass murder (Khan 2016: 81-83; Hansen 2002). To make things worse, they had been led to believe in the possibility of an independent state, a promise later endorsed by Prime Minister Jawarhalal Nehru which was never to be fulfilled. The resulting disillusion, with added social problems, would translate into militant nationalism, which kept claiming the creation of a legitimate Sikh state in the Punjab that would go by the name of Khalistan. When in 1975 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of Emergency, severely curtailing civil liberties, again the Sikh community suffered. The radicalised Bhabhar Khalsa Brotherhood, responsible for the Air India 182 attack, was created in 1978 in the midst of these tensions. Violence between the community and government reached a climax in June 1984, when the most sacred shrine of Sikh culture, Harmandir Sahib or the Golden Temple in Amritsar, was destroyed by the Indian army, in a pre-emptive attack carried out under the pretext that the temple had stored weaponry intended to be used in attacking the Indian government and institutions (Tully and Jacob 2005). Besides being massacred, the community was deeply humiliated, and the action "created martyrs and completely disaffected the Sikh population, including the diaspora" (Van Dyke 2009: 986). Sikh retaliation came in the form of magnicide, as Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards in October that year, and riots ensued again, Sikh citizens being targeted. Such was the political situation in India when the Airbus carrying Flight 182 was sabotaged in June 1985. The attack, orchestrated by radicalized "long-distance nationalists" (Anderson 1984), thus responded to a rarefied political situation in the home-country, testifying to the veracity of Vijay Mishra's claim that "when not available in any 'real' sense, homeland exists as an absence that acquires surplus meaning by the fact of diaspora" (Vijay Mishra 2007: 2).

While around 20 million Sikhs live in India, more than seven million live scattered around the world, forming diasporic communities in various countries. In Canada, Sikh migration began in the 19th century. Usually reaching the American continent via the Pacific Ocean, most Sikhs settled in British Columbia, and by the early 20th century there was a small thriving community in the area. However, a dark incident has left an imprint on Canadian history which is simultaneously revealing of the country's national psyche and is recalled every time Canada's racist immigration policies are brought into the limelight: the Komagata Maru incident, which occurred in 1914. Three hundred and sixty-five prospective Sikh immigrants crossed the Pacific in a Japanese freight with the intention of settling in the Federation. Yet neither Canadian public opinion nor the Canadian authorities agreed to this, and after a three-month detention period in the waters of Vancouver harbour, most of them were finally refused permission to disembark and forced to make their way back to India. This is a poignant episode which remains a milestone in the uneasy construction of an Indo-Canadian identity, and it symbolizes the sense of outsidership of the Indian community in Canada as perceived by the Canadian authorities and mainstream citizenship. As will be discussed shortly, this perceived outsidership had not changed substantially in the seven decades between the Komagata Maru and the Air India 182 incidents.

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In 1985, months and weeks before the attack, heed was not paid to serious hints regarding a possible terrorist attack—at least, not sufficiently, or in an appropriate manner—by the Canadian authorities, something that the victims' relatives would bitterly resent. Then, to make matters worse, after the bombing, the Indo-Canadian community felt abandoned and ignored in their grief (Major 2010). As Fred Ribkoff remarks, they were victims of “literal, political, institutional, and cultural acts of erasure” (Ribkoff 2012: 507). The community of mourners felt excluded from mainstream society, as there was no real sense that this was a truly Canadian tragedy. Indeed, for a very long time the event was disregarded by Canadian public opinion, not being considered a truly relevant Canadian issue. Overall, the tragedy was perceived as an *ethnic* problem and understood as marginal. This indifference could only be produced by a feeling in Canadian mainstream society that this community did not really belong within the nation. As one relative of the victims sadly concludes in the documentary *Air India 182*, “We were never Canadian in the first place”. Ribkoff corroborates that the disaster disappeared very soon from Canadian consciousness. As he claims, “not enough Canadians [were] deeply touched” (Ribkoff 2012: 509). In collaboration with her husband, Canadian writer Clark Blaise, Bharati Mukherjee published a book analysing this issue two years after the attack. Blaise and Mukherjee claim:

When we began our research in January 1986, it seemed as though the Air India disaster (as it has come to be called) was in the process of disappearing from the larger Canadian consciousness. 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. (Blaise and Mukherjee in Ribkoff 508)

While, as Blaise and Mukherjee state, the Indian authorities considered this affair as something that only remotely concerned them, the Canadian Prime Minister on his part offered the Indian Prime Minister his condolences. Thus, the Air India 182 tragedy was “unhoused” in the same way that, as was mentioned earlier, diasporas are ontologically driven by a necessarily unfulfilled “homing desire”.

Twenty years later, in the spring of 2006, a Commission of Inquiry into the Investigation of the Bombing of Air India Flight 182 was created. The intention was to bring closure to the families of the victims as well as to help prevent future terrorist acts. However, even at this point some Canadians still considered this move “an exercise in ethnic politics” (Ribkoff 2012: 508), denying its relevance. This gives a measure of the response of the mainstream Canadian public, and of the difficulty of diasporas in fully belonging. Canadian society appears to perceive itself as persistently white, aloof from the immigrant communities' efforts to integrate in their society. The distant response to the attack responds to the structure Marlene Nourbese Phillip describes in an essay published in 1989, one year after Bill C-18 was passed proclaiming Multiculturalism the official policy of the nation, where she claims: “At its most basic, Multiculturalism describes a configuration of power at the centre of which are the two cultures recognised by the Constitution of Canada —The French and the English— and around which circumnavigate the lesser satellite cultures” (Nourbese Philip 1989: 182). Still in 2006, twenty years after the tragedy and twenty-one after Bill C-18 was passed, a public enquiry revealed that only forty-eight per cent of interviewed Canadians considered the bombing as a Canadian event, while twenty-two per cent considered it an Indian affair. Thus, throughout those years there was a sense in which the South Asian Canadian community did not see their tragedy acknowledged, one consequence being that they could not mourn it as they needed to. The bombing remained an open wound, not properly healed. In a sense, this situation represents what Vijay Mishra, and later Lily Cho and others, consider the defining feature of diaspora: a state of mourning which cannot be healed.

The result of the Commission of Inquiry was finally made public in 2010, and eventually a sense of closure was brought to the victims' relatives twenty-five years after the tragedy. The report acknowledged the shortcomings in the safety measures, first, and then in the management of the situation:

A cascading series of errors contributed to the failure of our police and security forces to prevent this atrocity. The level of error, incompetence, and inattention which took place before the flight was sadly mirrored in many ways for many years, in how authorities, governments, and institutions dealt with the aftermath of the murder of so many innocents: in the investigation, the legal proceedings, and in providing information, support and comfort to the families. (Major 2010)

To try and amend so many mistakes, on 23 June 2010 Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued a formal apology to the Indo-Canadian community on behalf of the Canadian nation. An integrated institutional effort was finally made to *home* the sorrow of the victims' relatives, acknowledging the tragedy as fully Canadian: "This atrocity was conceived in Canada, executed in Canada, by Canadian citizens, and its victims were themselves mostly citizens of our country" (Harper in Lu 2010), Harper stated in his apology. After so long, if only in this token gesture, the victims' relatives could at least see their pain symbolically acknowledged by the nation where most of them were born.

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3. Intradiegetic Elements: A Diaspora within a Diaspora

In Bharati Mukherjee's story "The Management of Grief", a symbolic meta-diaspora, with its multifarious and chameleonic reality, emerges after the accident. The murdered persons are perceived as members of a diasporic community — Indo-Canadians, but further, a real community, referred to as "the relatives" (96), emerges around those who have died. Altogether they compose a diaspora within the diaspora, with a culture of their own, capitalised on the necessity of mourning. As stated earlier, on a metaphorical level, as in real diasporas, this meta-diaspora crystallizes around a loss, that of those who were murdered, in the same way as literal diasporas crystallize around the loss of the home country. Their foundational event is a loss which cannot be properly mourned, and the community are alone in their sorrow, as diasporic peoples are in their in-between world.

According to Fred Ribkoff, Mukherjee's short story illustrates "inadequacies and dangers of institutional, textbook responses to traumatic losses experienced by people astride different cultures" (Ribkoff 2012: 516). Yet the story also suggests that the management of grief is not only cultural, but also personal. In any event, grief cannot be managed adequately from a merely institutional stance. Both the personal and the institutional levels are culturally ordained, yet whereas the personal reaction often exceeds the boundaries imposed by cultural conventions, the institutional, conversely, falls short of providing a comforting avenue for an appropriate management of grief. Thus the title has a double edge. On the one hand it refers to a situation which is irredeemably managed by grief, and thus

cannot fit neatly into any culturally-specific preordained mould, let alone any institutional one. But it also suggests that grief originating in a tragedy like this needs to be managed institutionally, from the home and host country, through institutions created to serve the citizens in question. In this regard, the story shows that Canadian management after the attack was inappropriate and insufficient (which, as we have seen, was indeed the case). Perhaps the ultimate idea the story wants to suggest is that such grief is simply impossible to manage properly, as it entails unbearable and unspeakable pain. No preordained institutional way of managing it, however complex, would suffice to fully alleviate the array of deeply nuanced feelings of each person that had suffered such a terrible loss.

The story begins in Shaila Bhave's home in Toronto, where members of the Indo-Canadian community have gathered after learning the terrible news. As the story opens, Shaila sits down on a staircase. Her situation evokes Bhabha's remarks on the work of artist Renée Green in his introduction to *The Location of Culture*, where he equates the staircase Green presents in one of her installations with the condition of interstitiality, characteristic of the diasporic subject. At this point in her life, having learned that her husband and two children are in all probability dead, Shaila Bhave's position is necessarily one of transit, where she can either succumb or, as will be the case after long suffering, emerge as a different, necessarily renewed person. This transit is metaphorically embodied in the staircase. But Shaila's interstitial position, between cultures, is further emphasized by her unusual reaction to the news she has received. She has surprised everybody by her coldness and her perceived detachment, which metaphorically reinforce the sense of "being apart", neither fully here nor fully there, which, as "The Management of Grief" illustrates, characterizes diasporic subjectivities. For the members of her community, Shaila is behaving in an odd manner, not disclosing her feelings. A case is made for respect towards each culture, but also which each subject deserves in her or his form of mourning: "We must all grieve in our own way" (95), Shaila will assert later on in the story. With these words, she is claiming not only respect for cultural difference but, more emphatically, for personal reactions and idiosyncrasies.

Although she does not show it, Shaila is corroded by unbearable pain, which she prefers to keep private. She is actually so unsettled that she keeps hearing her family's voices calling her name, and she will go on hearing them until much later. This unusually calm reaction, however, due to the barbiturate dose she has absorbed, makes Shaila feel freakish. Indeed, her sense of identity is in question. Quite literally, her former sense of identity as a mother and wife, who has just lost the persons that gave meaning to the most important roles she has played in her life until the present, has been shattered. Also, in this reading of the story as an archetypal account of the diasporic predicament, her emotional turmoil appears to

be a reflection of her increasingly *unhomed* subjectivity. “Like my husband’s spirit”, she will feel, “I flutter between worlds” (101).

In her home, Shaila Bhave is surrounded by completely unknown people: “A woman I don’t know is preparing tea on my kettle” (91), she observes. On the one hand, this sense of unfamiliarity is again a reminder of the intrinsic sense of disorientation involved in the immigrating experience. In their new environment, immigrants have lost contact with their cultural referents, and therefore their sense of a personal identity is unlikely to be left untouched. Their referential map has been shattered and they need, in all urgency, to build one from scratch, or from the few inferences they have been able to gather before leaving, plus their immediate impressions. With physical displacement, the immigrant’s system of cultural referents has been left behind as she or he needs to learn how to decode entirely new semiotic systems (Alonso-Breto 2012: 130). On the other hand, the fact that Shaila Bhave is surrounded by people she does not know, but who, nonetheless, have gathered in her house with the intention of providing some comfort, accounts for the contingent character of diasporas as much as for their solidarity. In diaspora, people who do not know each other but who have a common origin tend to cluster around and support one another in an environment often perceived as hostile or, at best, indifferent. The whole situation has been taken command of by Mr. Sharma, the President of the Indo-Canadian society, a means of pointing to the identity politics of diasporic communities, who see the need to institutionalize their informal and contingent connections in order to defend specific interests, which often differ from those of mainstream society. Due to discriminatory immigration policies, the Indo-Canadian community grew very slowly between the early and the middle decades of the 20th century, but figures started mounting significantly from the late 50s and rose especially in the 1960s with the elimination of racial limitations for immigrants and the introduction of the point system in Canada. Thus, by the mid-1980s, when the story takes place, the Indo-Canadian community had acquired a significant presence in the country, was well organized, and had already had time to nurture a sound feeling of belonging. The fact that Mrs. Sharma is pregnant is no coincidence, but points to the obvious fact that by that time many if not all members of the Indo-Canadian community were not immigrants, but Canadian-born.

Shaila Bhave’s counterpart in the story is her neighbour Kusum, like herself a wife and mother, who has lost her husband and daughter in the attack. United in sorrow, these two women will eventually find very different ways to reconstruct their lives. At this point in the story, we read that when Kusum’s family arrived in the neighbourhood, only recently, they had organised a housewarming which was attended by members of the Indo-Canadian community, and also by white

neighbours. According to Avtar Brah, "Diaspora space is inhabited not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous" (Brah 1996: 16). However, at the time of the attack, the absence of mainstream Canadians in Shaila's house is conspicuous. And we cannot be conclusive about the reasons for this absence, which spans the whole of the story, the only exception being the controversial government envoy Judith Templeton. Is it from a sense of awe for such deep human suffering, or out of respect for cultural difference, or simply a lack of interest, that white Canadian neighbours may conclude that the fate of Indo-Canadians is none of their business? We can only speculate about these possibilities. The TV is on, yet so far reports about the event are sparse and unclear. The Government acts evasively (92), and is reluctant to admit it has been a terrorist attack, going as far as to suggest that the explosion might have been due to space debris or Russian lasers. Those in the house, however, have guessed right from the beginning: "Sikh bomb. Sikh bomb" (92), they mumble. From the very beginning, the community and relatives are deprived of information appropriate to the situation. To emphasize this, on the TV screen a white-haired priest in a blue robe (attributes that should not go unnoticed) rants about unrelated matters. "Damn! [...] How can these preachers carry on like nothing's happened?" (92), a man in Shaila's house exclaims. The feeling of being ignored from an institutional point of view already at this stage lays bare certain flaws in the societal structure denounced by Marlene Nourbese Philip.

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Four days after the accident, "the relatives", as the community of mourners comes to be called, have been taken to the south-west of Ireland. The explosion occurred a few miles off the coast, and some corpses and plane debris have been retrieved nearby. The first scene in Ireland is disheartening, the relatives carefully scanning over the surface of an Irish bay in search of the dead bodies of their loved ones. Their state of mind is one of shock and deep sorrow, verging on madness. To add to their despair, the gap between the sparse information provided by the authorities and their need to know has widened, and they are still plagued by doubt: "Knowing, not knowing. Wishing". Not a single representative of the Canadian Government has accompanied the group on this ominous journey. Thus, they feel that their tragedy is not properly acknowledged, which will translate into the impossibility of an appropriate mourning, and their loss will remain an open wound long after it might have been healed. The Canadian authorities' neglect adds to the sad fact that only a few of them will be "lucky" enough to recover their loved ones' bodies. In this double sense, the relatives' plight embodies what Vijay Mishra considers the defining feature of diaspora, that is, a state of perpetual mourning: "I want to suggest that the diasporic imaginary is a condition of an impossible mourning that

transforms mourning into melancholia” (V. Mishra 2007: 9). The transformation of mourning into melancholia occurs, namely, when the lost object of desire is continuously deferred and the mourner cannot rebuild a new relationship with it, then the mourning cannot be completed and the situation becomes pathological. At this point, then, the relatives’ situation pointedly parallels the ever marginal, in-between position of diasporic subjectivities. Their stay in the “third space” of Ireland provides a representation of the idea of unhomeliness, defined by Homi Bhabha as the “estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world [...] that is, the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations” (Bhabha 1994: 13). For Bhabha, “the unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence” (Bhabha 1994: 15), which is precisely the point the story tries to make, in its simultaneous exploration of the personal, cultural and institutional reactions.

More pointedly than in the rest of the story, the Irish interlude of this metadiasporic community highlights the complexity of diasporic identities, bringing them closer to what Sudesh Mishra has called the “second scene of exemplification” in understandings of Diaspora, which debunks strict filiations with the idea of nation or home/host-land and instead is characterized by asynchronous migrations, crablike detours and overdetermined identities that defeat all attempts to institute a discrete homeland-hostland dichotomy. In this second scene, subjective filiations are viewed as provisional or occurring at the micro-local and heterotopic levels (kinship identifications, ad hoc associations, attachments to milieu items, institutions, adoption of hybrid cultural forms and practices, etc.) rather than at the customary macrolevel of the homeland or nation-state (S. Mishra 2006: 44).

Paradoxically, the Irish people’s response is warmer than that of their fellow Canadians. Over these days the relatives are given flowers and comfort, hugged in the streets by complete strangers. There is a feeling of empathy which Deborah Bowen defines as “the quintessentially ‘human’ touch” (Bowen 1997: 51), and which seems to be missing in Canadian people: “I cannot imagine recations like that in the streets of Toronto” (99). Several reasons may account for this. Importantly, the Irish people have undergone deep suffering, often enduring tragedy, due to political oppression, terrorism, or natural disaster. Another reason for empathy can be their also being a nation of emigrants. A less optimistic way of reading the Irish people’s attitudes would suggest that the Irish do not feel politically implicated in the event, and therefore are not afraid to offer support and care, whereas mainstream Canadians may be reluctant to endorse a moral responsibility towards Indo-Canadians to which they might have to respond someday. In other words, implicating themselves in the pain of the tragedy would mean fully accepting “visible minorities” as full members of the Canadian nation,

something which, apparently, they were not fully ready to do at the time. Another reasonable explanation, however, suggests a purely humanist approach, whereby the Irish peoples' compassion would be rooted in the proximity of the accident and their first-hand witnessing of the tragedy, whereas for both mainstream Canadians and Indians the accident remains geographically, and therefore emotionally, more distant.

In this peculiar reverse journey of the diasporic selves, the following step is India, where Shaila and Kusum fly together, escorting Kusum's husband and daughter's coffins. On arrival, the two women are scolded by a customs officer, underscoring the fact that ethnic filiations do not mean higher empathy with their tragedy, and also that, as in Canada, their sorrow is not going to be universally acknowledged here either. With this episode, the story puts the emphasis on the *unhousedness* factor applying in India too. Shaila speaks back at the officer, showing—and here the coffin image acquires supplementary meaning—that they are no longer the submissive wives that once left the country with veiled heads and voices “shy and sweet” (101). This confrontation announces, as soon as they are entering their original home nation, that change has taken place within these migrant Indian women, again dramatizing the symbolic equation between the trauma of loss and the trauma of migration.

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In India, Shaila feels that she is “trapped between two modes of knowledge” (101). Considering her present situation and vital trajectory, one would expect such a division to be drawn between eastern and western values. It is ironic, therefore, that her sense of being a split subject should respond, rather, to the simultaneous influence that her grandmother's traditionalism and her parents' rationalism exert on her. This is a way of discarding understandings of culture as monolithic, and of suggesting that cultures are inherently different from each other—like diasporas, for that matter (Bhabha 1995), as well as the truism that rationalism is not a western prebend. Trying to decide what to do with her life, Shaila travels in India with Kusum, then alone, when Kusum decides to sell her house and enter an ashram, embracing tradition as an Indian widow. But Shaila's fate is different, and one day after months of searching for clues in her new situation, her husband finally conveys a message to her by means of a sadhu: “*You must finish alone what we started together*” (102), his voice whispers to her under the guise of a sadhu, and she decides to return to Toronto.

Judith Templeton reappears in this part of the story. She had already been introduced before “the relatives” left for Ireland, charged with the mission of distributing economic hand-outs to them. Like the TV preacher, she is an embodiment of white Anglo-Saxon Canadianness, as indeed her physical appearance proclaims:

Judith Templeton is much younger than she sounded. She wears a blue suit with a white blouse and a polka dot tie. Her blonde hair is cut short, her only jewellery is pearl drop earrings. Her briefcase is new and expensive looking, a gleaming cordovan leather. [...] her contact lenses seem to float in front of her light blue eyes. (94)

For all her good intentions, Judith Templeton is an inadequate government emissary. She acts in a self-centred and tactless manner, using derogative language to refer to matters of cultural difference and human grief. Appealing to the principle that Multiculturalism needs to be administered properly and that this was not always done, she takes on herself the mission of caring for material aspects, a task for which she is obviously not prepared inasmuch as she is incapable of empathising in the least with the relatives. Both grief and cultural difference stand in the way, and she cannot find the means to properly communicate with them in most cases. She attempts to solve this by absorbing a manual which explains the stages of *grief management*, a book which, like her, is completely unaware of its own cultural specificity, and which falls definitely short of accounting for the diversity of human (and cultural) reactions to grief. As Fred Ribkoff puts it, “such ‘universal’ patterns and abstract terms of assessment are removed from the realities of each individual case of grieving” (Ribkoff 2012: 518). Templeton’s inadequate treatment of the deep pain experienced by those who have lost their beloved ones reflects the aloofness of mainstream society regarding both cultural difference and individual sorrow, and she sees the old Sikh couple’s refusal to accept their children’s death as “stubbornness and ignorance” (106), something she is “against” (106), and as a “complication” (95). It is not surprising that Shaila should refuse to help her, choosing to keep silent about her reasons for doing so. “The cultural impasse between this government representative and Shaila is tortuous and seemingly insurmountable, and Shaila can only run away”. (Ribkoff 2013: 518)

The story thus illustrates diversity within diasporas as much as their fragility and contingency, that is, their difference, understood in the sense defined by Bhabha in “Diversity vs. Difference”, as based “not on the exoticism of multi-culturalism of the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*” (Bhabha 1995: 209; his italics). Shaila, Kusum, Dr. Ranganathan, Kusum’s daughter Pamela... each of “the relatives” needs to make different decisions in order to soothe their sorrow and manage to go on with their lives. Diasporas are by no means homogeneous or stable, but rather they are mutable and, at most, strategic: “As border communities, diasporas [...] create microcosmic alliances by attending to ‘cultural forms, kinship relations and business circuits or by attaching themselves to religious institutions and cities’” (S. Mishra 2006: 79 quoting Clifford 1994). The microcosmic alliance of this metadiaspora community is based on a common experience of suffering, but also on the tacit assumption

that their individual ways out of it are to be respected since each of the characters' decision, whether culturally ordained or not, is both "a means of survival [and] a mode of agency" (Bowen 1997: 56).

For Shaila, achieving a new sense of direction after this spine-breaking event consists in finishing what she and her husband started together. And what they started together was a life in Canada. The transit begun with migration and punctuated by the loss of her family continues for Shaila. She had been a traditional Indian wife who did not say her husband's name aloud and, as tradition would also have it, never told him that she loved him. Also, she had been part of a family who did not participate in politics. But in the final impasse this will inevitably change in Shaila's life, and when she returns to Toronto with the mission of finishing what she started with her husband, she takes on an unexpectedly proactive political attitude:

I write letters to the editors of local papers and to members of Parliament. Now at least they admit it was a bomb. One MP answers back, with sympathy, but with a challenge. You want to make a difference? Work on a campaign. Work on mine. Politicize the Indian voter. (107)

Thus, for Shaila, going on with her life after losing her family means both going on with what they had started together and, necessarily, starting anew. For her starting anew means becoming a full, politically active Canadian citizen. Leaving behind the marginal role played by diasporas in the early days of official Multiculturalism, she will follow her husband's last suggestion, "*Your time has come. Go, be brave*" (108), and inaugurate her own future and that of others like her. Thus, and here lies the originality of my reading, when in the final lines of the story Shaila leaves the package she was carrying on a bench and simply "starts walking", she is not only accepting her new condition as hybrid. Further, and crucially, she is beginning to construct a future where minorities shall have complete representation and protagonism in the nation, and not allow their role to be limited to being Government hand-out recipients anymore, as in her historical moment, the late eighties, had been the case.

Shaila's position is still interstitial, the trauma of her loss has turned her into an *empirically* hybrid subject, but she refuses to be marginal anymore. Her loss has prompted Mrs Bhavé into "the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (Bhabha 1994: 1), that moment uniquely capable of creating newness and moving society forward. Unlike her former self once and again, after her journey Shaila consciously embraces the realm of "the beyond", (to once more retrieve Homi Bhabha's terminology), to become the very "articulation of cultural differences" herself, and thus open an infinite space

of social and political possibilities. If her choice is textually ambiguous (“There is no sense of closure”, Fred Ribkoff claims, probably rightly), we choose to read this non-definition as Shaila’s decision to actively occupy her in-between space so as to be able to elaborate new “strategies of selfhood —singular or communal— that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (Bhabha 1994:1). Ultimately, Shaila’s gesture points to the empowerment of diasporas and their increasingly active role in the life of the nation, since (to quote Bhabha again), “it is in the emergence of the interstices [...] that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness* [...] are negotiated”.

4. Conclusion

“The Management of Grief” entails an uncompromised critique of Canadian Multiculturalism at its early stage in the 1980s. Through subtle strategies of representation, it presents Canada as a country where whiteness-as-power is pervasive, and where ethnic minorities are perceived by mainstream society as exogenous, and made to feel as such. I have argued that this idea is presented in Mukherjee’s “The Management of Grief” in a number of very effective textual strokes mostly concentrated in the figure of Judith Templeton. Thus the text chooses to echo and replay the particularities of the politics surrounding the tragic event which inspired the story, especially its aftermath.

Together with the previous one, this paper has suggested a reading of “The Management of Grief” as an archetypal representation of the predicament of diasporas, understood, pace Vijay Mishra and Lily Cho, in the sense of the diasporic condition perceived as one dominated by melancholia. The story evokes the diaspora experience in several other ways, most notably with its emphasis on the in-between status of such communities in an identitarian, affective and political sense. As expounded, the story underscores and productively illustrates several elements paramount in the diaspora experience: to begin with, the need of diasporic peoples to reconstruct themselves anew in the situation of displacement (or, in the case of second or later generations, the awakening of a similar need when made fully aware of the complexity of their in-between cultural, affective and often political situation). Further, the story highlights the frequent contention, especially popularized by Hall and Bhabha but elaborated in various ways, that cultural identities are fluid and movable, constantly in the making, which emphatically applies to migrant and diasporic identities. Diasporas are not dependable on more or less immutable points of reference such as homeland, location, religion, etc., or, importantly, on historical

experience—in this case the tragedy—which, pace Hall and others, eventually marks the distinctiveness of a group.

Bharati Mukherjee, further, tells the story of a political empowerment, a coming-into-consciousness process which is accompanied by a coming-into-agency one. Sheila Bhave leaves Canada in an unsuccessful quest for the recovery of her lost family only to return as a different person, ready to unsettle both culturally and, importantly, politically, the very foundations of white, bicultural Canada. And such an intervention cannot be overlooked. As Trinh Min-ha beautifully puts it,

The moment the insider steps out from the inside she's no longer a mere insider. She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands in that underdetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. Undercutting the inside/outside opposition, her intervention is necessarily that of both not quite an insider and not quite an outsider. She is, in other words, this inappropriate other or same who moves about with always at least two gestures: that of affirming 'I am like you' while persisting in her difference and that of reminding 'I am different' while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at. (Minh-ha 1990: 374-5 in S. Mishra 2006: 76)

With a dexterous literary manoeuvre which becomes a respectful homage paid to the victims of the Air India 182 tragedy, both the bereaved and their relatives, Bharati Mukherjee succeeds in inscribing in the national archives an event which had been virtually ignored by the mass of Canadian mainstream citizens. And she does so from a non-institutional perspective which can be aptly and appropriately described as *affective*, much like the event itself and what its protagonists had deserved—a necessary gesture of compassion which was inexplicably denied to them by their nation. Together with this, in writing her story Mukherjee manages to symbolically reorganize the socio-political texture of the Canadian nation, bearing witness to the specific moment in history when Canadian diasporic communities took political control of themselves.

Notes

¹. This paper benefitted from MICINN funding, Ref. FFI2015-63739 P, and from support of the Centre for Australian Studies, University of Barcelona. The author wishes to thank Drs. Felicity Hand, Jacqueline Hurtley, Ishmeet Kaur and Dolores Ortega, as well as the two *Miscelánea* reviewers, for useful feedback and suggestions.

². Quotes from this story will only be referenced through page numbers.

³. Sikh-Canadian and Indo-Canadian identities are her conflated given the dimension of the attack and its treatment in Mukherjee's short story. An exploration of the connections and divergences of both

labels falls beyond the scope of this article; however, we should remark that both ethnic communities, while connected, obviously retain certain idiosyncrasies.

⁴. On April 11 2016, the current Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, announced he would offer an apology in the Parliament for the Komagata Maru incident on May 18 of the same year (<<http://pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2016/04/11/prime-minister-canada-announces-komagata-maru-apology>>, accessed April 29, 2016).

⁵. Lily Cho elaborates on this idea in several articles, generally proposing the thesis that diaspora is not so much a sociological category as a condition of subjectivity: "Diaspora, at its best, is not about membership, but about a raced and gendered condition of melancholia and loss which is intimately related to the traumas of dislocation and the perpetual intrusion of the past of this trauma into the present" (2007b). See also Cho 2007a.

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