CHAPTER 1

SPACES OF IMPACT: ADOLESCENTS
INTERROGATING A STORY OF THE AIR INDIA
BOMBING

To enter into the postcolonial world is to see cultural relations at a global level, to understand the complexities of the histories and power relations which operate across continents. (Sherry Simon and Paul St-Pierre, 2000, p. 13)

“The Management of Grief,” a short story by Bharati Mukherjee (1988), was published as part of the collection *The Middleman and Other Stories*. These stories epitomize North America’s new “middlemen,” the “not-quites” who must negotiate “between two modes of knowledge” (p. 189). The story we are discussing here concerns the effects of the 1985 Air India bombing by Sikh terrorists on Toronto’s Indian community and specifically on the central character and narrator, Mrs. Shaila Bhave, who loses her husband and two sons in the crash. The narrator appears to be coping well with the tragedy and is asked by a government social worker, Judith Templeton, “to help as an intermediary—or, in official Ontario Ministry of Citizenship terms, a ‘cultural interpreter’—between the bereaved immigrant communities and the social service agencies” (Bowen, 1997, p. 48).

In this chapter, we explore the spatial, cultural and temporal disruptions that resonate from the story and the real life events surrounding the Air India plane crash. We ground our discussion in a study that explored the responses of ten high school readers, five Indo-Canadian and five Euro-Canadian students, who read the story fifteen years after the actual event. We consider how the story and the event function as spaces of impact in the context of Canada’s official multiculturalism, exposing and revealing the disruptions between public policy and the lived realities of Canada’s diasporic peoples.

The story is about a very specific event in Canadian culture; but it may also be about an event specific to a Canadian culture. In *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy*, Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee (1987) tell us that they “saw it then, and see it now, as fundamentally an immigration tragedy with terrorist overtones” (p. ix). Mukherjee (1997) explains that in 1985 a terrorist bomb, planted in an Air-India jet on Canadian soil, blew up after leaving Montreal, killing 329 passengers, most of whom were Canadians of Indian origin. The prime minister of Canada at the time, Brian Mulroney, phoned the prime minister of India to offer Canada’s condolences for India’s loss. (para. 13)
Despite the fact that this bombing was Canada’s largest mass murder, this attitude that the tragedy constituted an “Indian problem” persisted in Canada until well into the twenty-first century. Ironically, the human impact of the crash resonated more deeply in Ireland, the literal space of impact, than it did in Canada. Only since a criminal trial revealed the extent of the incompetence of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in investigating the alleged perpetrators have public attitudes changed significantly. The trial judge delivered a verdict of not guilty based on the evidence presented, but he also made it clear that this evidence and the investigation were deeply flawed. As a result of public outrage, an official inquiry was set in place to review the process of the investigation. Increased media coverage, the events of September 11, 2001, the political commitment of surviving family members, changing notions of who counts as “Canadian” and genuine anger at systemic injustices surrounding the tragedy have reignited interest in the Air India bombing.

THE TEXT

However fascinating the real life events surrounding the tragedy itself, Mukherjee makes it clear that in “The Management of Grief” she does not intend to “[reduce] art to sociological statement,” (Chen and Goudie, 1997, para. 22) explaining that “no fine fiction, no good literature, is anchored in verisimilitude. Fiction must be metaphor. It is not transcription of real life but it’s a distillation and pitching at a higher intensification of life” (para. 36). What Mukherjee does distill in this story are her perspectives on official Canadian multiculturalism, against which she has “spoken so vociferously” (para. 56). Mukherjee spent fifteen years in Canada; then in the early 1980s, dissatisfied with her experiences with Canadian multiculturalism, she and her family moved to the United States. Mukherjee (1997) explains that

Canadian official rhetoric designated me as one of the ‘visible minority’ who, even though I spoke the Canadian languages of English and French, was straining ‘the absorptive capacity’ of Canada. Canadians of color were routinely treated as ‘not real’ Canadians. (para. 8)

Given Mukherjee’s strong views on ethnicity in Canada, it is interesting to consider her perceived status as an “ethnic writer” in North America. Her resistance to this designation raises questions similar to those posed by Wil M. Verhooven (1996) when he asks, “What exactly makes ‘ethnic writing’ ethnic? Is there such a thing as ‘ethnic writing’? If so, to what extent can an ‘ethnic’ writer be expected to write ‘ethnically’? (p. 100)

If such questions might be asked about writing, might not the same questions be raised about reading? Is there such a thing as ‘ethnic reading’? If so, to what extent can an ‘ethnic’ reader be expected to read ‘ethnically’? Since we were most interested in the personal responses of students to the story and the ways in which they came to an interpretation of the text’s meaning for themselves, these questions provided a useful starting point for thinking about questions of literature, response and culture. In much the same way that Shaila, the story’s protagonist, acts as a