

# Official Apology, Creative Remembrances, and Management of the Air India Tragedy

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ON 23 JUNE 1985, A BOMB DETONATED aboard Air India Flight 182 en route to New Delhi from Montreal via Toronto: 329 people died in the explosion; 280 were Canadian citizens, mostly of Indian heritage. Another bomb, intended for Air India Flight 301, detonated in baggage transfer at the Narita International Airport in Tokyo, killing two baggage handlers. In the aftermath of the bombings, the Canadian government dismissed the bombing of Air India Flight 182 as a foreign tragedy: “A foreign carrier had crashed off foreign seas” (Blaise and Mukherjee 174). It was this “failure to acknowledge the victims of the crash as Canadians” that, according to Clarke Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee, “remains for most of the families the enduring political grief of Air India 182” (203). The twenty-year investigations that followed revealed that the bombings had been planned and executed in Canada. Two Sikh residents of British Columbia were put on trial, but the British Columbia Supreme Court acquitted both men, citing the mishandling of evidence by the Canadian national police force (the RCMP) and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, along with a lack of cooperation between the two national agencies.<sup>1</sup> Only one person, a resident of British Columbia who had made the bombs, was convicted, of manslaughter, in 2003.

After decades of pressure from the families of the victims, a public inquiry into the bombings was established in 2006, headed by retired Supreme Court of Canada justice John C. Major. In his final report of the Commission of Inquiry on 17 June 2010, Major concluded that a “cascading series of errors” by the Canadian government and official agencies had contributed to the Air India tragedy. Five days later, at the memorial site in Toronto, Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized on behalf of the federal government for what he called the “institutional

failings of 25 years ago and the treatment of the victims' families thereafter" ("Statement").

I am interested in examining the prime minister's "statement" or "apology" to the families, which followed closely on the heels of the Inquiry report and was delivered at the memorial site in Toronto. Arguably, Harper's public admission that "Canadians now understand that this atrocity was conceived in Canada, executed in Canada, by Canadian citizens, and its victims were themselves mostly citizens of Canada" ("Statement"), points to the state's and its majority citizens' belated acceptance of racialized minorities as citizens with rights and protections guaranteed by the state; however, even while pointing to an apparent crisis in multiculturalism, the text of the apology (analyzed here) does not put the state's official policy of multiculturalism into question.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, it presents the bombing of Air India Flight 182 as *India's* problem with *its* (Sikh) minorities, ignoring Canada's historical contributions to these racial tensions and its own failure to protect its minorities — as if what explains the crisis is not the failure of the ideal but the failure of minorities to adhere to it. Delivered before and to grieving families, predominantly Canadians of Indian descent, who, aggrieved at the government's pre-bombing conduct and post-bombing response, had spent years pressuring the government to take responsibility for the tragedy and its aftermath, the apology functions as a strategy and discourse that seeks to consolidate Canadian multiculturalism, even as the state works toward increased surveillance of difference. Linking the state's conceptualization of brown bodies as potential terrorists to the Air India bombings — for example, naming 23 June as the National Day of Remembrance for Victims of Terrorism (in 2005) rather than after the event itself — the government, through the apology, urges the Air India families to embrace a multicultural future by endorsing its anti-terrorism initiatives "to prevent another Flight 182" (Harper, "Statement"). The implication is that the Indo-Canadian community's failure to live up to Canada's multicultural ideal in the past makes its commitment to the government's initiatives in the present all the more urgent. As Sunera Thobani reminds us, official multiculturalism seeks "to further the nation's unity, not its transformation" (156).

The official apology, then, in seeking to offer redress, functions as a tool of the state to *manage* the grief and grievance of racialized minorities. Fictional remembrances of the Air India bombings, on the

other hand, trace a long history of racialized subjects living with loss and grief and resisting the government's push toward closure. In this essay, I read the apology in conjunction with two fictional remembrances of the Air India bombings: Bharati Mukherjee's 1988 short story "The Management of Grief" and Anita Rau Badami's 2006 novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* These two creative texts address the implications of the politics of official apology/official multiculturalism by emphasizing "the constitutive role that grief plays in racial/ethnic subject-formation" (Cheng xi) in multicultural Canada. They direct the reader's gaze to the lived experiences of Indo-Canadians pre- and post-1985, interweaving the production of the ordinary (everyday racism and racial grief) with the excessive or the extraordinary (terrorist act). Demonstrating the pressure on racial minorities to *manage* their grief civilly and even *hide* it (the model minority/model mourner in multicultural Canada), Mukherjee and Badami propose that everyday grief and racial violence need to be acknowledged and articulated publicly more so than the Air India tragedy as an exceptional or aberrant event (or series of events) in Canadian multiculturalism. Engaging with a history of disarticulated grief carried by generations who inherit the sorrow involves facing the intricacies and paradoxes of the grief. Thus, where the government apology seeks to orient the Air India families away from dwelling in the past and looking to the future, "The Management of Grief" and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* insist on opening up the past. In engaging with loss and past injustice, these fictional texts make available multiple pasts and "alternative histories forgotten within the metanarrative of institutionalized history" (Sugars and Ty 8). They illuminate how memories of historical experiences of discrimination and persecution, coupled with ongoing racialized experiences, shape South Asian psyches in the diaspora and trouble the celebration of Canada's official multiculturalism as articulated in the Air India apology. Whereas Harper wants to "make the skies safe for travel" ("Statement") to ensure a happy multicultural future for Canada, Badami and Mukherjee alert us to conditions on the ground, which — without an engaged reflection on the state's long history of racism against South Asians (and other racialized minorities), who continue to grieve their past — make the government's projection of a happy multicultural future untenable.

## A Canadian Tragedy?

Recent scholarship on the Air India tragedy points to a shift in its framing from a “foreign tragedy” to a “Canadian tragedy” in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Through such strategic reframings, scholars argue, Canada emerges as a victim of foreign political violence brought on by racialized immigrants, successfully obscuring the central role that systemic racism played in the Air India events. It did, after all, take the government of Canada twenty-one years to launch a public inquiry into what has been characterized post-9/11 as “the single worst act of terrorism in Canadian history” (Harper, “Statement”), “the largest mass murder in Canadian history” (Major), and “Canada’s 9/11” (MacQueen and Geddes).

In his 1 May 2006 announcement of the Commission of Inquiry, Harper repeatedly stated that the intention of the Inquiry was to “bring a measure of closure to those who still grieve for their loved ones.” The agenda set forth for the Commission, however, was limited to “a focused and efficient inquiry” that would “provide information that will help ensure that Canada’s police agencies and procedures, its airport security systems and anti-terrorism laws are the most effective in the world” (“Prime Minister”).<sup>4</sup> Thus, while the Inquiry’s first phase provided opportunities for victims’ families to give public testimonies of their losses and how they were treated by Canadian officials, agencies, and the larger public, the government’s focus was limited to the prevention of future terrorist attacks.<sup>5</sup> The racial injuries repeatedly noted by the families in testimonies and interviews with the press were glossed over, not seen to merit the government’s attention.

The lawyer representing the families commissioned University of Toronto sociology professor Sherene Razack to write a report on the Air India bombings for the Commission. In her report, Razack discusses in great detail the role that systemic racism played in the pre- and post-bombing activities and responses of Canadian officials. After studying numerous security documents, Commission reports, and trial testimonies, Razack concluded that, because of “systemic racism,” the potential threat to Indo-Canadians was not taken seriously. “In a nutshell,” she writes, “systemic racism operates when all lives do not count the same and when those charged with protection are not inspired to do their best to ensure that no life was lost” (3). In his summative remarks that

frame the final report, Commissioner Major also comments on this negligence:

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, [in] the legal proceedings, and in providing information, support and comfort to the families.

Yet the Commission's final report, though titled *A Canadian Tragedy*, fails to explore the reasons behind the Canadian official agencies' disregard of pre-bombing security briefings; the slow, apathetic response of the Canadian state in the aftermath of the bombings; and the remarkable indifference of the Canadian public to this momentous tragedy. Razack notes in her expert witness report that "Canadians do not recall June 23, 1985. As a nation, we were not shaken, transformed and moved to change our own institutional practices for a tragedy we considered had little to do with us" (9). Indeed, her report is excluded from the Commission of Inquiry's official website, revealing the government's careful attempt to manage a reading of the Air India story suitable to its political agenda.<sup>6</sup> Questions raised by Razack at the Inquiry remain unanswered even today. Why did official agencies and the nation

not care as much as when far fewer Canadians lost their lives in the World Trade Centre . . . ? What can we say about successive federal governments that made no public space for inquiry into the bombings, could not bring itself to even express condolences, and was not moved to commemorate the Canadian lives lost that day until more than twenty years after? (Razack 24)

Harper's 2010 apology to the families, even though twenty-five years late, gestures (finally) toward embracing the loss of lives on Flight 182 as a *Canadian* loss. The families' grief over the loss of loved ones on Air India Flight 182, exacerbated by the indifference of the state and many of its citizens, seems to have gradually seeped into the national consciousness, for, as Harper affirmed, "*Your* pain is *our* pain. As *you* grieve, so *we* grieve. And as the years have deepened *your* grief, so has the understanding of *our* country grown" ("Statement"; empha-

sis added). However, this reaching out to (primarily) Indo-Canadians does not overturn the government's initial perception of the events as "theirs" rather than "ours": the binary oppositions of *your/our* and *you/we* instead perpetuate what Cassel Busse describes as a long history of national exclusion and "a narrative of Othering that is not reconciled even in the public act of 'truth and reconciliation'" (237). The families' ("your") grief does not inform the change in the understanding of their ("your") country, for, according to Harper, the grief is *yours*, but the country is *ours*: "as the years have deepened *your* grief, so has the understanding of *our* country grown." And, while grief is recognized and named here, the underlying structure of differentiation remains: in the ephemeral nature of the apology, delivered at a memorial site rather than in the House of Commons (unlike the 1998 apology for the Second World War internment of Japanese Canadians, the 2006 apology for the Chinese head tax, or the 2008 apology to First Nations and other Indigenous Canadians for the residential school system) and archived on the prime minister's website rather than in Hansard, and in the non-recognition of the grief produced by the government's apathy toward and disrespect of the families. Thus, the state's marginalization of the Air India tragedy in the nation's history continues despite this public recognition of loss.

Rajeswari Sundar Rajan argues that in official apologies those admitting to guilt not only "continue to occupy, and to speak from, a position of power" (162) but also treat wrongs as isolated events in the past, thus ignoring the ongoing implications of those events. The Air India apology for "institutional failings" is an admission of past wrongs, not of systemic racism, as Razack has argued. It does not facilitate revisiting the past or reflecting on continuing practices of racism against minorities in Canada.<sup>7</sup> Instead, the wrongdoer — the Canadian state — re-establishes through this public speech act, which admits that the state and its agencies contributed to the tragedy and mistreated families in its aftermath, *its own value* as a liberal democracy, a caring nation that listens to minority grievances and takes responsibility for its own (in)actions. In the same instant that the state appears to come clean before its citizens, it directs focus away from its wrongdoing by reminding the Air India families of Canada's generosity in allowing Indo-Canadians entry into Canada. It then holds the Indo-Canadian community responsible for wreaking havoc in this purportedly peace-

ful, multicultural nation. The lesson that the government learned from the Air India bombings — which it clearly conveyed to those gathered at the memorial ceremony — is that it needs them for the success of its new surveillance, security, and anti-terrorism initiatives. In other words, the government strategically reached out to Indo-Canadian families who lost loved ones in the bombing of Air India Flight 182 *as Canadians* in order to solicit their support in distinguishing between bad (“terrorist”) minorities and good (“model”) minorities, not to work with them toward producing an inclusive nation.

Support for this endeavour to secure the nation’s future in an “age of terror” can be created only by eliciting fear of the faceless terrorist lurking in our midst. Thus, Harper declares in his apology,

Sadly, we have no way of knowing when, if, or how, we may once more be attacked, or by whom. We know only that terrorism is an enemy with a thousand faces, and a hatred that festers in the darkest spots of the human mind. And we fear that when we invite from around the world, those who share our aspirations for a better life, others also come, those who see in our Canada, not new bridges to a hopeful future but only another chance to travel the old roads to the blood-feuds of the past. (“Statement”)

Echoing a long-standing official line of argument, here the apology traces the Air India bombings directly to religious hostilities in India between Hindus and Sikhs. Placing emphasis on (good) immigrants as those who are “invite[d] from around the world” because they “share our [Canadian] aspirations for a better life,” Harper warns about “others [who] also come” — those who should not have been allowed entry but who got in anyway because of Canada’s openness (multiculturalism). Because these feared others came in along with the invited outsiders, the state now needs the invitees to look out for this “enemy with a thousand faces.” It is ironic that, while immigrants emerge here as fundamental to Canada’s self-construction as an open and inclusive multicultural nation, the project of imagining the nation’s future also insists on “foreign” origins as potential threats requiring surveillance and eventual assimilation.

Harper contends as well that “it is incumbent upon us all, not to reach out to, but rather to marginalize, to carefully and systematically marginalize, those extremists who seek to import the battles of India’s

past here and then export them back to that great and forward-looking nation” (“Statement”). Thus, the abstract image of the “enemy with a thousand faces” now gets fleshed out in the figure of the “extremist” or “separatist” Indian Sikh or the Khalistani. This reduction of terrorist identity allows some brown bodies to *pass* as safe while restricting the mobility of other brown bodies by eliciting anxiety on trains and airplanes, in streets, and at gas stations.<sup>8</sup> Such official discourse enables social violence to take place by creating the conditions under which social groups become pitted against each other in fear and mutual hatred. This positioning of minorities not only against majorities but also against other minorities and against each other raises important ethical questions. Can Canadians of different races and religions mourn the Air India tragedy while also being suspicious of friends and neighbours? Can racialized subjects stake claims to Canada as home if they are continuously relegated within discourse to a non-Canadian homeland?

### The Model Mourner/The Model Minority

Harper’s apology ends with this assertion: “The greatest legacy we can leave to our loved ones is to make the skies safe for travel” (“Statement”). But the government’s desire “to make the skies safe for travel” is not accompanied by a similar desire to make the people on board those flights feel at home once they disembark in Canada. Also, the apology seeks to distinguish between racialized immigrants. Yet in Mukherjee’s “The Management of Grief” and Badami’s *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* we see how this “new country” (Mukherjee 193) prompts the same immigrants, despite differences in language, food, religion, and class, to seek out each other. Both Mukherjee and Badami note that fellow feeling among immigrants from India results from their recognition of the difficulties in settling down in Canada. Mukherjee’s central character, Shaila, describes relationships between minoritized subjects in the years before the Air India Flight 182 bombing as “a time when we all trusted each other in this new country, it was only the new country we worried about” (193). Similarly, Bibi-ji and Pa-ji, in Badami’s novel, run “an open house. Anyone was welcome: relatives, friends of friends, refugees, children of friends” (42), and we see the effects delineated in



detail through the intimate friendship that develops between the North Indian Bibi-ji and the South Indian Leela Bhat.

Mukherjee's story begins in Shaila's house, peopled with friends and strangers who, without being asked, have gathered to offer support to Shaila, who has lost her husband and two sons on Air India Flight 182: "A woman I don't know is boiling tea the Indian way in my kitchen. There are a lot of women I don't know in my kitchen, whispering and moving tactfully. They open doors, rummage through the pantry, and try not to ask me where things are kept" (179). A house full of immigrants from the Indo-Canadian community, who have discreetly gathered at the narrator's home to offer solidarity and support, makes the indifference in the Canadian public realm stand out. This is further clarified for the reader when one of the men in her house complains that the preachers on television carry on "like nothing's happened," and Shaila thinks that it is because "we're not that important"; "*they* care about nothing" (180; emphasis added).<sup>9</sup> This issue of marginalization, of the invisibility of brown bodies, is also brought up in Badami's novel. Bibi-ji, the "beautiful and accomplished proprietor" of a shop and the owner of an apartment, is aware that she is "invisible" to white Canadians, who view her as "an insignificant brown foreigner, one of the people who ran small shops . . . or worked in the sawmills, or cleaned up in the posh restaurants, hardly worthy of notice" (44-45). Leela took great pride in her husband's family lineage — "the Bhats of Bangalore" (102), "*the famous family of Kunjoor Bhats*" (115) — but similarly comes to understand her position after moving to Canada as "a Minority lumped together with an assortment of other minorities" (137). She muses, "How long would she remain foreign?" (129).

The precariousness of minority existence is established in both texts: the transition from "foreigner" to either model minority or terrorist suspect seems to depend on official discourses. Shaila, faced with the tragic loss of her family, feels "[n]ot peace, just a deadening quiet" (Mukherjee 180). She wishes that she "*could scream, starve, walk into Lake Ontario, jump from a bridge*" (183). However, on the surface, she appears to be unnaturally calm. This makes a young government social worker, Judith Templeton, conclude that Shaila is "coping very well" (183). Templeton views her as a model mourner, which, to social service agencies, means someone who can accept the loss and move ahead with life. She suggests that Shaila's apparent strength — "the strongest person of all" (183),

according to most observers — might be of practical help to those who are “hysterical” (i.e., mourning improperly). Templeton asks Shaila for help as an intermediary or cultural translator for other traumatized families. Keen to ensure that there is “the right human touch,” she declares, “We don’t want to make mistakes.” “More mistakes, you mean,” corrects Shaila, reminding Templeton that the government had failed to protect its citizens in the first place and contributed to their deaths (183).

Shaila believes that she is “behaving very oddly and very badly” and does not consider herself “a model” mourner (183). Hesitantly, she accompanies Templeton to meet an elderly Sikh couple who had been brought to Canada just two weeks before their sons were killed in the crash and who refuse Templeton’s help. Shaila doubts that she will be of any assistance because, she believes, the Sikh couple “will not open up to a Hindu woman” (193). But when she identifies herself to the Sikh couple as another of the bereaved, another parent who has lost her boys, their shared grief creates (even if momentarily) a common ground, and she is able to move beyond her involuntary fear “at the sight of beards and turbans” (193), a fear arising from her knowledge that “Sikh” bombs were likely responsible for the deaths of her family members (179). We see here how grief both acts on individuals and spurs them to act. Grief that makes Shaila anxious about Sikh turbans also produces empathy for the turban-wearing Sikh parent. Shared grief allows her to reach out and connect with terrorist look-alikes, despite regional, linguistic, class, and religious differences and despite the generalized fear and suspicion of members of the Sikh community as alleged perpetrators, supporters, or bystanders of the crime. Similarly, on hearing of Shaila’s loss, the old Sikh mother’s “eyes immediately fill with tears” (193), and her husband mutters, “God provides and God takes away,” which to Shaila “sound[s] like a blessing” (194). We see here the potential to produce community by an appeal not to sameness but within difference through the recognition of shared (parental) grief. While divisions are created within communities, a relative form of kinship remains as victims bond over shared experiences while maintaining distances.

The elderly Sikh parents’ refusal to sign any of the official documents signifies to Shaila that they have not yet given up hope for their sons’ lives, for as she observes, “*In our culture, it is a parent’s duty to hope*” (195). She suggests to Templeton that bereaved families will employ different means to cope with the loss of loved ones: “Nothing I can do will

make any difference. . . . We must all grieve in our own way” (183).<sup>10</sup> But the understanding that there are different modes of grieving is incomprehensible to Templeton. The government, she says, wants nothing more than to help family members “accept” loss by assisting them to enrol in college or to volunteer with cultural societies (192). For government officials, “Acceptance means you speak of your family in the past tense and you make active plans for moving ahead with your life” (192).

Templeton wants the bereaved Sikh parents to sign the official documents quickly so that she can close their file and move on to the next family or task on her list. Her push for quick closure risks depriving them of the time to grieve in culturally specific ways the loss of their children. In addition, she misreads the parents’ inflexibility, their push back against the government’s insistence on closure, as an indication of their ignorance and illiteracy. “You see what I’m up against?” she tells Shaila. “I’m sure they’re lovely people, but their stubbornness and ignorance are driving me crazy” (195). Templeton’s exasperation embodies the Canadian state’s impatience with minorities who continue to turn back or hold on to lost objects (whether homelands, cultural practices, or memories of dead sons) rather than accept the government’s reconciliatory gestures of closure (whether a public inquiry, monetary compensation, or an official apology) and move on.

What might it mean, then, for the marginalized Air India bombings to occupy a central place in the Canadian state’s discourse on terrorism in a post-9/11 era? More than a decade after Mukherjee’s fictional representation of how Shaila and an array of others who lost loved ones on Air India Flight 182 find ways to live with their losses, the Canadian government issued its apology. The apology clarifies for *real* family members what “the management of grief” and “moving ahead” with one’s life signify in this era of heightened anxiety and increased securitization. The families are reminded that the crime was perpetrated by members of their own community (Indo-Canadians), and to secure their future they must now become foot soldiers for the state in its war on terror.

With the model mourner represented in Mukherjee’s story merging seamlessly into the model minority enunciated in Harper’s apology, the norms for “managing grief” seem to be reiterated.<sup>11</sup> Racialized Canadians, we are reminded, are perpetual others who need to be on guard while displaying their emotions — their loss, pain, anger, or frustration. The model immigrant, like the model mourner, successfully

suppresses his or her racial grief and grievances against the state, is compliant, displays approved public behaviour, and supports the policies of the state. More importantly, immigrants are reminded, they will be *tolerated* as long as they remain model mourners or model minorities.

In “The Management of Grief,” the Sikh couple, by refusing to sign the documents provided by Templeton, resist closure, while beards, turbans, and, one can assume, their ethnic attire render them hypervisible. As Thobani notes, “Multiculturalism has had the effect of constituting people of colour as possessing an excess of culture that marked them as outsiders to the nation” (162). So cultural diversity itself becomes “a ‘problem’ [or] . . . an issue for national concern, consideration, and management” (162). Writing in the post-9/11 US context, Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai similarly note that more visibly “cultured” or “ethnic” South Asians such as Sikhs and Muslims with beards or turbans are perceived as “fringe” model minorities (82). This is clearly established in post-9/11 novels such as Neesha Meminger’s *Shine, Coconut Moon*, which poignantly depicts the resurgence of racial anxieties in the perception of “turban-wearing, dark-bearded, and mustached men” (2), who are quickly associated with none other than the terrorist par excellence, Osama bin Laden.<sup>12</sup> Or Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, whose Pakistani American protagonist, Changez, decides to grow a beard. All of a sudden, he recognizes a certain kind of nervousness around him at his workplace: he “seemed to become overnight a subject of whispers and stares” (130).

Unlike Meminger’s and Hamid’s novels, Badami’s *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* is set in a pre-9/11 Canadian context. Still, the turban is a visible marker of difference. The narrator tells us of “the suspicious glances of the Europeans” in Vancouver and of Pa-ji’s “fear that the look in their eyes would turn to violence” (203). The turban marks the next generation of urban Vancouver Sikhs as different, too, when Pa-ji’s foster son, Jasbeer, constantly gets into trouble at school. This in turn makes Pa-ji’s wife, Bibi-ji, wonder, “was there something wrong with the school, or was it the way she and Pa-ji were bringing up this boy?” She is concerned specifically with Jasbeer’s long hair: “was he teased or bullied at school for the colour of his skin or because he wore his hair in a topknot like all good Sikhs? Should she ask Nimmo whether they could cut his hair — the marker of his Sikh identity — as so many other

Sikh parents in their community had done for their sons, so that Jasbeer could blend in?" (197).

The turban emerges as *the* identity marker that immigrants should give up in order to embrace the multicultural future so that they will not stand out in public spaces and be cast out. This is evident when the school principal summons Bibi-ji and Pa-ji because Jasbeer has brought a kitchen knife to school. As Jasbeer explains, "Jason said I was a wimp because I wore my hair in a bun like a lady, so I was showing him how brave Sikhs are" (211). During the sardonic exchange between Bibi-ji and the principal that follows, we notice Jasbeer's mounting anger: "Jasbeer kicked the leg of the principal's table. He recognized that tone of voice. It made him helplessly furious. Too young to know that the word to best describe that tone was patronizing, he was not too young to understand the thread of meaning that ran through it" (211). By calling attention to Jasbeer's suppressed anger, the narrative emphasizes how "the social and subjective formations of the so-called racialized or minority subject are intimately tied to the psychological experience of grief" (Cheng x). These everyday, unarticulated (often unarticulable) experiences of discrimination, coupled with their knowledge of historical discriminations perpetuated by the Canadian state, can render these racialized minorities unhappy, alienated, and aggrieved.

Badami's novel effectively captures a long history of grief and the struggles of racialized minorities to manage their grief. We are aware from its beginning that, as a young child, Bibi-ji had heard "endless stories of a ship called the *Komagata Maru* and a voyage that ended in nothing" (5).<sup>13</sup> Harjot Singh's traumatic memories and experiences had left an indelible mark on his young daughter's psyche. The young Bibi-ji "hated this ship . . . that had snatched his [her father's] dreams away and turned him into a barren-eyed man" (11). But her father's stories also produced in her an intense longing for the land that had refused her father entry. She has dreamed about Canada "ever since she could remember" (27). Later, as a parent, Bibi-ji recounts to Jasbeer, numerous times, the *Komagata Maru* incident and its effects on her father, followed by Pa-ji's "comment at length on the injustice of the whole episode" (198). At one point, Bibi-ji contemplates whether they had "burdened the boy with an impossible load, a feeling of grievances unresolved" (198).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Jasbeer embodies the long-term effects of living with Bibi-ji's and Pa-ji's stories of pain and injustice.

As Sara Ahmed reminds us, “Migration is not only felt at the level of lived embodiment. Migration is also a matter of generational acts of story-telling about prior histories of movement and dislocation” (*Strange Encounters* 90). Jasbeer’s personal circumstances — alienated in Vancouver, with a deep grievance against his birth parents for having given him “away” (289) — are compounded by his knowledge of his grandfather’s “aborted journey on the ship called the *Komagata Maru*, turned away by this very city” (198). Later, after hearing of the atrocities of the Indian state perpetrated against Sikhs, Jasbeer, who has grown up with “too *much* of a sense of history” and “[t]oo much of ancient stories of wars and warriors” (198) because of Pa-ji’s attempts to foster in him “a sense of the people he belonged to, a pride in his Sikh roots” (206), joins the Khalistanis. This secessionist movement offers him legends and heroes that can compensate for his feelings of lack and of non-belonging in Canada, for what he characterizes as “living a meaningless life” (289). As the narrator notes, “Dr. Randhawa’s diatribe of conquest and betrayal and revenge appealed to him. The older man seemed the epitome of a heroic figure lashing out against greater, darker powers” (253).

In suggesting that Jasbeer’s embrace of religious extremism is the consequence of the Canadian state’s historical and continuing racist practices against Indo-Canadians, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* offers a serious rebuttal to the state’s rhetoric of Sikh extremism in Canada as being imported from elsewhere and to the state’s portrayal of the Air India tragedy as an isolated wrong — an aberration — in its treatment of South Asians. The novel writes into the nation’s memory a whole litany of wrongs — monumental ones such as the *Komagata Maru* and mundane ones such as the discriminations experienced by minorities in their everyday lives. Rather than see the surge in Sikh militancy as an effect of Bibi-ji’s narration of the *Komagata Maru* incident to Jasbeer, we can follow Amber Dean’s suggestion that we “contemplate how the derision of mostly Sikh men as ‘Hindoo invaders’ during and after the *Maru*’s time in the Vancouver harbor can be understood as a racializing practice that *produces* such militancy as an *effect* of the state’s discriminatory policy” (207). Dean urges us to recognize how the Air India bombings are “bound to colonial histories of injustice that cross state lines and remain inseparable from the production of racialized subjects” (207). Further to these observations, I add that it is racial grief or

the continuous engagement with the pain of state violence (Indian and Canadian) that, in Badami's novel, makes Jasbeer join the secessionist struggle. His knowledge of past and present persecution of Sikhs determines his present (as the persecution itself determines the transnational present).<sup>15</sup> Jasbeer does not successfully hide his grief from the public; he does not "manage" it like the model minority; instead, it erupts beneath a mask — masking the inexpressible, the unarticulable — as his own experiences of racism are overlaid with other memories and histories. Linking the *Komagata Maru* to the Air India bombings, grandfather and grandson, Canada and India, the narrative of *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* exposes this hidden grief to the public eye.

In this light, the government's call in the Air India apology to "systematically marginalize" and "not . . . reach out to" alienated and disgruntled Canadians appears to be profoundly shortsighted. Texts such as *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* urge the state to attend to the grief and grievances of those who are othered, and to reflect on the conditions within the nation that breed anger and frustration in minoritized populations, in order to work toward producing a more habitable future. The government, by treating the Air India tragedy as an anomaly in its history of accepting diverse populations (as evident from its innate or originary multiculturalism), dismisses calls for the state to address issues of racialization and discrimination that affect the lives of minorities.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the government's stance positions anyone who seeks to probe the Air India story — or other national histories with alternative personal and collective histories or memories — as a threatening body that requires strict vigilance and possible disciplining by the state. It is not surprising, then, that the apology suggests a way of living with difference: by increasing surveillance and policing of difference rather than finding ways to reconnect with affected communities and reaching out to alienated and disenfranchised youth to make them feel at home in *their* home.

### The Past in the Present

Reading the Air India apology in conjunction with pre- and post-9/11 fiction such as Mukherjee's and Badami's reveals how the easy association of terror with particular bodies in the post-9/11 era has resulted in a history of racism being effectively covered over by a reinvigorated discourse on terrorism. Thus, while the pre-9/11 characters in Mukherjee's

and Badami's texts lament the invisibility of racialized minorities in Canada, the post-9/11 retroactive framing of the Air India bombings as a "Canadian tragedy" and the enforcement of new surveillance and security measures mean that it is nearly impossible now for turbaned or bearded brown men, whether Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, or Parsis, to remain *unmarked*.

In acknowledging that the Air India bombings were planned and executed in Canada, the official apology suggests that the Canadian state initially failed to recognize the "terrorists." This failure then provides a rationale for the increased vigilance of non-white immigrants seeking entry into Canada and of racialized minorities who reside in Canada. The discourse of "an enemy with a thousand faces" can thus result in the minoritized Indo-Canadian male eliciting fear and posing danger merely by inhabiting space with others. Encoded with the ostensibly "seeable" (readable) signs of "terrorist" identity — brown skin, turbans, beards, or ethnic attire — can these bodies be trusted in this age of terror? *Should* they be? So asks the official discourse. In contrast, Mukherjee's and Badami's narratives unravel a prehistory of casting immigrants from India as undesirable outsiders to an imagined national community. Such an approach renders the apology's idealized vision of an inclusive, progressive nation as a strategy for closing off avenues to revisit the past.

The state's assumption seems to be that, if racism is preserved not in official archives but in minority memories and consciousness, then, as Ahmed writes, "racism would 'go away' if only they would let it go away, if only they would declare it gone" (*Promise* 148). That is, the state does not need to address its past; it merely needs to convince minorities not to look in that direction. Although the premise of citizenship is that it leads to happy multiculturalism, racialized minorities must first demonstrate that they are worthy to be treated as citizens by being model mourners. State versions of happy multiculturalism require leaving behind the old world (transnational affiliations) and the past (e.g., the government's mistreatment of the Air India families) and expressing willingness to adopt the state's version of the future. Yet this call to be model mourners or model minorities — that is, loyal Canadians — is not neutral, for, as Badami reveals through Jasbeer, how one deals with grief and which direction one takes are determined by the subject's relation to a broader history of loss and suffering.



Thus, while “a proximate ‘we’” of those “who might be assumed to be ‘with me’ as well as ‘like me’ (sharing my ideals)” (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 106) is produced in the name of official multiculturalism, the framing of Air India Flight 182 as a *national* tragedy continues to marginalize Indo-Canadians and *their* grief through the state’s tactics of differentiation. The purported need to demarcate model minorities from terrorist minorities — that is, the assumptions that immigration brings in terrorists and that those terrorists cannot be differentiated from the welcomed immigrants — already marks brown bodies as others. The question of difference also comes into play in the conceptualization of the Air India bombings, in which the loss is understood to be that of Air India families and friends who lost loved ones. The Air India trials, the Commission of Inquiry findings, and Prime Minister Harper’s apology do not recognize the effects of the Air India bombings and their aftermath on others beyond the immediate families and friends of those killed. In contrast to the state, invested in particular practices of remembrance of Flight 182 and in narrowing forms of remembrance, the fictional texts discussed here incorporate the Air India tragedy within a long history of racial grief (dislocation and resettlement, in/visibility of minorities, and psychic and corporeal effects of racialization).<sup>17</sup> They suggest that a commitment to multiculturalism means working to produce multiple and contested histories of different marginalized groups that can allow these groups to reflect on and share repressed histories and personal memories of marginalization. By sharing historically significant — though silenced and forgotten — legacies of racism, suffering, and loss with the next generation of readers, Mukherjee and Badami urge Canada and Canadians to look back actively instead of close off grief.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Both men were alleged to be involved with a radical Sikh separatist movement fighting for an independent Khalistan. This allegation strengthened the view that the bombings were acts of retaliation for the Indian state’s atrocities against Sikh separatists in the 1970s and 1980s, Operation Blue Star (the Indian Army’s storming of Sri Darbar Sahib [the Golden Temple] on 6 June 1984), and the Indian National Congress government’s complicity in the anti-Sikh riots that erupted throughout India (31 October to 4 November 1984) following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by two of her Sikh bodyguards.

<sup>2</sup> Multiculturalism emerged as official government policy in Canada during the 1970s

in response to tensions among a white, Anglo-British national core, French Canadians, and other ethnic European Canadians. The 1971 Multiculturalism Policy and the 1988 Multiculturalism Act (Bill C-93) proclaim the state's (and its citizens') innate openness to and tolerance of diverse populations. The widespread refusal of Indigenous peoples in Canada to subscribe to multiculturalism stems from their understanding of it as a strategy of the nation to conceal its *intolerance* while maintaining its core ethnic genus, reinventing itself free of its colonial past.

<sup>3</sup> See Chakraborty, ed.; Failler; and Seshia.

<sup>4</sup> Major identified the central objective of the inquiry as “recommend[ing] safeguards and systemic changes to prevent future threats to our national security and intrusions into the lives of so many innocent people.”

<sup>5</sup> See Government of Canada for the first phase of the report, released in December 2007.

<sup>6</sup> In her analysis of the cross-examination of Razack by Barney Brucker, counsel for the attorney general of Canada, Angela Failler cites Brucker's concern that Razack's report “was going to form part of the public record” (159).

<sup>7</sup> Rajeswari Sundar Rajan writes that “political apology operates only within the frame of a particular wrong around which the boundaries are drawn, so that it can ignore its implications for other times, places, actors. . . . If they have no pedagogic logic, they can have no deterrent force” (162).

<sup>8</sup> The first person arrested as a terrorist suspect after the 9/11 attacks in the United States was a Sikh man, Sher Singh, taken off an Amtrak train bound for New York from Boston on 12 September 2001. The first case of retaliatory killing was of another Sikh man, Balbir Singh Sodhi, shot in front of his gas station in Mesa, Arizona, on 15 September 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Later on in the story, after arriving in Ireland to identify the deceased, Shaila notes the public display of emotion there. Strangers “rush” to her and give her “hugs,” and some cry. “Touched” by this public recognition of the grief of family members, Shaila notes, “I cannot imagine reactions like that on the streets of Toronto” (187).

<sup>10</sup> The story also reveals the irony of Templeton's juxtaposition of Shaila against the other mourners, whose trauma has “sprung bizarre obsessions” (192), since Shaila herself is haunted by the visions and voices of her dead family members and prophetic dreams. In an abandoned temple in a tiny Himalayan village, her husband appears to her; in Queen's Park in Toronto, she hears voices of her dead family members, who direct her toward the future.

<sup>11</sup> For critiques of the model minority, see Cheng; and Puar and Rai.

<sup>12</sup> In one episode in the novel, several white boys throw garbage at the turbaned Sikh American Sandeep's car, yelling, “[G]o back home, Osama! No bombs on civilians here, asshole, this is America!” (55). For a detailed analysis, see Chakraborty, “But that” (278-88).

<sup>13</sup> On 23 May 1914, a ship called the *Komagata Maru* arrived at Vancouver with 376 predominantly Sikh Indians on board — all of them British subjects. The passengers were refused permission to leave the ship because of the continuous journey law, which required that they come via direct passage from India. The ship had departed from Hong Kong, and most passengers did not have the \$200 in hand required to enter British Columbia. After two months, on 23 July, the *Komagata Maru* was forced to leave Vancouver. For further details, see Dean.

<sup>14</sup> Yet Bibi-ji never publicly expresses her grief; it is shared only within the home. In fact, she advises the new immigrant Leela thus: “Forgetfulness was good. . . . A bad memory was necessary for a person wishing to settle in, to become one of the crowd, to become an invisible minority” (136-37).

<sup>15</sup> A woman at the Golden Temple tells Bibi-ji that terrorism initiated and executed by Canadians affects those living in India: “It is people like you sitting in foreign countries, far

away from everything, nice and safe, who create trouble. You are the ones who give money to these terrorists, and we are the ones who suffer!" (326).

<sup>16</sup> A number of scholars have noted the embrace of Aboriginal peoples as "our Communities" in the Canadian national imaginary in order to affirm the state's innate multiculturalism, its tolerance of diverse peoples and cultures, and in order to conceal the nation's racist past (e.g., Mawani 51). This move is one way that the nation markets itself, according to Mawani, as being absolved of "its colonial past, suggesting that we have transcended it" (52). Thobani argues that official multiculturalism enables Canada to renarrate its history and present itself "on the global stage as urbane, cosmopolitan, and at the cutting edge of promoting racial and ethnic tolerance among western nations" (144).

<sup>17</sup> Whereas state attempts at redress and memorialization are directed exclusively at the families of those who lost loved ones in the Air India bombings, Bibi-ji's intergenerational "memory" in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* becomes transgenerational, transcultural, and transnational memory for readers.

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