

*Spaces of Translation:  
Bharati Mukherjee's  
"The Management of Grief"*

DEBORAH BOWEN

The word "translation" comes, etymologically, from the Latin for "bearing across." Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained.

SALMAN RUSHDIE, *Imaginary Homelands*

**I**N THE FINAL article of the special January 1995 issue of *PMLA* on "Colonialism and the Postcolonial Condition," Satya Mohanty observes that "vital cross-cultural interchange depends on the belief that we share a 'world' (no matter how partially) with the other culture, a world whose causal relevance is not purely intracultural" (114). There are occasions on which such a shared world is traumatically imposed upon diverse groups of people. If ever there were an occasion for a human compassion that transcends boundaries of race and culture in the need for vital cross-cultural interchange, the Air India crash of 1985 surely must have been it—an occasion when the attempt to be "borne across" the world was itself "translated" in a particularly macabre way. During the spring and summer of 1995, the anniversary of this disaster brought it back into the Canadian news, specifically because the belief that "its causal relevance [was] not purely intracultural" had led some people to continue to fight for a Royal Commission of Inquiry into an unresolved crime.

The initial tragedy of the plane's destruction was, in the eyes of many, compounded by the fact that the Canadian government treated the event precisely as an Indian intracultural tragedy, not immediately relevant to the ordinary Canadian citizen. Bharati

Mukherjee and her husband Clarke Blaise published a book about the disaster in 1987. They pointed out that over 90% of the passengers on the plane were Canadian citizens. They described the disaster as, politically, an “unhoused” tragedy, in that Canada wanted to see it as an Indian event, and India wanted to see it as an “overseas incident” that would not train an international spotlight on the escalated Sikh-Hindu conflicts in India (ix). In the last sentence of that book, *The Sorrow and The Terror*, one of the bereaved requests, “Mr. Clarke and Mrs. Mukherjee, tell the world how 329 innocent lives were lost and how the rest of us are slowly dying” (219). Blaise and Mukherjee declare in their introduction that in researching the book they spoke with a wide range of people directly and indirectly involved with the tragedy; “mainly, however, we have visited the bereaved families and tried to see the disaster through their eyes” (xii). It was perhaps in order to manage the grief involved in such seeing that Mukherjee found it necessary to write not just *The Sorrow and The Terror* but also the short story “The Management of Grief,” which appears in her 1988 collection *The Middleman*.

It is a story about the effects of the Air India disaster on Toronto’s Indian community and specifically on the central character and narrator, Mrs. Shaila Bhawe, who loses her husband and her two sons in the crash. Because she is rendered preternaturally calm by the shock, she is perceived by the government social worker, Judith Templeton, as “coping very well,” and as “a pillar” of strength, who may be able to help as an intermediary—or, in official Ontario Ministry of Citizenship terms, a “cultural interpreter” (Cairncross vii)—between the bereaved immigrant communities and the social service agencies, though of course she has had no training. Shaila wants to say to Judith but does not, “I wish I could scream, starve, walk into Lake Ontario, jump from a bridge.” She tells us, “I am a freak. . . . This terrible calm will not go away” (183). In fact, then, the “pillar” and the “temple” are both unstable; figured as tottering buildings in a collapsing of hierarchy, both women are initially beyond knowing what to do. Death is the great leveller, even of the social worker’s neocolonial benevolence. “I have no experience with a tragedy of this scale,” says Judith; and Shaila interjects, “Who

could?" When Judith suggests that Shaila's apparent strength may be of practical help to others who are hysterical, Shaila responds, "By the standards of the people you call hysterical, I am behaving very oddly and very badly, Miss Templeton. . . . They would not see me as a model. I do not see myself as a model." Instead, she says, "Nothing I can do will make any difference. . . . We must all grieve in our own way" (183).

Judith is caught between worlds; she does not know how to translate the grief she shares with Shaila and the Indian community into cultural specifics that will be acceptable to both Indian and Western modes of thought. Shaila is initially caught, too, between different impulses coming from different cultural models which she has internalized within herself. The question of how to effect moral agency while practising the acceptance of difference is in both instances a tricky one. Satya Mohanty addresses the question of the immobilizing effects of difference by proposing a revisionary universalist perspective. "Given the relativist view of pure difference, difference can never represent genuine cross-cultural disagreement about the way the world is or about the right course of action in a particular situation" because cultures are seen as "equal but irredeemably separate" (112). Edward Said had already taken an overtly polemical stance against such separateness, at the end of *Culture and Imperialism*:

No one today is purely *one* thing. . . . No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about. Survival in fact is about the connections between things. (336)

But the practical question remains intransigent: how are such connections to be made?

Mohanty argues that "[g]enuine respect depends on a judgment based on understanding, arrived at through difficult epistemic and ethical negotiations"; otherwise, "the ascription of value (and of equality among cultures) is either meaningless or patronizing" (113). Mohanty proposes what he calls a "post-

positivist 'realism'" (115) of socially negotiated knowledge, undergirded by a moral universalism: "Perhaps the most powerful modern philosophical ally of modern anticolonial struggles of all kinds is this universalist view that individual human worth is absolute; it cannot be traded away, and it does not exist in degrees." Such a universalist claim concerns a basic capacity for agency shared by all humans; it *invites* cultural articularization but does not *depend* upon it for support of the underlying claim, and thus provides "the strongest basis for the multiculturalist belief that other cultures need to be approached with the presumption of equal worth" (116). Perhaps this is not to say more than Gayatri Spivak, quoting Derrida—"there are no rules but the old rules" (*Critic* 22). But then, perhaps this is to say something quite momentous. Universalism has had a bad press, associated as it has been with a manipulative essentialism and the blindnesses of liberal humanism to inherent racism, sexism, paternalism, phallocentrism, Eurocentrism, and all those other distressing -isms from which we in the late-twentieth-century West are anxious to dissociate ourselves. But perhaps a universalist ethic always already underlies much of our ism-rejection: on what other basis do we respect difference? On what other basis do we assume worth?

In Mukherjee's story, the assumption of moral universalism is a necessary precursor to the problems of negotiating social knowledge. Judith wants to help exactly because she is presuming the equal human worth of the Indian bereaved. But Mukherjee addresses questions of cultural particularization head-on by showing how inadequately translatable are institutionalized expressions of concern: as Judith says to Shaila when she is trying to persuade her to help, "We have interpreters, but we don't always have the human touch, or maybe the right human touch" (183). This distinction between "the human touch" and "the right human touch" is crucial: one is universal, the other particular. The grief is transcultural; the management of grief is not. Thus it is that grief shared rather than managed may have more chance of adequate translation.

Here is how the issue could be formulated: a shared world: the trauma of violent death; a universal: the experience of grief; a cultural, even intracultural particularization: grief "in our own way." For the bereaved relatives in Mukherjee's story, this grief is figured as "a long trip that we must all take" (184). The story enacts a kind of diaspora through death, a doubling of cultural displacement for those immigrants whose chosen initial passage was to Canada, and who must now embark on a voyage out grimly parodic of those earlier "civilizing missions" of the colonizers, journeying first to Ireland, to identify the wreckage from the ocean, then to Bombay, to mourn and reassess in the mother-country, and thence back to step-mother Canada, to find another new identity.

Both in Mukherjee's story and in the non-fiction account of the tragedy, the people most able to connect viscerally with the grief of the bereaved are the Irish, off whose shores the plane went down. They have the quintessentially "human touch." They weep with the bereaved; strangers hug strangers in the street; once one mourner has picked flowers from a local garden to strew on the ocean, a newspaper article asks residents to please give flowers to any Indian person they meet. All this really happened. Such transcultural expressions of empathetic connectedness, however impractical, construct an equal and opposite subjectivity; even the difference between the Eastern mode of management, the "duty to hope" (186), and the Western, the spelling out of grim knowledge and the request to "try to adjust your memories" (188), is rendered tolerable by grief so obviously felt and shared and by a compassionate regard for the privacy of pain. In fact Blaise and Mukherjee suggest in *The Sorrow and The Terror* that there may also have been a kind of cultural knowledge at work here, in that the Irish, as a chronically subalternized people who have firsthand experience of terrorism, may have been particularly sensitive to a tragedy like the Air India disaster.

The practical distinction between universal human emotions and their particular cultural manifestations seems to be one that a writer like Neil Bissoondath does not clearly draw, when he declares that "Culture, in its essentials, is about human values, and human values are exclusive to no race" (71). The visceral

connection made between the Irish and the Indians would seem to support Bissoondath's view. But Mukherjee does not allow the reader to be lulled into sentimentality by such a connection: she presents the reader also with the dissonance between Shaila and Judith. More useful here is Homi Bhabha's distinction between "the semblance and similitude of the symbols across diverse cultural experiences," including death, and "the social specificity of each of these productions of meaning" (*Location* 172). In Shaila and Judith, Mukherjee figures the problems of this social specificity: how does one translate even shared grief into practical action? What is more, this is a story in which the characters are not merely "shuttling between the old and the new world," as Mukherjee has remarked of her characters elsewhere ("Melting Pot" 28). She does not allow the reader a straightforward binarism between Shaila and Judith; here there are also differences within the "old" culture—differences of sensibility and differences between different generations and belief-systems.

Shared ethnicity is in itself no guarantee of the presence of "the right human touch." In the story, the customs officer at Bombay airport, who is presumably Indian, is as obnoxious an example of petty officialdom as one might hope to avoid, and unlike Judith he is therefore treated to vociferous anger from Shaila. Even though "[o]nce upon a time we were well brought up women; we were dutiful wives who kept our heads veiled, our voices shy and sweet" (189), the universal human experience of grief can be so extreme as to free such a woman from the patriarchal customs of her culture into the beginnings of an effective moral agency. The women get the coffins through the customs, despite the official's officiousness. That is, grief neither shared nor decorously managed may itself translate into a power of cultural resistance.

Moreover, when Shaila finds herself "shuttling" between Indian and Western modes of managing grief, the sense of being "trapped between two modes of knowledge" (189) is not unlike what she had experienced within her Indian upbringing, which had pitted the irrational faith of her grandmother against the nonsense rationalism of her mother. In Bombay after the rituals of death are over, Shaila struggles: "At thirty-six, I am too old to

start over and too young to give up. Like my husband's spirit, I flutter between worlds" (189). Shaila's response at this point is to make her journey one of "courting aphasia"—dancing, riding, playing bridge (190). She is in any case paradoxically "luckier" than some: because the bodies of her family did not surface from the wreckage, she is marked as *unlucky*, and therefore does not have parents arranging a new husband for her. In a wry reversal of patriarchal oppression, she has widowers, "substantial, educated, successful men of forty," phoning her and saying, "Save me. . . . My parents are arranging a marriage for me." Most will succumb, because "they cannot resist the call of custom" that decrees it is "the duty of a man to look after a wife" (190). But Shaila returns to Canada alone: in the end, she is saved by faith—by visions and voices, by the irrational world of temple holy men and prophetic dreams.

\* \* \*

"[O]n the third day of the sixth month into [her] odyssey, in an abandoned temple in a tiny Himalayan village," her husband appears to her and tells her two things: "You're beautiful," and "You must finish alone what we started together" (190). Like other travellers, Shaila returns to her starting-place "translated" in more than physical being: she returns to Canada with "something . . . gained"—with a personal affirmation and a mission. It is through the universalizing power of grief that she experiences metaphysical intervention and the freedom to choose even between different Indian behaviors within her own cultural background. Thus in her translating and her translation, the narrator not only experiences the aporias inherent in attempts to communicate between cultures; she also recognizes the gaps in her own cultural constructedness. These gaps are traversed most powerfully in the story not by Mohanty's cognitive negotiations—Judith trying so hard to understand—but by the metaphysical "translations" of mystical experience: the voices and forms of the longed-for dead who comfort the living and direct them through their grief. This unapologetic introduction of the metaphysical is of course, on Mukherjee's part, in itself a "writing back" to the poststructuralist theorists of the West. Back in Canada, Shaila is

surrounded by the spirits of her deceased family who, "like creatures in epics," have changed shapes and whose presence brings her both peace and rapture. But what is the shape of her mission?

Initially on her return she gets involved in trying to help Judith help the bereaved. She realizes that she has become Judith's confidante. As Judith's management skills lead her to compile lists of courses on bereavement, charts of how the relatives are progressing through the textbook stages of grief, lists of "cultural societies that need our help," Shaila tells her politely that she "has done impressive work" (192). She goes with Judith to translate for her to an elderly Sikh couple who had been brought to Canada two weeks before their sons were killed in the crash, and who refuse to sign any of the papers which would secure them money, lodging, and utilities, because they are afraid, and proud. The interchange is laced with the ironies of half-translation, mistranslation, and non-translation. Because Shaila is Hindu and the couple are Sikh (something she, though not Judith, has recognized from their name), there are already unspoken stresses. Shaila stiffens involuntarily, and remembers "a time when we all trusted each other in this new country, it was only the new country we worried about" (193). In Toronto as in India, Mukherjee explores the doublenesses and duplicities of intra-cultural differences. The Indian characters in Canada are united by their grief at the very moment that they are also divided by their fear and suspicion of those supposedly of their community who have caused that grief: Sikh extremists were likely responsible for the bombing. It is only when Shaila identifies herself to the Sikh couple as another of the bereaved, and not merely a translator, that real communication begins between them. The common reference provides a shared world; nevertheless, the cultural particularizations erect barriers, and those separating Judith from the Sikh couple are all but insuperable, because her neo-colonial expressions of concern inadvertently enact a re-colonization. Shaila is drawn more to the Sikh couple's obstinate and impractical hopefulness than to Judith's anxious and bureaucratic goodwill. After all, Shaila too has lost sons. After all, the Sikh couple too are managing their grief.



The scene is interwoven with Shaila's awareness of the difficulties of translation: "How do I tell Judith Templeton?" "I cannot tell her"; "I want to add"; "I wonder"; "I want to say"; "I try to explain." But in the end, reading without words the elderly Sikh couple's stubborn dignity, their determination to fulfil their cultural duty to hope, she asks to be let out of Judith's car on the way to the next appointment. Judith asks, "'Is there anything I said? Anything I did?' I could answer her suddenly in a dozen ways, but I choose not to. 'Shaila? Let's talk about it,' I hear, then slam the door" (195). Words will not do. Words cannot enable the Sikh couple to appreciate Judith's concern; words here can construct only a kind of cultural enmeshment, *Judith's* mode of managing grief. Mukherjee seems in this moment of decisive action to be making an equal and opposite point to that of Gayatri Spivak when she writes, "If the subaltern can speak, then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern any more" (*Critic* 158). Sometimes silence itself may be a choice, against both subalternity and forced assimilation, a kind of "claiming ownership of one's freed self," as Mohanty puts it (116). Hybridity is not of itself necessarily productive: Ella Shohat has distinguished between the hybridities of forced assimilation, internalized self-rejection, political co-optation, and social conformism, as well as creative transcendence (110). If, to use E.D. Blodgett's formulation, we posit translation as a threshold, a kind of "ur-language" or "langue" that is between languages, preventing assimilation while allowing for interpretation, then Shaila lives on this threshold in her dealings both with Judith and with the Sikh couple; and it is her choice to translate into silence.

In fact, the relationship to one's own language is also problematized in this story. One of Shaila's first responses to news of her husband's death is to lament that "I never once told him that I loved him" because she was so "well brought up." Her bereaved friend Kusum says, "It's all right. He knew. My husband knew. They felt it. Modern young girls have to say it because what they feel is fake" (181). This distinction between words and feelings reinforces the notion of a prelinguistic realm of universal capacities. But later in Ireland Shaila lets drift on the water a poem she has written for her husband: "Finally he'll know my feelings for

him" (187). Not that her feelings are fake; rather that words are a survival technique, a management tool for her, just as, at the beginning of the story, the woman who got the first news of the crash must tell her story "again and again" (180). After the second diaspora and return, Dr. Ranganathan, alone in Montreal, having lost his whole huge family, calls Shaila twice a week as one of his new relatives: "We've been melted down and recast as a new tribe" in which "[t]alk is all we have" (191). Eventually he accepts "an academic position in Texas where no one knows his story and he has vowed not to tell it. He calls me now," says Shaila, "once a week" (196). Inside the tribe, he chooses speech, outside, silence; each is a means of survival, a mode of agency.

\* \* \*

At the end of the story, Shaila's voyage is still incomplete. She accepts the mission to "go, be brave," received through the final message of the other-worldly voices of her dead family; she "drop[s] [her] package on a park bench and start[s] walking"; but she tells us that "I do not know where this voyage I have begun will end. I do not know which direction I will take" (197). The story is encircled in unknowing: it opens, "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" (179). Where that first unknowing conveyed shock and repressed hysteria, the last unknowing figures acceptance and reconstruction, another journey, willingly undertaken beyond the pages of the story. Acceptance and reconstruction: Judith would recognize these words, the last two stages of her textbook description of the management of grief. She might not, however, recognize their manifestation in Shaila, who hears voices, who drops packages, for whom grief is ultimately managed more through *metaphysical* translations than physical ones. True, she has sold her pink house for four times what she and her husband had paid for it; she has taken a small apartment downtown; she has plenty of money from her husband's careful investments; she is even looking for a charity to support. In Western terms, it seems that she has managed her grief very well. But this alone would be what Bhabha calls colonial mimicry (*Location* 89); it is not where the story ends.

Grief must in the end also manage Shaila—almost, stage-manage her. If grief shared rather than managed is the most effectively translated, it is perhaps appropriate to point to the doubleness of Mukherjee's title. "The Management of Grief" can mean "how people manage grief," or "how grief manages people"—in other words, "grief" in this phrase can be understood as grammatical object or subject of the action of managing. Moreover, the phrase can be read as what Roland Barthes calls a "structure of jointed predication" (qtd. in *Location* 180) in which the translator figures as the fulcrum, the pre (and post) position "of." This little word itself contains and signifies the space of translation, whose function is to hold substantive concepts together, a liminal space, an almost unnoticed minimal word signifying possession—in this case, possession of the ability to construct the self.

Thus when Shaila hears the voices of her family giving her her mission, "I dropped the package on a park bench and started walking" (197). Interpreting for propositional meaning, a reader might wonder if she is going mad. If so, what happens now? Does she get home for supper? If not, who finds her? Looking for symbolic meaning, a reader might think that it is now that the most personal journey begins, in privacy and solitude. But a postcolonial reading is likely to note the performative structure of the text (Bhabha, *Location* 181), and to recognize the tension between these two interpretations—the cognitive and the phantasmatic, the rational and the intuitive—as precisely that experienced both interculturally and intraculturally by Shaila as translator throughout the story. We know that she got back to her apartment: the story is composed in such a way that she is telling us about the final moment of insight a week after it happened. She is herself the fulcrum, the translator and the translation, undoing the traditional oppositions between West and East, reason and faith, physical and metaphysical. She is settled in a good apartment, and she walks off the page. Nor is this merely a West-East difference of response: Shaila's mother and grandmother themselves represented this same difference. Shaila is a figure for productive cultural hybridity. Standing on the translator's threshold, looking in both directions, she

comes to possess the power to understand her liminality as itself a space for “effective (moral) agency” (Mohanty 116).

The phrase “space of translation” is Bhabha’s: in discussing the language of critique, he suggests that such language is effective

to the extent to which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of “translation”: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the “moment” of politics. (*Commitment* 117)

In Mukherjee’s story, Shaila journeys into figuring just such a language of critique, just such a place of hybridity, and she stands at a new and unexpected political “moment”: the immigrant translator who learns how to be translated, how to inhabit the productivity of the threshold. The package that she drops stands synecdochally for the weight both of her grief and of her translator’s role. Having journeyed thus far in her odyssey, she leaves behind the weight of translating as she steps beyond the narrative into her own translation: she “started walking.” In moving from translator to translation she breaks open the management of grief, each part of the substantive proposition falling away from her because the preposition has taken upon itself its own self-possession. Through this figure, Mukherjee suggests that, despite the cultural misunderstandings inescapably exposed in a transcultural tragedy, the experience of being “borne across”—or through—grief itself opens up a space of translation in which, as Salman Rushdie hopes, “something can also be gained” (17): Shaila deconstructs apparently opposing modes of knowledge into a productive hybridity without denying either of them. Shaila thus becomes in herself an embodiment of Mohanty’s “understanding, arrived at through difficult epistemic and ethical negotiations” (113). No longer “fluttering between worlds,” Shaila reinscribes herself through self-translation, and possesses her own space beyond the page, outside the sentence, a space of moral agency where the place of both words and silences is a chosen one.

Mukherjee has written of "colonial writers" like herself that "[h]istory forced us to see ourselves as both the 'we' and the 'other,'" and that this kind of training has enabled her to inhabit a "fluid set of identities denied to most of my mainstream American counterparts" ("Maximalists" 28). In a similar way, she chooses to write of immigrant characters for whom re-location is a positive act requiring "transformations of the self" (Hancock 44, 39). This story suggests that such an embracing of hybridity can actually be empowered by the experience of grief, because grief first exposes an inner world irrevocably divided and estranged by loss, a world from which there is no turning away, and then acts as a form of energy to enable the dislocated mourner in the task of management, reconstruction, and translation into acceptance. In writing out of the political and personal tragedy of the Air India crash, Mukherjee achieves a particularly fine figuring-forth of such transforming hybridity; I would argue that this is because the universal nature of grief is a powerful if complex force for change, cultural resistance, and moral choice. It is partly because such transcultural grief is still at work that two years ago a million dollar reward was offered by the RCMP for information leading to the prosecution of the six prime suspects in "the worst terrorist act involving Canadians" (Canadian Press, "RCMP Offers"). Indeed there are many mourners who hold to the strong hope that their grief may yet translate into a Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Air India crash, even though it is more than a decade after the fact.

## WORKS CITED

- Bhabha, Homi. "The Commitment to Theory." *Questions of Third Cinema*. Ed. Jim Pines and Paul Willemsen. London: BFI Publishing, 1989. 111-32.
- . *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Bissoondath, Neil. *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*. Toronto: Penguin, 1994.
- Blaise, Clark, and Bharati Mukherjee. *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy*. Markham: Viking Penguin: 1987.
- Blodgett, E. D. "How do you say 'Gabrielle Roy'?" *Translation in Canadian Literature: Symposium 1982*. Ed. Camille La Bossière. Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1983. 13-34.
- Cairncross, Larissa. *Cultural Interpreter Training Manual*. Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Citizenship, 1989.

- Canadian Press (Vancouver). "RCMP Offers \$1M Reward to Crack Air India Case." *The Ottawa Citizen* 1 June 1995: A3.
- Mohanty, Satya. "Colonial Legacies, Multicultural Futures: Relativism, Objectivity, and the Challenge of Otherness." *PMLA* 110.1 (1995): 108-18.
- Mukherjee, Bharati. "Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists!" *New York Times Review of Books* 27 Aug. 1988: 7:1, 28.
- . Interview with Geoff Hancock. *Canadian Fiction Magazine* 59 (1987): 30-44.
- . "The Management of Grief." *The Middleman and Other Stories*. New York: Grove, 1988. 179-97.
- . "The Melting-Pot Lady." Interview with Joel Yanofsky. *Books in Canada* 19.1 (1990): 25-8.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta, 1991.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf, 1993.
- . "The Politics of Knowledge." *Falling Into Theory: Conflicting Views on Reading Literature*. Ed. David H. Richter. Boston: Bedford, 1994. 193-203.
- Shohat, Ella. "Notes on the 'Post-Colonial.'" *Social Text* 31-32 (1992): 99-113.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. Ed. Sarah Harasym. New York: Routledge, 1990.