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Abstract

Managing Grief: An Analysis of Rene Saklikar's poem "un/authorized interjection"

This paper examines "un/authorized interjection," written by Canadian author Renée Saklikar. The poem is part of a compilation titled *Children of Air India*, which deals primarily with the crash of Air India Flight 182 in 1985. "un/authorized interjection" is the only poem in the anthology that focuses on Inderjit Reyat, the bomber of Flight 182. The poem presents a juxtaposition of Reyat's childhood and adulthood, which we analyze in the context of the larger narrative of *Children of Air India*. We argue that the author uses this focus to discuss the consequences of the attack and the extent to which it affected Canada. Aside from causing the suffering of the crash victims and their families, the attack also led to marginalization of the Canadian immigrant community and tarnished the historical reputation of the country as a welcoming, multicultural society. In addition, we also examine how the poem's focus on Reyat presents a unique opportunity for those individuals especially affected by the event to come to terms with the Air India crash.

Key Words: Indo-Canadian, Renée Saklikar, Air India Flight 182, Children of Air India, Immigration in Canada, Canadian-Indian Relations, South Asian Literature in Canada

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On June 23, 1985 a homemade bomb detonated in the cargo hold of Air India Flight 182, which was travelling from Canada to India. The plane combusted mid-air and killed all passengers aboard. During the crash investigation, the Government of Canada revealed that the bomb was hidden in a suitcase, which escaped detection before the plane departed from Vancouver (Government of Canada 1). The Sikh extremist group Babbar Khalsa later took responsibility for orchestrating the bombing. Speculations suggest that the attack was in retaliation for the Indian government's destruction of the Sikh golden temple and the resulting deaths that occurred the previous year. In the immediate aftermath of the crash, Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney created controversy by sending his condolences to the Indian government, despite the fact that the majority of the victims were Canadian citizens. It was not until 2010 that the government formally apologized for treating this event as a foreign affair.

Children of Air India is an anthology of poems, written by Canadian author Renée Saklikar, concerning the 1985 terrorist bombing of Air India Flight 182 and its aftermath. The anthology connects the stories of the victims of the crash with those of their family members, the

jurors of the 20 year-long trial, and the bomb maker. Saklikar lost her aunt and uncle in the crash; throughout the collection she personifies herself as N, becoming both a narrator and character within the overall narrative of the poems. N narrates many of the poems formally, mirroring the experience of a court trial, while examining the intimate details of the victims' lives as pieces of evidence that fit into a larger whole. By treating these details as such, Saklikar invites readers to judge the case of Air India Flight 182, so that they might come to terms with the sheer scale and depth of the tragedy.

Of the poems in *Children of Air India*, "un/authorized interjection" stands out as the single work that examines the life of the only terrorist convicted in the Air India case, Inderjit Reyat. The poem juxtaposes the innocence of Reyat's childhood with his sinister adulthood as he designs and tests the bomb that is later detonated during Flight 182. This contrast highlights the inner conflicts suffered by Reyat in order to demonstrate the incomprehensibility associated with the Air India bombing. Focusing on Reyat's immigrant status, the poem also highlights the rampant social marginalization experienced by the victims of the crash and their family members, while lamenting the damage inflicted by Reyat against the historical legacies of Canadian settlers. Saklikar aims to address the far-reaching consequences of Reyat's actions. Her poem also functions as an outlet for managing grief for those connected to the crash.

"un/authorized interjection" is the only poem in *Children of Air India* that gives Reyat a voice. The first images of Reyat are of him as a child, narrated presumably by N. She comments, "Air India, always happening, imagine, this bomb builder boy: / see him running, happy and free" (5-6). Reyat's carefree youth is sharply contrasted with the knowledge that he will grow up to become a murderer; however, the poem maintains that this transformation from innocent child to murderer is relevant and even necessary in processing the Air India bombing because it

humanizes Reyat, making his actions easier to understand. The speaker further examines this transformation, stating,

Come, stranger, point to this boy
holding his mother's hand on the streets of London
stranger, make your pronouncement –
Boy, you will be the one (9-12).

Inderjit Reyat first embraced Sikhism while living in England as a child. Robert Matas of *The Sikh Times* reveals, “He was the most devout in the family, taking on the obligations of an observant Sikh at the age of 16” (1). It was eventually these strong ties to Sikhism that enticed him to become a part of Babbar Khalsa, the terrorist organization responsible for the bombing of Flight 182. Reyat's childhood in London marks the beginning of his descent into terrorism; however, the reader is reminded that, despite his dark turn, Reyat was not always an ominous figure in Canadian history.

The poem then switches to Reyat narrating his own childhood. He recalls, “in our kitchen, mother makes roti / It is not June. It is not 1985. No sulphur, no potassium, no cadmium” (14-15). Juxtaposing Reyat's childhood and adulthood creates a temporal divide separating his destructive and passive attributes. As an adult, Reyat murders hundreds and desecrates families; however, in his youth, Reyat is observant and passive, silently watching his mother provide for the household. The poem suggests a further contrast when Reyat, depicted as “a young man on Vancouver Island,” builds a fire commenting, “it is only a small fire I make, to cook trout” (20). His fire is carefully contained so that he doesn't harm the surrounding woodlands. However, Reyat fails to demonstrate similar caution when he later detonates a bomb in the same forest. These distinctions highlight the many paradoxes of Reyat's character – he was

once an innocent child, yet he is now a murderer of children; he is deeply faithful to a religion that prizes peace and defends the innocent, yet he harms innocents in the name of his faith; he takes care to avoid destruction in one case, but then blatantly destroys on a large scale. These paradoxes demonstrate the impossibility of fully comprehending the tragedy that is Air India Flight 182. How could one expect to deal with a trauma this monumental if the man who is responsible is so full of contradictions?

As an immigrant to Canada, Inderjit Reyat is described as having strong connections to the Canadian immigrant community. Despite Canada's status as a multicultural community, racism continues to be a debilitating issue for many citizens. The poem seems to be implying that Reyat's association with the immigrant community has intensified discrimination against it because the negative stigmas surrounding him were projected onto this entire population. Saklikar comments on this dynamic in Maya Seshia's essay, "From Foreign to Canadian: The Case of Air India and the Denial of Racism": "My family has put its heart and soul into raising us to view the world as Canadians and yet when we look at the series of failures in relation to [Air India], I think we might ask, well, have we truly been accepted as Canadians?" (219). Here, Saklikar makes the direct connection between the actions of Inderjit Reyat, which led to the bombing of Flight 182, and the outsider status placed upon members of the Indo-Canadian community by the mainstream population.

One of the consequences of the crash of Flight 182 was the unearthing of deep-seated racism and prejudices against Indo-Canadians. The Canadian government's treatment of the crash as a foreign affair and its subsequent failure to take proper responsibility for the event made the extent of this discrimination clear. The Air India bombings also intensified prejudices against Canadians of South Asian descent because the government reinforced the

marginalization of its own citizens. In “un/authorized interjection,” N comments on this marginalization, stating “Those on the cusp, become a center / a gyre” (2-3). The phrase “those on the cusp” refers to Indo-Canadians; they become a “centre” of society, by being brought under scrutiny as a result of the attack. Seshia suggests that this was indeed the case: “The bombing of flight 182 was distanced from Canada and the Canadian public and victims and their families were discursively positioned as ‘internal foreigners’ - subjects who, despite possessing formal citizenship status and residing within Canadian borders, are marked as non-Canadian outsiders” (218). The use of the oxymoron “internal foreigners” describes the attitude that Canada took towards the citizens involved in the crash. They were Canadian but were not recognized as such within the country. In the poem “– and her redactions” from *Children of Air India*, Saklikar emphasizes the marginalization that the Canadian immigrant population experiences. N in this piece is asked, “Where were you born? (colloquial: Where you from),” and “Growing up did you see yourself as part of the community?” (line 16). In everyday experiences the subject is being questioned about her heritage, a fact which suggests that she is frequently told she doesn’t belong. The speaker questions N about that sense of belonging within the Canadian community, but simultaneously implies that displacement is common among individuals with a foreign background. In “un/authorized interjection” and throughout *Children of Air India*, the theme of belonging to a place, yet struggling to feel accepted as a meaningful part of the community is reiterated.

In the essay “‘War-on-Terror’ Frames of Remembrance: The 1985 Air India Bombings After 9/11,” Angela Failler comments on the lack of recognition the Air India attack has received from the Canadian public. She asserts that, “Over the past few years government authorities have publically admitted their failing and the failing of the Canadian public to recognize that the

majority of the victims and their families were Canadian citizens” (264). The suffering of the victims’ families was worsened because their loss was ignored by the community. This national lack of identification with the Air India attack also increases the relatives' suffering because the mainstream Canadian public has largely forgotten about this tragedy – often relating more to the American 9/11 attacks. This response demonstrates the Canadian public’s refusal to accept Indo-Canadians as true citizens.

The bombing of Air India Flight 182 affected both the Canadian and Indian nations; however, the poem encourages us to see that, despite the outsider status which mainstream Canadians apply to Indo-Canadians, the latter has played an integral role in Canada’s history. Indians, in tandem with citizens of other European and Asian countries, began to immigrate to Canada in the late 1800’s. The town of Duncan, located on Vancouver Island in British Columbia, was established and settled largely by immigrant populations who thrived on the area’s rich logging and mining resources (Super Natural British Columbia). In the context of the Air India crash, Duncan is where the Babbar Khalsa conspirators is said to have planned the attack of Flight 182. Inderjit Reyat worked in the town as a mechanic at a marine electrician shop and eventually used his experience with electronics to construct the Flight 182 bomb. Reyat was a member of the working-class community, which has a long legacy in Duncan. The town’s historical immigrant population is identified by the speaker in “un/authorized interjection”: “in the woods outside Duncan, on the island named Vancouver, / Swedish/Cornish/Punjabi/Chinese/First Nations/Irish/Scottish/Black men work” (21-22). The immigrant populations cleared the land and laboured to establish the town of Duncan as a thriving community. The speaker describes the area’s natural wealth: “cedar, Douglas fir / the lifeblood of the province / flowing inside a century’s worth of work” (27-28). Both the successes

of Duncan and Canada are the legacy of the working classes, to which, for many years, Inderjit Reyat belonged.

As we previously mentioned, Reyat's disregard for the environment when testing his bomb in the forest demonstrates his destructiveness. Reyat not only desecrated the forest near his home, but also tarnished the historic legacy left behind by generations of workers who inhabited Duncan. Robert Matas states that "Two weeks before the Air-India bombing (...) [Inderjit Reyat] went into the woods with [other members of Babbar Khalsa] to test some explosives" (1). When Reyat detonated his explosives in the forest, hundreds of years of work were also erased. The efforts of past working-class generations to establish Duncan as a safe, welcoming community have now been tainted. "un/authorized interjection" refers to the rich history of Duncan and in doing so implies that the consequences of the Air India crash are not limited simply to the victims and their relatives, but extend to the members of the larger community. Reyat's actions also affect how we are able to interpret the history of previous generations in this community. The poem demonstrates that the bombing of Flight 182 is an event that resonates across provincial, national, and even temporal borders.

Because of the Canadian government's disassociation from the crash of Flight 182, families were denied support that would typically have been provided by the government. No representatives from Canada were present shortly after the tragedy to help the families navigate their grief. Little grief or mental health counselling was provided. Seshia describes the various testimonies of these family members after their arrival in Cork, Ireland, off the coast of which the plane went down, and these reveal the lack of support they received. She comments, "Kalwant Mamak, who lost his wife, asserts that when he arrived in Cork 'there were no Canadian officials,' and he 'was totally lost'" (219). Further, "Mirthy Subramanian, who lost his

wife and daughter, and Dr. Bal Gupta, whose wife died aboard Air India Flight 182, reported that ‘there was no emotional, psychological, physical or administrative help or grief counselling from any government agency’” (219). No outlet was given to the victims’ families to grieve as a result of Canada’s response to the Air India tragedy. In an interview with the *Globe and Mail* about her collection of poetry, Saklikar reveals, “I didn’t want to write about this. It’s painful, it’s fractious, it’s problematic. I just didn’t feel up to it (...) [but it is an] emanating thing that must be dealt with” (qtd. in Leederman 1). She continues, “People say you must be excited about this book. No, I’m not excited. First of all, it’s the responsibility and the weight of the subject matter” (qtd. in Leederman 1). The amount of suffering resulting from the Air India event, in addition to the lack of resources given to the families, might have been what led Saklikar to write *Children of Air India*. She uses her poetry as an outlet for this anger and her sense of betrayal so as to allow herself and those others affected personally to move on from the tragedy.

“un/authorized interjection” focuses on the impact of the Air India crash on a large and small scale, thereby providing a means of expression to those most seriously affected. Saklikar channels her pain to help others who are experiencing similar loss to come to terms with the crash. As the only poem in *Children of Air India* to focus on Inderjit Reyat, “un/authorized interjection” controversially proposes that Reyat’s story is a critical piece in the entire framework of the Air India event and that his story deserves to be seen alongside those of the victims and their families. The tone of the poem suggests that Saklikar is aware of the controversy that might arise from including his story in a series of poems about his victims, for it begins with “Not him! He shouldn’t be here. He is here.” (1). Saklikar does not identify the speakers in this passage; however, one could interpret these lines as the voices of the other individuals portrayed in *Children of Air India*, who are exclaiming their anguish and expressing

their disgust at the inclusion of Reyat's story alongside their own. His presence in the poem is unwanted and is evident in the fact that he is labeled "Intruder." The title of the poem "un/authorized interjection" further suggests that the poem itself is simultaneously authorizing and unauthorizing this interruption of the other poems in *Children of Air India*, and it is here that Saklikar's intent becomes clear. Reyat's presence is naturally painful for the speaker, but, as the poem states, "He should not be here. He is here." (1) – a line that indicates that, regardless of the pain resulting from Reyat's presence, he is a part of the larger story and must be dealt with if there is any possibility that Canada can come to terms with the Air India bombings. Amber Dean, author of "The Importance of Remembering in Relation: Juxtaposing the Air India and Komagata Maru Disasters" states that literary explorations of the tragedy are "not so much on redressing an injustice that is framed as mattering primarily in and for the past, but instead on contemplating how to respond to the many ways injustice continues to inflect our lives differently in the present" (200). By including Inderjit Reyat's personal story within the collection of *Children of Air India*, Saklikar demonstrates the far-reaching consequences of the Air India event, allowing the affected individuals to, as Dean observes, contemplate "how to respond to the many ways injustice continues to inflect lives" (200). Therefore, "un/authorized interjection" provides these individuals with an opportunity to confront Inderjit Reyat and subsequently begin the healing process.

Children of Air India is a compilation of poems presenting a complex narrative about the bombing of Air India Flight 182 from the perspectives of the victims of the crash and their families, the maker of the bomb that destroyed the plane, and even individuals associated with the court investigation of the crash. Within this anthology, the poem "un/authorized interjection" focuses on the perspective of Inderjit Reyat, the only man to be convicted in association with the

conspiracy to bomb Flight 182. The poem describes the suffering of the victims of the crash in addition to the subsequent marginalization of the Indo-Canadian community as the Canadian government distanced itself from the event. Reyat's actions are shown to not only affect the victims of the crash and their families, but also the Canadian immigrant community as a whole. Furthermore, by causing the death of 329 people, Reyat has desecrated the historical legacy left behind by immigrant workers who laboured to build a strong, safe community in Duncan, British Columbia. Ultimately, however, Saklikar's collection suggests that the bombing of Air India has become an event that has transcended both its physical and temporal boundaries to cause the citizens of an entire nation to become children of Air India, who are living in the aftermath of Flight 182. Finally, "un/authorized interjection" uses this focus on Inderjit Reyat and the suffering he has caused to provide those individuals especially affected by the event with an opportunity to contemplate how the Air India event has marked them, perhaps allowing them to accept the trauma and move on.

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