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Memory, Trauma, and the Body:
An Analysis of *The Children of Air India: un/authorized exhibits and interjections*

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Abstract: This article explores, Renée Sarojini Saklikar's poem "Mother and Daughter" from the collection *The Children of Air India: un/authorized exhibits and interjections* in relation to the historical memory of the event, theories of psychic-trauma in literature, and representations of female sexuality and male violence. While the 1985 Air India attack which killed 329 people is Canada's largest mass murder in history, Canadians largely fail to recognize the attack as a "Canadian tragedy." However, we argue that through literature, Canadians can empathize with one another and see past the lines of ethnicity and/or cultural backgrounds that prevented us from doing so in the first place.

Keywords: Air India; Historical Memory; Female Sexuality; Psychic-Trauma; Children of Air India; Male Violence

On June 23 1985, Air India flight 182 left Toronto Pearson International Airport on route to London, England before its final destination Bombay, India. On board were 329 passengers, 280 of whom were Canadians, and eighty-six of them children. None survived. The Boeing jumbo jet was destroyed by a bomb in Irish airspace and the plane crashed into the Atlantic Ocean ("1985: The drowning of Air India Flight 182"). The immediate response from the Canadian government framed the disaster as a "non-Canadian tragedy involving non-Canadian citizens" (Seshia 215). At the time, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney telephoned the Prime Minister of India Rajiv Gandhi to "extend condolences and offer help" (Seshia 220). Not until 2010, twenty-five years later, did Canada issue a formal apology for the "institutional failings... and... the treatment of the victims' families thereafter" ("Air India families treated with 'disdain' says PM"). In the meantime, families were left to grieve over the tragedy without the support of their fellow Canadians. However, in the aftermath, a creative archive of literature, film, and other works of art has emerged from the sorrow and trauma of the disaster. Among these is a book of

poetry by Renée Sarojini Saklikar, *The Children of Air India: un/authorized exhibits and interjections*. One of the poems from the collection is entitled “Mother and Daughter,” in which a 16-year-old girl narrates her final moments on board Air India flight 182. In this essay, we critically assess “Mother and Daughter,” using the theories of psychic trauma and feminism in order to determine how patriarchy and violence are symbolically and literally inflicted on the female body. While almost no scholarly publications on *The Children of Air India* exist¹, we hope that our essay initiates further discussion on this important work that calls out to Canadians to see the tragedy from an intimate perspective and *remember*.

Public memory

Much of the Air India creative archive reacts to the lack of responsibility and support that the Canadian government displayed towards victims’ families from the time of the crash, during the official investigation, and all the way through until 2010 when a formal apology was issued. Many victims’ families commented that they were treated and viewed as “not real Canadians” (Seshia 217). For example, when families arrived in Cork, Ireland, there were no Canadian officials present to help them through the process of identifying bodies, nor did families receive support services such as psychological or grief counselling. Rama Bhardwaj, who lost a relative, describes his experience as an “unthinkable cold treatment” (Seshia 219). For family members this not only made the terrible event of losing parents, siblings, and children even more difficult, but framed the terrorist attack as an ‘Indian issue’ involving ‘Indian people’. Maya Seshia comments on the social and political consequences of the government's response. She writes,

The parliamentary debates, as well as government and Air India Inquiry reports... demonstrate that the national story woven through the history of the Air India case is a

¹ The only other scholarly essay written on Saklikar’s collection at the time of publication of this journal issue is by Tanis MacDonald (see Works Cited).

racial one: it erases racism out of its narrative and ultimately imagines Canada and the country's citizens as white. (225)

By choosing to ignore the fact that the Air India tragedy was a homegrown terrorist attack and instead responding to it as if it were a tragedy involving only Indians, Canada effectively dissociated itself from problems happening on its own soil. Official discourse framed the attack as a "foreign problem" brought into Canada by "foreigners" (Seshia 222). The effect of constructing the attack in this way worked to preserve Canada's reputation as a peacekeeping nation and, by extension, a country that is morally and socially removed from the "savage" acts of terrorism (Failler 164). Furthermore, Seshia argues that if the government were to have accepted the role racism played in the whole affair, it would have caused a "radical rethinking of Canada's liberal multicultural imagining" and would have "expose[d] the white supremacist ideology that infiltrates Canada's structures and comprises the very foundation of the state" (224).

In response to these problems, art, literature and other creative works attempt to change popular perception of the event by reshaping the public's understanding of the Air India disaster narrative originally presented by the government. Works such as Saklikar's also serve as a way to "pass out of the isolation imposed" on the victims' families (Caruth 3). In an interview, Saklikar explains that she was inspired by the form of Charles Resoncoff's *Holocaust*, which places the reader in the role of witness (Adler). This technique helps to immerse the reader personally into the tragedy and to experience a particular memory of the event. The effect of doing so symbolically distributes the grief carried by the families and shares it with other Canadians - giving the text a therapeutic effect. As Cathy Caruth suggests, understanding the history and memory of a traumatic event "can only take place through the listening of another" (5).

Literature has a powerful ability to help heal broken ties and re-imagine history by making use of a different set of archival sources. Saklikar, for example, writes that her evidence is based on “embedded/sediments – /other people’s stories/ cracks within cracks,/ tales, anecdotes/ gossip, family legends” (48) along with textual documentation from governmental reports. By using fragmentary pieces of fictional victims’ lives, she reinserts a human dimension that has literally been redacted from archival sources and figuratively redacted from the public’s memory and official narratives. The collection suggests that the victims should be remembered as individuals with unique stories and lives rather than simply as those among the 329 dead. While Saklikar never claims her work can fully heal the wounds of a family and a nation, she does say in a 2014 interview that, as the author, she became a “transmitter” of the dead (“To write about one’s dead: Talking Poetry with Renée Sarojini Saklikar”). In doing so, she reclaims the identities of the victims as both individuals and as Canadians. She gives them a voice and a story in our memory.

That being said, Saklikar is careful not to impose a new single narrative on readers by stating in the introduction of *The Children of Air India* that, “This is a work of the imagination./ This is a work of fiction, weaving fact in with the fiction...” (9). Furthermore, she adds, “Another another version of this introduction exists./ It has been redacted” (9). Here she reminds her readers not to take a single account of the event as the *only* account that exists or to say one account is more accurate or better than another. In a way, this work serves as a “counter-monument” against the master narrative put forth by the government. A counter-monument is “non- or antirepresentational, non-hierarchical, anti-authoritative” in nature and “carve[s] out a new niche in memory.” Most importantly, counter-monuments “frankly acknowledge the impossible but necessary task that they undertake, that of representing the un-representable”

(Harris 35). Much of the “un-representable” is the trauma that surviving family members experienced as a result of their loved ones being murdered. While Canada cannot turn back time and grieve alongside them, what we can do now is to empathize with the families through texts such as Saklikar’s which reshape our understanding of the tragedy from exclusively a private event to one to which all Canadians can and should relate.

Psychic-trauma and literature

Saklikar’s “Mother and Daughter,” can be analyzed using the theory of psychic-trauma to understand how the text as a whole brings the reader personally closer to the impact of the 1985 terrorist attacks. Through the character of the young woman, who is the focus of the poem, the reader not only learns about trauma related to the body, but also trauma related to the human psyche. Traditionally, “trauma” was defined in medical discourse as “the physical notion of injury to the body tissue,” but over time “adapted to signify an injury to psyche” (Caruth 39). Feminist therapist Laura S. Brown states that the early definition of trauma was largely shaped by “male human experience” (101). For example, she notes that “war and genocide, which are the work of men and male-dominated culture are agreed-upon traumas” (101). The problem with this concept is that it leaves out the experience of anyone who is not a “white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian [man]” (101). As absurd as it seems, by the traditional definition, Air India would not be considered a trauma, especially since the surviving family members were not physically wounded by the act of violence. However, Saklikar’s text works against the narrowly conceptualized traditional definition of trauma by writing from the perspective of an individual whose experience is very different from the “white Christian man.”

In the poem, trauma is inflicted on the sixteen-year-old young woman's body when the bomb explodes and her body "disintegrate[s]" and "drop[s] "thirty thousand feet," but alongside the physical trauma comes a mental trauma as well. This trauma does not stay with the girl, but ripples through her fictional family and ultimately reaches beyond the text to complete strangers. The text effects this ripple by providing background to the anonymous girl's life in order to build a relationship between the reader and the character. The reader is privy to intimate facts about the girl, including demands made by her mother – "*remember to iron your slip*" – and the love affair with the "fair hair" boy in chemistry class. One of the most devastating aspects of this poem is the fact that the uneasy relationship with her mother will never be resolved, and her secret relationship with the boy will never be fully realized. As the speaker says, "Your own words said to yourself they will never get to hear about a boy in Chem 11" (101). Cathy Caruth explains that literature can be used to describe traumatic experience because "like psychoanalysis, [literature] is interested in the complex relationship between knowing and not knowing" (3). Often times when a young person dies, people reflect on all the missed opportunities and experiences that would have presumably occurred if they were still alive. The poem mourns not only the life of the young girl, but also all of the missed opportunities and experiences cut short by the terrorist attack. Mourners are left wondering "what if their loved one did not get on the plane," or "what if security had only checked luggage more carefully?" In a sense, this type of insistent questioning, brought on by grief, is an experience of trauma. This kind of trauma is not like a single blow to the head or an injury to an extremity. Instead, it is repetitious and can be inescapable. The fact that the main character remains nameless makes it easy for readers to imagine that the child is someone they knew personally. The great sadness

that this thought brings provokes empathy for the families who actually lost a child, or children, in the attack. By tapping into such feelings, the exercise cuts across ethnic and cultural backgrounds which initially prevented Canada from viewing the tragedy as a “Canadian tragedy.” As well, readers inevitably question *why* and *how* the terrorist attack itself occurred and come to understand the great moral failing and injustice that Canada inflicted upon the families affected by the terrorist attack. Ultimately, the poem helps to bridge the gap between ‘us’ and ‘them’ that developed as a result of racist attitudes, as we discussed in the first section of this essay. In doing so, it helps to frame the terrorist attacks in a new way that sees past lines of ethnicity.

Kai Erikson suggests that there is a social dimension to trauma in which the “tissues of a community can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of the body” (185). While the 1985 terrorist attacks were portrayed in the media as having impacted the Indo-Canadian community more than the rest of Canada, Saklikar’s collection of poetry suggests that the attack should be looked at as a blow to the fabric of the Canadian community and, furthermore, the global community. On the surface, the line, “You are sixteen, / soon to be released, scattered. Soon” (Saklikar 101) seems to be solely referring to the physical trauma of violence, but it also expresses the idea that, like the girl’s body, the trauma will be “scattered,” or, in other words, spread throughout the global family. The speaker states, “this summer trip – your body, your family multiple of four / It is the mother-line stretching – soon it will be broken –...” (102).

Also, the girl refers to her mother’s persistent nagging and instructions as “mother-natter” (101). Most teenagers recognize that parents can be particular about how teens dress, with whom teens hang out, and the choices teens make in general. By pointing to light-hearted

intergenerational conflict, readers relate to the girl's experience and are subsequently reminded that humans are all a part of the same family. Common experiences tend to connect Canadians together, more so than differences divide us. While this poem references one particular body and one particular family, the heart of the matter is that the tragedy of losing life, especially young life, is intensely felt no matter if the incident occurred in our own nation or somewhere thousands of kilometers away.

Sexuality and the body

Much of the mother's nagging has to do with protecting her daughter's sexuality. While the poem emphasizes the trauma done to the body, it also focuses on the girl's body in another sense – the way it sexually matures. The nameless sixteen-year-old girl's body serves as a devastating site of tragedy, since just as she begins to grow and experience the world as a sexual being, her life is taken from her. The young woman with "smooth black hair" from the "kingdom" of "North America" (Saklikar 101) is in conflict with her mother throughout the poem and in competition for control over her sexuality. While the mother tries to subdue her daughter's sexuality, the daughter seeks to explore it. Despite the mother's best efforts to protect her daughter from gazing male eyes and intimacy, by the end the girl's body is penetrated not by a lover, but by the effects of male violence.

The poem "Mother and Daughter," can be interpreted as a commentary on patriarchal control, since there is a focus on the ways in which patriarchy constructs female sexuality as something harmful and dangerous. Women are simultaneously pressured to be physically and sexually attractive to men, but discouraged to act upon their own sexual desires and instead are expected to remain passive. To adolescent girls, these contradictory messages are disempowering

and harmful, especially because during their teenage years as young women struggle to form their identities. Because adolescence is when bodies begin to rapidly change and sexual desires become enhanced, girls are often left feeling confused and uncomfortable in their own skins when they are surrounded by such messages dictating how they should look and behave. While the young girl in the poem seems quite confident and excited about her developing body and sexuality, the mother serves an instrument of patriarchal control by trying to subdue or contain this growth.

Patriarchal control is prevalent in the way the mother continually polices her daughter about how she should dress and act, wielding an authority that is demonstrated in the lines “you’re not wearing that on the plane cover yourself,” “Your tightest jeans. Your mother scolds,” “Your two-inch strappy sandals in the airport mother’s eye up down” (101). The mother’s words demonstrate that women, even those with the best of intentions, can also become acting agents of patriarchy, since no one is entirely immune from the internalization of patriarchal power. Sandra Bartky, in her article “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” extends Michel Foucault’s ideas about the panopticon and self-policing. The panopticon was historically a prison in which “a single prison guard . . . would staff a central guard tower. Because the guard could see anywhere in the prison, but the prisoners could never tell if the guard was watching them, the prisoners (at least in theory) would never dare to revolt” (76). This strategy in turn creates what Foucault calls “docile bodies,” bodies which “meet social expectations without complaint or resistance – not through punishment, but by teaching individuals to accept those expectations as their own and to live as if they might be punished at any moment” (76). Bartky relates this to the way in which women internalize patriarchal power

through self-policing, but in the poem this idea takes on a new dimension, since it is the mother who polices the daughter, thereby performing the work of the panopticon.

Readers come to understand that, despite the mother's policing efforts, she cannot halt the process of her daughter's growing body nor protect her from her own budding sexuality. The girl's body, in particular her breasts, are referenced multiple times in the poem, highlighting her growth into womanhood: "Your breasts rise fall..."; "Your full breasts" (101); "sharp impact against breasts" (102). Iris Marion Young writes about women's relationships to their breasts and argues that, while breasts are often a site for objectification, they are also a potential site for empowerment. A woman's perception of her breasts begins to change, especially in adolescence, and Young states, "When a girl blossoms into adolescence and sallies forth, chest out boldly to the world, she experiences herself as being looked at in a different way than before" (181). This is not only because breasts are often an obvious signifier of femininity, but simultaneously are "the signal of her sexuality" (181) in many patriarchal societies.

Yet when adolescent girls begin to grow into their bodies, they are given conflicting messages which sexualize them, but at the same time they are deterred from both having sexual desires and acting upon these desires. Deborah L. Tolman, who has written extensively on adolescent girls' sexuality, recognizes this tension, observing, "When their bodies take on women's contours, girls begin to be seen as sexual, and sexuality becomes an aspect of adolescent girls' lives; yet 'nice' girls and 'good' women are not supposed to be sexual outside of heterosexual, monogamous marriage" (324). The fear that the adolescent girl in the poem might be having sexual desires is revealed when the mother disapproves of the daughter's clothing choices, clothing which may highlight her womanly contours and thus, in her mother's

eyes, put her at risk of both receiving attention of a sexual nature and perhaps responding to that attention. From the mother's perspective, the daughter seems to be "impenetrable under mother's eye" (101), yet the daughter's sexuality is not the real threat in the poem.

The girl's sexual desires are suggested when the "boy in Chem 11" (101) is mentioned, and readers are left wondering if she has acted upon these desires, for the poem further states, "his fair hair his arms that will hold his watching you his mouth it might move/against/ You" (102). The girl's sexual desires are also manifested in the diction of the poem, as evidenced in the words "pulsating" (101), "clench-release," "young and clench," "release," "your groin pulsing," and "pulse and, and –" (102). These words can be interpreted as a description of the effects the explosion would have on a human body and of the destruction of the aircraft. Even the layout of the words on the page suggests this interpretation, for the words are spaced further apart as if the sentences are falling apart, just as the plane would have fallen in pieces out of the sky. At the same time, the words can also be interpreted as a description of an orgasm. The fact that the plane crash is halting the girl's life, as well as halting an orgasm, suggests that the plane represents the forces of patriarchy attempting to disrupt the girl's sexual agency. As Tolman and many other feminist scholars have argued, there is empowerment within female sexuality, and this in turn is perceived as a threat to many patriarchal societies. Tolman states, "Cultural contexts that render girls' sexuality problematic and dangerous divert them from the possibilities of empowerment through sexual desire" (324). The language also shows the dichotomy of life and death, since the orgasm – an affirmation of being alive – is contrasted with the breaking apart of the airplane and consequently the girl's death.

Even though the mother has tried to protect the daughter from her own sexuality, in the end the poem suggests that the girl's sexuality was not really the danger at all; the danger, instead, was the act of terrorism. Thus, the poem seems to imply that the patriarchal obsession with controlling female sexuality merely serves as a distraction from what *really* needs to be controlled and what is the *real* danger in society: male violence.

In this paper we have attempted to incorporate theory on public memory, psychic trauma, and female sexuality in order to analyze Renée Saklikar's "Mother and Daughter," in her *Children of Air India: un/authorized exhibits and interjections* collection. In doing so, we learned about the complexities of how trauma is felt, remembered, and is sometimes absent. Historically, the Air India bombing was largely ignored by the general public and deemed a foreign affair. In response to this, the creative archive serves as an important reminder of the lives of those who perished on Air India Flight 182. The juxtaposition of the adolescent girl's body and budding sexuality with the image of death and destruction ultimately changes our perspective about how we should think about the tragedy. It makes readers realize that the people killed should not be simply characterized or defined by their tragic deaths. Instead, we should acknowledge that people such as the 16-year-old-girl could have been *anyone's* mother, sister, daughter, aunt, or grandmother. As Renée Saklikar told us in conversation through email, the power of poetry gives back to the dead a "life-pulse, [and] an agency of aliveness, despite the act of terror."

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