

**UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA**

**PROXIMITY AND DISTANCE: STUDENT RESPONSES TO AN INDO-  
CANADIAN LITERARY TEXT**

**By**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study, conducted with 10 suburban high school students, explores their responses to the short story "The Management of Grief" by Bharati Mukherjee. Five of these students were of Indo-Canadian heritage, and five were of Euro-Canadian backgrounds. The questions of primary interest in this study were those relating to concerned with the extent to which students' own cultural identities influence their reading of a culturally specific text.

The study was conducted through individual interviews with each of the ten participants and while an interview guide was used, free flowing discussions arose in the interviews. After the interviews were transcribed, themes and sub-themes were identified.

This study reinforces the value of culturally proximate reading, especially for those students who are unaccustomed to seeing their experiences reflected in school literature. This study also emphasises the potential richness of a reading for students who commonly find themselves reflected in the cultural mainstream.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Proximity and Distance: An Introduction to the Study**

#### ***Research Questions***

The increasingly multicultural nature of North American society has resulted in an interest in culturally diverse literary texts and their roles in the classroom. As students are exposed to a variety of literatures from cultures and peoples traditionally excluded from Western literary study, a new space is created for the investigation of student responses to these diverse texts. With increasing exposure to the Other, through both the form and content of these new literatures, students have the opportunity to negotiate their own cultural identities, whether they are immediately conscious of this or not. My study is concerned with the extent to which students' own cultural identities influence their reading of a culturally specific text. The study attempted to explore the following questions:

- Do readers who share a “cultural proximity” to a text read the literary work significantly differently from students who are more “culturally distant” from that text?
- If the answer to the previous question is “yes”, what is the nature of this difference?
- How does the cultural information embedded within the literature impact readers' responses to the text?
- What aspects of the text do “culturally proximate” and “culturally distant” readers find most compelling?

Located within these questions are theoretical perspectives on reader response, cultural identity formation, multicultural education, and multicultural literary

education. Literary and cultural theorists, such as Bhabha (1994), Iser (1996), Greenblatt (1995), and Larsen and László (1990), together with educators such as Cruz et al. (1997), Dasenbrock (1992), and Jasper (1998) have investigated possibilities of cross-cultural literary study. As North American teachers, we are coming into increasing contact with ethnic diversity within our classrooms; our students bring with them their individual degrees of cultural awareness, and as we become more committed to experimenting with multicultural literature, the possibilities for diverse literary experiences grow. It is through such a commitment to literary diversity that I first came into contact with Bharati Mukherjee's short story "The Management of Grief".

### *A Personal Reading*

My first experience with the story came in the winter of 1998 in Dr. Ingrid Johnston's "Reconceptualizing Literature for Cultural Diversity" research group at the University of Alberta. This group of high school English teachers from the Edmonton area met twice a month with the purpose of investigating the theoretical and practical issues associated with the inclusion of multicultural literature in high school English classes. There were approximately ten English teachers present at this particular research meeting and while we were reading "The Management of Grief" aloud I suddenly became aware of being the only non-white person present. Normally, the fact of my being the only visible minority in a group does not register consciously with me. I've become used to it, having grown up in Marysville, the pseudonym I will use for the predominantly white, middle-class Alberta suburb in which I was



raised. As a child, I was often the only “brown person” in school. As an adult in the same community, I am one of a half dozen, at most, non-white teachers in a district that employs 371 teaching staff. The overwhelming majority of my students are white as well. As I said, I have grown accustomed to *not* seeing myself as “not white,” even when the context is one in which race, culture, and ethnicity are the topics of discussion, as in Dr. Johnston’s research group. Despite the fact that I was born in India, and due to the social advantages of my upbringing, I believe that “to call me an ‘immigrant woman’ or a ‘woman of colour’ is to trivialize the very real oppressions of those who are within these categories and who are disadvantaged” (Khyatt, 1994, p. 79). Since I “have never been submitted to the anguish of discrimination, the alienation of being slotted without my consent, or the experience of being silenced” (Khyatt, 1994, p. 84), I tend largely, but not exclusively, to identify myself with the dominant culture.

So, why this awareness while reading “The Management of Grief”? I suspect that there were numerous factors at work, but I will attempt to articulate the ones that resonate most clearly for me. First was the fact that I was the only person reading aloud whose tongue did not trip and stumble over the Hindu names. Second was the title: at the time I first read the story, it had been just over a year since I lost my mother to breast cancer and I had been doing some “grief management” of my own. The third was the opening paragraph of the story, where the narrator observes that, “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” (Mukherjee, 1988, p. 179). The detail of “boiling tea the Indian way” combined with strangers in one’s kitchen removed me immediately to the hours following my mother’s death.

On the drive back from the hospital that Sunday afternoon, just an hour or two after our mother died, my sister and I realized that someone would have to go to Safeway to stock up on tea bags, milk and Kleenex before friends and relatives filled our home. In a moment of shock and sheer practicality, we decided that since we had thought of it we ought to do it. So we found ourselves in Safeway numbly buying what we needed to make it through the next few hours, mumbling “Thanks, you too” to the cashier’s “Have a nice day.” When we came home, Dad was already making phone calls and we knew that within the next 30 minutes every public space in our home would be a place of grieving. At one point, when the mourners had begun to arrive, my dad said to me and my sister, “Make sure you make tea for everyone.” I thought that his request was a bit odd, but no stranger than what we had done earlier – a desire for normalcy in a difficult situation, perhaps. And to be honest, I was relieved to have something to keep me occupied and away from the tears and hugs of friends and family. I would leave the public grief to my aunts and grandmothers. They had more experience with the “Indian way” of grieving than I did, after all.

I didn’t realize the significance of my dad’s request until a few hours later, when it dawned on me that the tea and the grieving were inexorably entwined in a way I hadn’t expected; that *us* making the tea was a rejection, of sorts, of the “Indian

way” of grieving. When I say the “Indian way” of grieving, I suppose I mean the way my grandmother, my father’s mother, mourned. She wailed loudly that afternoon and evening and none of the older people seemed disconcerted by her keening; but it was behaviour my nerves could not tolerate. One of the aunts explained to me that in India during my grandmother’s time it was not uncommon to hire “professionals” to lament during funeral ceremonies and that she was simply responding in the way she knew. I didn’t care. All of my good multicultural intentions escaped me that day – I could not bear to listen to her, culturally appropriate or not. Finally, in a move that perhaps I shouldn’t have made, I asked her to stop. I’m sure I crossed a cultural line about respect for one’s elders, but I had to explain that we, her grandchildren, couldn’t take it. We couldn’t listen to her cries and watch her become the centre of attention in this situation. Countless well-meaning friends had come to me that afternoon and asked me to keep an eye on my grandmother, that they were worried about how she was handling things. I didn’t need the added stress, and I told her so in my somewhat limited Punjabi. She understood, I think, and she stopped. I know it wasn’t easy for her and, at the age of 80, she was forced to abandon the “Indian way” and adopt the “Canadian way” of coping with a deeply personal process.

My sister and I made what felt like a hundred cups of tea that afternoon and for some reason we rejected the offers of help that came from the women mourners. It didn’t strike me as particularly unreasonable that when we served tea to the new arrivals they seemed to cry a bit harder. I assumed that they were thinking of the tragedy and the sadness and the loss, as was I. It occurred to me that something else

was going on, however, when one of the older women from our community rejected the tea I offered. Her rejection was quiet, yet powerful. Even if she had no intention of drinking it she would have accepted if she had not been making a sort of statement with her refusal. It was then that I realised that by asking us to make tea for everyone, my dad was making a public statement of his own: that we were going to be fine, that we weren't to be pitied, that the tragedy of my mother's death wasn't insurmountable. *We could* manage this grief. The woman who refused the tea was simply shocked that *I* had offered it. If it had come from someone else, a stranger perhaps, it would have been in keeping with her expectations. People were expecting us to be passive, stricken, and clearly mourning. We weren't supposed to be practical and capable at a time like this. My offer of tea from my mother's kitchen implied a sense of normalcy; I had served tea to these women hundreds of times before and for them to see me do it again, under these circumstances, seemed to be both unbearable and reassuring. It was unbearable, I suppose, because they knew that my mother, their friend, would never offer them tea, or her hospitality, again; it was reassuring, perhaps, because they knew that she had trained us well and left us prepared for this eventuality. Mukherjee's "tea boiled the Indian way" drew me into a world of understanding that I hadn't expected that evening in Dr. Johnston's research group, even before any suggestion in the story of the 1985 Air India bombing.

### ***The Air India Disaster***

As a Punjabi Sikh, the mention of a "Sikh Bomb" (Mukherjee, 1988, p. 179) at the beginning of the story was a fourth factor that heightened my awareness that

perhaps my reading of this story was quite different from those with whom I was sharing this reading experience. The events of June 23, 1985 resonate deeply within the Sikh community in Canada; ultimately, the Air India disaster affected all segments of Indo-Canadian society and to this day the tragedy remains unresolved. However, this was not just an Indian loss. As Bharati Mukherjee and her husband and co-writer, Clark Blaise, observe, over ninety percent of the 329 people on Flight 182 were Canadian citizens (Blaise and Mukherjee, 1987, p. iv). The tensions between fundamentalist and moderate Sikhs have not abated, especially in British Columbia. In fact, Ujjal Dosanjh, Premier of British Columbia and Canada's first Indo-Canadian provincial leader, was described by Blaise and Mukherjee (1987) as "the most outspoken anti-Khalistani Sikh in the country" (p. 210). In February 1985, as a result of his outspokenness, Dosanjh was severely beaten by another Sikh and eighty stitches were required to close the wounds on his head (Blaise and Mukherjee, 1987, p. 211). An act of terrorism that began as a Sikh attack on Hindus has left its mark as a deep division within the Canadian Sikh community. When Dosanjh is described as an "anti-Khalistani Sikh," it means that he is opposed to the creation of Khalistan, a separate Sikh state in India. Currently, the majority of the world's 20 million Sikhs live in Punjab, a wealthy state in Northwest India, and a minority of these Sikhs, the fundamentalist Khalistanis, are involved in terrorist activities.

The 1980s were a time of strong sectarian violence in India; Hindu fundamentalists were attempting to reassert their religious presence throughout the nation and equally fundamentalist Sikhs, led by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale,

responded in kind. In 1982, Bhindranwale and his following of young Punjabi Sikh men took refuge in the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab. The Golden Temple is the seat of the Sikh religion, and with his occupation of the temple, Bhindranwale asserted himself as the head of the Sikh faith. In June 1984, 'President's Rule' was declared in Punjab and Indira Gandhi deployed 100,000 Indian Army troops in the state. In an attempt to force Bhindranwale and his supporters from the Golden Temple, an invasion called Operation Blue Star was launched, resulting in an unconfirmed death toll in the thousands. Blaise and Mukherjee (1987) provide a concise summary of the intensity surrounding the Air India bombing when they describe the events of 1984, which directly led to the bombing of 1985.

Bhindranwale, a fundamentalist Sikh leader,

was killed in 'Operation Blue Star,' the Indian Army 'invasion' of the Sikh's holiest shrine, the Golden Temple. In revenge for having ordered the invasion, Sikh bodyguards of Mrs. Gandhi assassinated her on October 31, 1984. In revenge for her assassination, nearly three thousand innocent Sikhs were killed by rioting Hindus – or by paid criminals masquerading as rioters. In presumed revenge for those riots, Khalistanis and criminal, nonpolitical elements within Sikh society have killed hundreds of innocent Hindus and moderate Sikhs in the past two years [1985-1987]... The 329 victims of the Air India crash are part of that ongoing, self-generating, self-justifying vengeance. (ix)

In June 1985, at the time of the Air India bombing, I was preparing to write my grade 12 Diploma Exams at the Marysville high school I attended. I was a fairly typical high school student: at that moment I was excited about finishing high school and starting university, but I was even more excited about the three weeks I would be spending in Germany that summer as part of a Lion's Club exchange. However, the

Air India bombing cast a pall over the final days of the school year. I distinctly remember the sombre mood at home despite the fact that my family was not personally affected by the disaster. The mood had more to do with the fact that until 1984 my family had been quite active in the Punjabi Cultural Association and the gurudwara (Sikh temple) that had recently been constructed on Marysville Trail. Our involvement was never religious; my parents always insisted that it was possible to be a secular Punjabi. Neither of my parents was a practising Sikh, but they encouraged us children to be involved in the language and culture of Punjab. When the fractured politics of the Sikhs in Punjab made their way to Canada it became difficult for my parents and their friends to remain both “secular humanists,” as they referred to themselves, and members of the larger Punjabi community. The time we had spent involved in the Punjabi Cultural Association (PCA), with its sports tournaments, dances, parties and language classes, came to an end. The PCA became more Sikh and less Punjabi, and religion rather than culture became the focus. Stories circulated from Vancouver that moderate Sikhs were being attacked in their homes. The story always went like this: the doorbell rings, a family member answers and the attacker throws acid or the like at the person who opened the door. I remember a few weeks when we were instructed that no one other than Dad was to answer the door or even the phone. As far as I know, this violence never directly affected the Edmonton Sikh community and it certainly never struck home, literally.

I also recall discussing the bombing during those last days of school with my biology teacher, Dr. Patel, a Hindu. I do not remember exactly what we talked about,

but what has stayed with me for 15 years is the strangeness of having a very 'Indian' conversation in my very 'un-Indian' high school community. It was both unsettling and exhilarating in its newness. Finally, after 12 years of schooling in this community, I was having a conversation about my 'ethnicity' that wasn't about me explaining the 'exotic.' Dr. Patel was one of two non-white teachers on staff at the school, and I was one of the handful of non-white students there. In this politically correct community difference was not readily discussed.

My parents chose very deliberately to settle in this particular locale. Dad worked for the provincial government in Edmonton and Mom was a teacher, so it would have been perfectly logical to buy a house in the city, closer to the Indian immigrant community. When I asked, ages ago, why they chose to live in Marysville, they made it very clear that they had wanted their children to be "well-integrated" into "Canadian" society and that included having somewhat clear understandings of our Indianness and our Canadianness. Ironically, I think that this separation from the daily reality of living as 'immigrants' allowed for an integration of identity that might not have been as possible if our family had been immersed in Indo-Canadian culture on a daily basis. My experience of growing up as a Monday-to-Friday minority was balanced by the fact that most of my weekends and holidays were spent in Edmonton with the close-knit community of immigrants who, like my parents, had come from India to Canada in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was easy to balance this duality since I never felt out of place in either location: I had my school friends and my



'cousins,' none of whom I was actually related to, and I had ways of interacting with both groups of peers without feeling that my identity was particularly compromised.

With this cultural history, my first reading experience of "The Management of Grief" was powerfully evocative and I chose it for my study because I was curious about which elements of the story might resonate for students who had grown up in the same community as I had. The world has changed in the 15 years since I graduated from high school, and this study allowed me to compare my own experiences with members of the next generation of Canadian youth.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Readers, Responses and Cultural Identity

#### *Transactional Theories of Interpretation*

The logical starting point for investigating students' responses to literature in the secondary classroom is Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading (1938, 1978). For Rosenblatt, the term "transaction"

designates a reciprocal or circular relationship in which each [the reader and the text] conditions the other. Thus the 'self' of the reader and the text are conceived as more flexible, taking on their character during the transaction, which is an event conditioned also by its particular context. The importance of the cultural or social context is stressed, but transactional theory sees the convention or code, as, e.g., in language, as always individually internalized. Each reader draws on a personal reservoir of linguistic and life experiences. The new meaning, the literary work, whether poetic or nonpoetic, is constituted during the actual transaction between reader and text. (1991, pp. 59-60)

Rosenblatt's "insistence on the word *transaction* is a means of establishing the active role of both reader and text in interpretation, and ensures that we recognize that any interpretation is an event occurring at a particular time in a particular social or cultural context" (Rosenblatt, 1990, p. 106). This notion of meaning in a literary work as a reciprocal transaction between the reader and the text illuminates the significance of investigating the role of a reader's sense of his or her own cultural identity in the creation of meaning while reading. The "reservoir of linguistic and life experiences" (Rosenblatt, 1991, p. 60) that nourishes an individual's sense of cultural situatedness may do so consciously or not.

Just as Rosenblatt challenges us to erase the line between reader and text, Homi K. Bhabha (1994) asks “Where do you draw the line between languages? between cultures? between disciplines? between peoples?” (p. 59). In response, he offers us a “Third Space” through which lines need not be drawn: “It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (p. 37). Here, Bhabha is specifically focused on cultural identity formation; however, Rosenblatt and Bhabha appear to share a number of commonalities, which become clear when Bhabha states that:

The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot ‘in itself’ be conscious. What this unconscious relation introduces is an ambivalence in the act of interpretation. (1994, p. 36)

Both Rosenblatt and Bhabha insist that meaning and identity can only be produced through an ambivalent, yet *active* process. The Reader and the Text, the I and the You are each pairs of “signifiers” and “signifieds” that must engage in a transaction through a Third Space in order to become meaningful.

Wolfgang Iser (1996) captures the interactive natures of reading and identity when he states that a “cross-cultural discourse distinguishes itself from assimilation, incorporation, and appropriation as it organizes an interchange between cultures in

which the cultures concerned will not stay the same” (p. 262). The cross-cultural investigation I conducted focused on questions of the nature of the interchanges between the cultures of the reader and the cultures of the literature. I use the plural of the term “cultures” here in recognition of the fact that readers are influenced by a number of cultural factors that impact their readings. Also, in these times of migration and movement one’s “ethnicity” or “culture” is often difficult to essentialize and, indeed, identify. These various elements become aspects of the cross-cultural discourse described by Iser (1996). He explains how “[t]he operations of such a cross-cultural discourse are realized in transactional loops... These transactional loops work chiasmatically, thus converting the ‘black box’ between cultures into a dynamism, exposing each one to its otherness, the mastery of which results in change” (p. 262). Interestingly, Iser’s “transactional loops” echo Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reading and his “‘black box’ between cultures” functions in a manner similar to Bhabha’s Third Space.

Rosenblatt, Bhabha and Iser all advance theories of meaning and identity production that depend on dynamic interactions between individuals and cultural artifacts. In all three theories, it is the areas between reader and text, individual and culture where significant understanding can take place. In investigating the relationship between cultural identity and the ways in which it affects one’s reading of culturally diverse texts, I hope to catch a glimpse into this space of the convergence and interrogation of identity, culture and literature. In increasingly multicultural

classrooms, new interactions between readers and texts are to be expected; however, the exact nature of these interactions may prove to be quite unexpected.

By investigating the possibility of an intersection between Homi Bhabha's highly political postcolonial theory and Wolfgang Iser's apparently "ahistorical, apolitical" (Fluck, 2000, p. 175) reception theory, it is possible to come to an understanding of a kind of postcolonial reception theory. According to Riquelme (2000),

The centrality of the in-between in their writings raises the possibility of linking elements of Iser's theorizing and the work of Homi Bhabha, whose commentaries on postcolonial matters differ in obvious regards from Iser's writings... Distinctions do not need to be drawn, but considering the similarities in their terminology at times, the shared concept of the in-between, and a shared antimimetic attitude, the distinctions may not be absolute and may not provide the whole story, which remains to be told convincingly. If there is a clear similarity between theories that appear to stand in such opposition, their difference becomes more difficult to parse and the project of formulating it more urgent. (p. 12)

This possibility of formulating a similarity between the two theories and theorists was previously considered, in passing, by Riquelme (1998), when he commented that "their common emphasis on the in-between reflect[s] compatible political and intellectual positions" (p. 547). It is this emphasis on the "in-between" that interests me; I am curious about the interpretation that occurs in this transactional space. Riquelme (2000) provides a further link between Iser and Bhabha when he states that:

Like reading [according to Iser], interpretation is to be understood as performance rather than explication; instead of the unearthing of some buried object, interpretation is the process of digging itself. Both reading and

interpretation involve the negotiating of a liminal, or in-between, space by means of activities that avoid 'colonization,' the ideological superimposing of meanings on human experience. (p. 8)

Bhabha (1994) tells us that “[t]hese ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining society itself” (pp. 1-2). By suggesting that this in-between space acts as both a site of interpretation and as a potential location of resistance to any manner of “colonization,” Riquelme also strengthens Armstrong’s (1991) statement that, “Cross-cultural understanding is an important issue for the theory of interpretation because it highlights questions about the possibility or impossibility of negotiation, agreement, or compromise which arise any time communities with opposing presuppositions find themselves in interpretive conflict” (p. 158).

The relationships between literatures and the cultures that produce them are as diverse as the factors involved; however,

In any culture there is a general symbolic economy made up of the myriad signs that excite human desire, fear, and aggression. Through their ability to construct resonant stories, their command of effective imagery, and above all their sensitivity to the greatest collective creation of any culture – language – literary artists are skilled at manipulating this economy.

(Greenblatt, 1995, p. 230)

In his essay on Culture in *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (1995), Greenblatt goes on to remind us that “great works of art are not neutral relay stations in the circulation of cultural materials. Something happens to objects, beliefs, and practices when they are represented, reimagined, and performed in literary texts, something unpredictable

and disturbing” (p. 230-231). The skilful manipulation of language on the part of storytellers is their hallmark and the unpredictability of readers’ responses to this reimagination of cultural materials certainly must be further problematized when individuals read literature that is a step removed from their own cultural experience.

Connected to this supposition is Greenblatt’s assertion that,

Indeed in our own time, most students of literature reserve their highest admiration for those works that situate themselves on the very edges of what can be said at a particular place and time, that batter against the boundaries of their own culture. (1995, p. 231)

This notion of linear distinctions between cultures being “battered” by students’ interactions with literature is intriguing and the imagery is compelling. The sense of tumbling into an unknown and undefined Third Space where one’s usual rules and theoretical groundings may not apply in the expected ways is profound. The possibilities for exploration are both exciting and frightening. Readers have the opportunity to examine not only the culture of an Other, but also their own.

### *Dasenbrock and Multicultural Literature*

In “Teaching Multicultural Literature” (1992), Reed Way Dasenbrock applies Donald Davidson’s theory of communicative interaction to literary interpretation. Dasenbrock, however, focuses his discussion on the application of Davidson’s communications theory to multicultural literature, and especially on the belief, common among English teachers, that “[w]hen dealing with texts situated in another culture, we feel that what is needed is someone knowledgeable about the cultural and historical contexts of the work” (1992, p. 36). Dasenbrock (1992) advances “a model

of reading, of interpretation, which redescribes the scene of reading not as a scene of possession, of the demonstration of knowledge already in place, or as a failure of possession, but as a scene of learning” (p. 39). He provides encouragement to teachers who would like to include culturally diverse texts in their teaching but who might feel uncomfortable at the prospect of not being in the “informed position” (1992, p. 39). He reminds us that “[t]he informed position is not always the position of the richest or most powerful experience of a work of art. And this becomes even more true when crossing cultural barriers: the unknown can be powerful precisely because it is unknown” (Dasenbrock, 1992, p. 39).

In his application of Davidson’s theories, Dasenbrock extends the possibilities for varied interpretations across cultures and within languages when he asserts that “Davidson’s point is that it is meanings and beliefs that keep us apart as much as words. We can share a language but not share a set of beliefs, and the beliefs will dictate our particular use of the language” (1992, p. 41).

Dasenbrock sees Davidsonian interpretation as a place from which to begin in a new exploration of literary understanding. His approach hovers around a sense of movement through the space between similarity and difference. Again, echoes of Bhabha’s Third Space resonate. Dasenbrock’s explanation is as follows:

Three aspects of [Davidson’s] work are crucial. First, the central movement in interpretation is from an assumption of similitude to a location of and an understanding of difference. Second, this understanding of difference leads not to an inability to interpret but to an ability to communicate across that difference. It is not essential for us to use the same words or mean the same things by those words – what is essential is that we understand what others mean by their



words and what they understand ours to mean. We can understand someone, even if we do not share a set of beliefs or a language, as long as we know what the other's beliefs are. What enables us to do this is our ability to construct passing or short-term theories to interpret anomalous utterances. Faced with an anomaly, with something that doesn't fit our prior theory, we adjust that prior theory, incorporating what we learn from encountering that anomaly into a new passing theory. This leads into the final crucial point about Davidsonian interpretation, its stress on how the interpreter changes, adapts, and learns in the encounter with the anomalous. In short, we assume similarity but inevitably encounter difference. The encounter with difference, however, is productive, not frustrating, because it causes change in the interpretive system of the interpreter. (1992, p. 41)

The changing nature of the reader's interpretive system allows for a truly reader-centred theory of literary interpretation, and the value of *difference* as the source of understanding makes this theory highly appropriate for the study of cross-cultural literature. When a reader approaches a text with a prior theory that can only be grounded in what Dasenbrock calls an "assumption of similitude" and when that reader encounters difference that requires an adjustment in his or her "system", the reader is actively moving within Bhabha's Third Space where meaning is negotiated.

If, as Dasenbrock (1992) says,

Davidson's account of an interpreter creating a passing theory in response to the anomalous seems generally right for all artistic interpretation, it seems particularly accurate for the encounter with the works of another culture. The uninformed reader is often the reader whom writers of the new literatures in English have primarily in mind, for a variety of complex reasons, many demographic and economic. (p. 42)

However, the question arises of what exactly Dasenbrock means by "the uninformed reader." Does he mean the reader uninformed about that *particular* culture about which he or she is reading, or does he have a "generically uninformed"

Western reader in mind? Does it make a difference in a reader's understanding of a culturally different piece of literature if he or she identifies him or herself as being culturally "informed" in some manner? If we indeed bring the cumulative effects of our life's experiences to our reading, is it not logical that readers with strong experiences outside of the cultural mainstream will read somehow differently than those who identify themselves almost exclusively with the dominant culture? The assumption here is that individuals who identify themselves as outside of the dominant culture will also identify themselves with an "other" group, while those who find their identities affirmed by mainstream culture will not find a minority group with which to identify.

*An "other", The "other", and "Non-other"*

In "Multiculturally Challenged," Gigi Jasper (1998) approaches similar questions; however, her focus is on her own role as a non-white teacher who attempts to teach multicultural literature in an overwhelmingly white school. In her own words her question is: "What do I do as an 'other' teaching the 'other' to high school seniors who stridently consider themselves 'non-other'?" (Jasper, 1998, p. 93). Jasper recounts her experiences as a black woman teaching Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* to her white students. She tells us that her

students respond to Kingston's novel in many ways. Some students resent that they were assigned this book in the first place and find it impossible to identify with the protagonist. Rock Springs, Wyoming, students have virtually no school experience in reading any work that isn't about their racial heritage, and some even feel themselves rather ecumenical when asked to "live in the skin" of another sex. (Jasper, 1998, p. 94)

Clearly, the students who voice such objections identify themselves with the dominant culture within which they live. Jasper is aware of one of the underlying, yet rarely articulated, biases held by her students – that which finds them wondering “Why bother to read about someone who is not like they are, someone who doesn’t act like a ‘normal’ (white) person?” (1998, p. 94). These students, who apparently find their cultural identities affirmed in the mainstream, do not seem to see the ethnocentricity of their responses to the literature of an “other.”

In relation to her own “minority status,” magnified within her teaching situation, Jasper states that she, “a black woman, can relate more closely to Kingston’s experience because [she] can see American life as a marginalized person” (1998, pp. 94-95). This assertion that a reader’s own sense of marginality creates space for identification with an also marginalized literary creation interests me. Perhaps, in this case, Jasper’s ability to relate exists as a combination of her own sense of herself as marginalized and the subject of the novel, which features a main character who also sees herself as an outsider. Following this logic, students who see themselves as outside of the mainstream might also be the ones who best identify with Kingston’s character. Jasper does not provide us with this information, so it is impossible to speculate further. However, if the piece of multicultural literature selected is not “about” marginalization or exclusion, what then? Who relates? Do students connect – or not – primarily with what the literature is “about”? Or do

cultural “markers” embedded in the work include “informed” readers and exclude “uninformed” readers?

### ***Cross-Cultural Literary Study***

In *Beyond the Culture Tours* (1997), Cruz, Jordan, Melendez, Ostrowski, and Purves investigate specific questions regarding cross-cultural literary study. In the Preface, Cruz et al. (1997) explain that:

Much of the attention to the complex issue of cultural literacy and multiculturalism in literature learning has focused on the culture of the texts offered in the curriculum. This attention has raised as a major issue representation by writers from ethnic minorities or women writers. It is important that curriculum planning address such issues as fairness in the schools, but to focus only on these issues when studying cultural variation is to see only one half of the picture. One must also consider the issue of teachers and students from one culture reading and responding to works from other cultures. What distinctive characteristics of reading and response exist for such students? How are the aims of multicultural teaching of literature accomplished? How should a teacher deal with the cultural differences of readers? (p. x)

The project Cruz describes actually involves three studies in which student responses to multicultural literature are investigated. The first study was based on in-depth interviews with students in which they were asked to “comment on what information was needed for the text to make more sense” (Cruz et al., 1997, pp. x-xi).

The second study was conducted by means of a national (U.S.) survey in which

students were given a text to read and a list of questions that could be asked about the story or poem, and asked to pick the three most important questions that could be asked about the text. Students were also asked to describe the culture of the text and rate that culture on a set of 5-point scales. These responses were also analyzed to find if there was any interaction between the culture of the text and the culture of the student. (Cruz et al., 1997, p. xi)

The third study of the project is the one that is most useful to me. In “A Case Study of the Responses of Caribbean Students to Multicultural Literature,” Cruz and Melendez (1997) examined “the interplay of culture of the reader and that of the text within a reading situation shaped by the research procedures employed: that is, private readings followed by a one-to-one interview” (p. 35). This study focused on a comparison of twenty-three Dominican and Puerto Rican students’ responses to multicultural literature. All students were high school graduates from New York City; all had varying degrees of engagement with the mainstream culture and all were able to maintain a degree of identification with a minority culture within the dominant culture.

Among their final observations, Cruz and Melendez (1997) note that the participants in the study expressed an awareness of “the concept of culture” in general and their own cultures in particular, and that this awareness “carried over” to their responses to literary texts from a variety of cultures (p. 45). This study is valuable largely because it establishes a correlation between a reader’s awareness of his or her own culture and that reader’s response to culturally diverse texts.

While significant educational research has focused on multicultural education in general, less appears to have concentrated on cross-cultural literary study. With the increased interest within academic arenas in new literatures in English and cultural studies, a new area of inquiry is emerging. Literary and cultural theorists are reconceptualizing the ways in which individuals negotiate meaning across cultures,

and educators are certainly involved in the process. With the increasing globalization of culture, North Americans are exposed to a wider range of culturally diverse literature than ever before. As teachers, we are also coming into more contact with ethnic diversity within our classrooms. Our students bring with them their individual degrees of cultural awareness, and as teachers become more committed to experimenting with multicultural literature the possibilities of diverse literary experiences grow.

These new possibilities need to be explored through both literary and cultural lenses. Literature is an expression of culture and culture is, in return, expressed through literature. The dynamic is reciprocal. Presumably, when readers are engaged with a text not of their own cultures, the process becomes even more complex due to an added layer of cultural interpretation. The nature of this complexity is what interests me. I came to this study suspecting that readers *do* read literature from their own cultures differently than they read texts of the “other”; however, I wondered whether readers who see themselves as “other” read culturally diverse texts differently than those who do not see themselves as “other”. What difference can the answers to this question make in the practices of an English teacher committed to cultural diversity? Ultimately, an awareness of how students’ cultural self-identifications affect their readings may determine the literature a teacher chooses and how that literature is approached within a class.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Particulars of the Study**

#### ***The Research Participants***

The ten students I interviewed were grade eleven and twelve students who attended two different high schools in Marysville, Alberta. I chose five students of European heritage and five of Indian heritage and all of the students, with the exception of one of the European-Canadian boys, were raised in Marysville. The students, four boys and six girls, were all strong readers and were enrolled in International Baccalaureate or Advanced Placement English. As well, each of these students was heavily involved in extracurricular activities within his or her school community. These young men and women were active in students' council, leadership, sports and fine arts, as well as being academically successful. Ultimately, I had hoped to select students who were as similar as possible to each other, with the significant variable being that of cultural background.

Finding five students of East Indian background in Marysville was somewhat difficult since, as one of my interviewees commented, "Marysville is so *not* culturally diverse." However, with the help of teachers at both high schools in the school district I was able to locate five volunteers. While these Indo-Canadian students shared much in common, they presented a number of interesting differences among themselves. They were all raised in Marysville and were strong, highly social students; however, their backgrounds, all "Indian" to some extent, were diverse. The students of European background proved to be no less diverse than their Indo-

Canadian counterparts. All of these students were also raised in Marysville, with the exception of Alex, who lived in England between the ages of ten and sixteen. Again, these students were academically motivated and socially active in their schools.

When I asked the student volunteers to tell me about their cultural backgrounds, none of the students of European heritage provided any information on religious affiliations, while the participants of Indian background did. The pseudonyms I have chosen for the students involved in this study reflect their real names to the extent that, especially for the Indo-Canadian students, I have attempted to maintain a connection to their specific cultural heritages. For example, Theresa's real name is Christian rather than Hindu and I have maintained that distinction here.

*Students of Indian heritage:*

Meena: 16, female, south Indian, Hindu

Theresa: 17, female, south Indian-Sri Lankan, Christian

Simi: 16, female, north Indian, Hindu

Raj: 18, male, Indo-Fijian, Hindu

Salim: 17, male, Indo-Ugandan, Muslim

*Students of European heritage:*

Joanne: 17, female, Scandinavian

Mary: 17, female, Scottish

Kristine: 16, female, Norwegian-Sioux

Alex: 17, male, Scandinavian

Colin: 17, male, British-Scandinavian



Only one of the students, Meena, had any real awareness of the 1985 Air India bombing, and this surprised me somewhat. I had assumed that, despite the fact that most of these students would have been only two or three years old at the time, they would still know something about the event in question. None had any but the vaguest recollection until I provided them with some background. Since I was not able to interview any Sikh students in Marysville, I can only speculate on the possibility that perhaps the resonance of the bombing runs more deeply within the Canadian Sikh community than in other Indo-Canadian communities.

#### ***Timeline and Ethical Considerations***

This qualitative study took place over a period of four weeks with students selected by their English teachers. The study involved interviews with ten students, half of East Indian origin and half of European descent, and their responses to the short story “The Management of Grief” by Indo-American author Bharati Mukherjee. The students were asked to read the story, consider some questions for discussion (see Appendix A), and participate in an hour-long audiotaped interview.

Ethical permission to conduct this study was received from both the University of Alberta and the school district. Letters of permission were signed by the students involved in the study and by their parents or guardians (see Appendix B). Volunteer participants were assured that they would remain anonymous and that their participation or possible withdrawal from the study would not affect their class mark.

### ***Methodology***

Since I proposed to investigate the extent to which individuals' cultural backgrounds affect their responses to literature, I found the case study to be the most appropriate methodology for this research. The case study approach is most suitable when the researcher is attempting to answer questions of "how" and "why" (Yin 1994). Also, the individuals' cultural contexts are integral to their responses to the literature and, for that reason, detailed description of their phenomenological worlds is vital (McKernan 1988). Case study allows for the "thick" description necessary for this research. Case studies also provide the researcher with the opportunity to identify themes within and across cases (Gall, Borg, Gall 1996). While case study findings are not generalisable to other contexts, they are useful in providing illuminative portrayals from which readers can make their own interpretations and draw their own conclusions (Cresswell, 1998; Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995; Tellis, 1997).

Case studies are bounded in time and space and the location of this study and the sociocultural reality surrounding the participants were significant in the context of Canadian multiculturalism. Unlike the majority of research involving ethnocultural diversity, this study was situated in an unusually homogeneous suburb of a multiethnic, mid-sized Western Canadian city.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Text and Context

#### *Culture and Multiculturalism in the 'Burbs*

Marysville, Alberta is a middle-class community of 50 000 and the population is made up overwhelmingly of white, professional, two-parent families. There is very little cultural or economic diversity in Marysville and the students I interviewed are aware that the community of their youth is quite unlike urban Canadian multicultural reality. In fact, Simi, a seventeen-year-old girl of Indian heritage, revealed that her older sister said that “going to university was a culture shock. Coming from Marysville, you don’t even think of yourself as Indian exactly. She said that she had never seen so many culturally different people in one room. She was shocked.” I can confirm a similar experience: until attending the University of Alberta I had only ever been with all “white” people or all “brown” people, rarely had I spent time with mixed groups. I had also never spent any time with people of other cultural backgrounds, so attending university certainly was a “culture shock.” At university I met people whose parents had immigrated from Italy, Egypt, Lebanon, Korea, and Hong Kong. I also met East Indian people I had *not* known all my life. This too was a shock to me – until attending university, I truly believed that I knew most of the brown people in Edmonton. Suddenly the world was much larger than I had imagined.

All of the students involved in my study offered similar insights into contemporary multiculturalism as they have seen it from their varying perspectives.

Expressing a dissatisfaction with the reality of how multiculturalism has manifested itself in Canada, Simi revealed,

They say that Canada is a multicultural society, but I think there's always gonna be that differentiation just because of the difference in looks. Canada is a country that is made up mostly of Caucasian people with fair skin. And I think that because we stand out so much I don't think we're going to see each other as 'Canadian'. Like when I walk down the street I can tell Italian people and Oriental people. I don't think oh, she's Canadian and she's Canadian. Like when you think about Europeans you think Caucasian, when you think of India you think Indians, you think of Africa you think of Black people, when you think of Canada you think of Caucasian people. When you think of North America that's what you think of...And just because of that generalisation we'll always stand out. Like when I think of Canada, myself, I think of Caucasian people.

The Indian students, despite having been faced with very little overt racism, agreed that they "haven't really experienced it hands on, but you can tell it's kind of on the backburner. It's there but no one says anything about it. No one treats you differently but they still make racist jokes and don't treat it as a serious matter."

This questioning of multiculturalism does not lie exclusively with the Indian students. Colin, a seventeen-year-old boy who told me that his family in England have been "fishermen since boats were invented," observed that

it seems like the problem with racism, you know, of multiculturalism failing, if you can say it has failed, is that there's this misunderstanding on both sides. And it's the lack of realizing that there's a misunderstanding that really creates the problem. And this [story] is sort of saying look, there *is* a misunderstanding on both sides, face it.

Interestingly, the students involved in this study appear to be providing a perspective on an ongoing debate regarding Canadian multiculturalism. In her

discussion of the writers Neil Bissoondath and Bharati Mukherjee, Margaret Cannon (1995) explains:

While...the East Indian author Bharati Mukherjee [sees] Canada as an extremely racist society, Bissoondath does not....[Bissoondath] states: 'I think every country is racist, unless it is a country that has only one race living in it. But Canada is less racist than most countries I can think of.'

Bharati Mukherjee has often criticized Canada for being more racist than the United States, a position Bissoondath doesn't share. Bharati, he says, 'she prefers the United States because there everything is up front. An American doesn't like you because of the colour of your skin, you will know it. And therefore Canada is a more racist country. I would much rather have a racist behave in the Canadian way: smile and be polite...Canadians, even when they are racist, realize that it's not a nice thing to be.' (p. 250)

Both Mukherjee and Bissoondath came to Canada as immigrants from "hot, moist" (Mukherjee, 1985, p. 2) countries and both have been concerned with "the immigrant experience." However, since the Indian students I interviewed were the children of immigrants their relationship with Canada is necessarily different. Rather than being from "hot, moist" places like their parents, these young people are from a cold, dry land and this does make a difference. These are young people who carry only vague, vacation memories of the climates of their parents and who have spent their childhoods with the real life memories of the smell of wet woolen scarves and varyingly successful attempts at ice skating. This cold, dry prairie and those "hot, moist" places come together to create people who can "live on the hyphen" in surprising ways (qtd. in Jones & Katel, July 10, 1995, p.34).

***The Text***

Bharati Mukherjee's short story "The Management of Grief" is "about the effects of the Air India disaster on Toronto's Indian community and specifically on the central character and narrator, Mrs. Shaila Bhave, who loses her husband and two sons in the crash" (Bowen, 1997, p. 48). The narrator appears to be coping well with the tragedy and she is asked by a government social worker, Judith Templeton, "to help as an intermediary – or, in official Ontario Ministry of Citizenship terms, a 'cultural interpreter' (Cairncross vii) – between the bereaved immigrant communities and the social service agencies" (Bowen, 1997, p. 48). In her article, "Spaces of Translation: Bharati Mukherjee's 'The Management of Grief,'" Bowen tells us that:

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 her self. The question of how to effect moral agency while practising the acceptance of difference is in both instances a tricky one. (1997, p. 49)

Both women occupy roles as translators and interpreters between two cultures, roles that are difficult and uncomfortable to occupy. Shaila, however, is the "dislocated mourner" (Bowen, 1997, p. 59) who must manage her own grief and that of others. Her sense of dislocation leads her on a journey that takes her from Canada to Ireland to India and back to Canada. Upon her return to Toronto, "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)” (Bowen, 1997, p. 58).

This story was particularly appropriate for my study because of the very issues of cultural translation explored by Bowen. The story is about a very specific event in Canadian culture, but it may also be about an event specific *to* a Canadian culture. In *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy* (1987), Blaise and Mukherjee tell us that they “saw it then, and see it now, as fundamentally an immigration tragedy with terrorist overtones” (p. ix). Mukherjee (1997) explains that,

in 1985 a terrorist bomb, planted in an Air-India jet on Canadian soil, blew up after leaving Montreal, killing 329 passengers, most of whom were Canadians of Indian origin. The prime minister of Canada at the time, Brian Mulroney, phoned the prime minister of India to offer Canada’s condolences for India’s loss. (paragraph 13)

However, the tragedy itself was not the main focus of my study. Similarly, Mukherjee makes it clear that in “The Management of Grief” she does not intend to “[reduce] art to sociological statement” (Chen & Goudie, 1997, paragraph 22), explaining that “no fine fiction, no good literature, is anchored in verisimilitude. Fiction must be metaphor. It is not transcription of real life but it’s a distillation and pitching at higher intensification of life. It’s always a distortion” (Chen & Goudie, 1997, paragraph 36). What Mukherjee does distill in this story are her perspectives on Canadian official multiculturalism, against which she has “spoken so vociferously” (Chen & Goudie, 1997, paragraph 56). Given Mukherjee’s strong views on ethnicity in Canada, it is interesting to consider her perceived status as an “ethnic writer” in

North America. Her resistance to this designation raises questions similar to those posed by Verhoven (1996) about the problematic relations “between ethnicity and writing, between ethnicity and hegemonic ideology, and between ethnicity and the politics of cultural pluralism” (p.100). Verhoven asks, “What exactly makes ‘ethnic writing’ ethnic? *Is there such a thing as ‘ethnic writing’?* If so, to what extent can an ‘ethnic’ writer be expected to write ‘ethnically’? (p. 100).

If such questions might be asked about writing, might not the same questions be raised about reading? *Is there such a thing as ‘ethnic reading’?* If so, to what extent can an ‘ethnic’ reader be expected to read ‘ethnically’? Since I was most interested in the personal responses of students to the story and the ways in which they came to an interpretation of the text’s meaning for themselves, these questions provided a useful starting point for thinking about questions of literature, response and culture. Where Shaila, the story’s protagonist, acts as a “cultural translator” between various members of Toronto’s Indian community and the government of Ontario, readers of the story act as translators between the culture of the story and their own cultural background.

### ***Colonised by the Postcolonials?: Mukherjee’s Resistance to Postcolonialism***

In *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) Ashcroft, et al. state that they “use the term ‘post-colonial’ ...to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day...” (p. 2). This is a broad net to cast and in the decade since the publication of their book there has been an intellectual and critical “boom” in the area of postcolonial studies. Theorists such as Ahmad (1992),



Bhabha (1994), JanMohamed and Lloyd (1990), and Spivak (1988) have both narrowed and broadened their sights in order to focus on relationships between postcolonialism and geography, feminism, postmodernism, literature, language, ethnicity and host of other issues related to politics and power.

Ania Loomba (1998) acknowledges that, “it is true that the term ‘postcolonialism’ has become so heterogeneous and diffuse that it is impossible to satisfactorily describe what its study might entail. This difficulty is partly due to the inter-disciplinary nature of postcolonial studies...” (p. xii). This interdisciplinarity is accompanied by another difficulty Loomba (1998) acknowledges in the world of postcolonial studies: “that essays by a handful of name-brand critics have become more important than the field itself – students feel the pressure to ‘do’ Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak or Homi Bhabha or to read only the very latest article” (p. xv). The “star system of the Western...academy is partly responsible for this” (Loomba, 1998, p. xvi) and this shorthand approach to literary study is partly what Bharati Mukherjee, “adamant about her desire not to be classified as a ‘postcolonial’ writer/critic” (Chen & Goudie, 1997, paragraph 2), opposes.

Mukherjee spent 15 years in Canada and, dissatisfied with her experiences with Canadian multiculturalism, she and her family moved to the United States in the early 1980s. Mukherjee (1997) explains that:

The years in Canada were particularly harsh. Canada is a country that officially, and proudly resists cultural fusion. For all its rhetoric about a cultural ‘mosaic,’ Canada refuses to renovate its national self-image to include its changing complexion. It is a New World country with Old World concepts of a fixed, exclusivist national identity. Canadian

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

Mukherjee rejects the notion of the Canadian cultural mosaic in favour of the “melting pot” approach of American immigrant society. She also chooses to describe herself on her own terms, as an American, rather than as an Asian-American, asking “Why is it that hyphenation is imposed only on nonwhite Americans?” (Mukherjee, 1997, paragraph 28). She asserts that “rejecting hyphenation is [her] refusal to categorize the cultural landscape into a center and its peripheries” (Mukherjee, 1997, paragraph 28).

In an interview featured in *Jouvert*, an on-line journal of postcolonial studies, Mukherjee reiterates her rejection of the centre-periphery “template” by saying that, “postcolonial studies seems an inappropriate category in which to place my works. I don’t think of myself as a postcolonial person stranded on the outer shores of the collapsed British Empire” (Chen & Goudie, 1997, paragraph 5). She goes on to express the belief that,

the mission of postcolonial studies as a discipline is to level all of us to our skin color and ethnic origin...[T]he mission of postcolonial studies seems to be to deliberately equate Art and journalism, to reduce novels to specimens for the confirming of their theories. If an imaginative work doesn’t fit the cultural theories they approve of, it’s dismissed as defective. The relationship between the artist and the postcolonial scholar has become adversarial...I’m not denigrating all scholarship, but only that particular school of postcolonial criticism that is hostile to art and aesthetics. (Chen & Goudie, 1997, paragraphs 58 and 60)

It is ironic that despite her resistance to any association with postcolonial writers and critics, Mukherjee's fiction explores many of the same themes as those critics she questions, particularly the themes of identity, location and transformation.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Student Responses: Themes from the Data

A number of themes emerged from the interviews with the participants, and it is important to note that while there were patterns that appeared to be related to students' cultural background, it is impossible to generalise on this basis. For organisational purposes I have chosen to discuss the resulting themes based on participants' cultural background while acknowledging the differences that appear among the student respondents.

#### *Stereotypes: "What's Hot and What's Not?"*

Each of the three Indo-Canadian girls I interviewed expressed a discomfort with what she perceived as cultural stereotypes presented in the story, while their male counterparts did not appear to have any such concerns. None of the Euro-Canadian students commented on the possibility of stereotyping occurring as a result of reading this story until I raised the question. In contrast, the first comment Meena made to me was "Why did it have to be a story about an *Indian* person, instead of just a *person*?" Two young women, Meena and Simi, revealed the most unease with several of the cultural references in the story:

**Simi:** There were a lot of cultural references to Indian culture and [an] Indian way of life and I think that if other people read the story they're going to think that Indian culture is a certain way. People already have lots of stereotypes about Asia and the East and the Orient and I think that the story just further implements the stereotypes.

**Meena:** I find that if they [schoolmates] know something a little bit about me they feel like they know everything and they feel like they can judge me.

Meena's and Simi's comments are illuminated in Meena's observations in during a brief discussion about the recent trendiness of India in North American popular culture. I asked Meena how she felt about pop star Madonna adorning her hands with mendhi [henna] and the availability, suddenly, of this "herbal tattooing" at Shopper's Drug Mart and London Drugs; the current fashion trend toward pashmina (a fine grade of cashmere) shawls; sari fabric appearing as throw pillows and window dressing; Gwen Stefani of the band "No Doubt" appearing in her music videos wearing a bindi on her forehead; and numerous other examples of Indian (specifically, North Indian) culture on the "What's Hot" list of such publications as *In Style* magazine. In an insight she attributes to a discussion with her older sister, who is working towards a Master of Arts, 16-year-old Meena expressed her ambivalence toward the recent popular culture exposure of India in these terms:

I can't justify to myself why I don't really agree with it, but I was talking to my sister who is studying *Orientalism* at university, [Edward] Said and stuff, and she was saying...that maybe it's because people are kind of exoticising it, like when you see people with mendhi on their hands or a bindi you see them as kind of ultra-trendy or kind of different from everyone else, and they're exoticising something I find kind of normal...it's interesting because a lot of times you don't agree with the way you're portrayed in the culture, but you can't exactly say why...it's not really an offensive portrayal, but you just don't agree...Orientalism helps to explain that feeling.

Both Simi and Meena insisted that they liked the story, but both wished "there weren't so many generalisations about India."

While Theresa did not express as many misgivings about the cultural references in the story she did join Meena and Simi in singling out the following

passage about the hasty remarriages expected of Dr. Ranganathan and the other widowers from the downed airliner as one which caused her some concern:

Already the widowers among us are being shown new bride candidates. They cannot resist the call of custom, the authority of their parents and older brothers. They must marry; it is the duty of a man to look after a wife. The new wives will be young widows with children, destitute but of good family. They will make loving wives, but the men will shun them. I've had calls from the men over crackling Indian telephone lines. 'Save me,' they say, these substantial, educated, successful men of forty. 'My parents are arranging a marriage for me.' In a month they will have buried one family and returned to Canada with a new bride and partial family. (Mukherjee, 1988, p. 190)

Theresa was eager to make the comment that the rapid remarriage of widowers might be common in India, but "not so much here, but back home...." Interestingly, as she made her reference to India as "back home," Theresa paused to consider the phrase and the fact that she was born in Canada before carrying on with "okay, I *am* going to say that..." and completing her thought that such a custom was "old fashioned." Meena and Simi were much more deeply troubled by the same passage regarding the rapid remarriage of widowers. Simi said:

his [Dr. Ranganathan's] wife died in the plane crash and they kept talking about how Indian men have to get married immediately after. Like, forget about their old family. I really had a problem with that. I mean Indian people aren't any different from Canadian. Like if you lost a family member you would have to grieve the same amount. They made it seem like we were totally incompassionate (sic) about things like that and it's not that way at all...that's so old...such an old custom and to put it in a story like this which seems kind of modern...I had a problem with that. I wouldn't want other people to have that impression of my culture.

Meena also expressed discomfort with what she referred to as "cultural stereotypes" of marriage in India and she carried on to say that she wished that the

story was less “culturally specific...like you never hear a ‘typical American tradition is....’ There’s no such thing as ‘typical.’ It’s actually making a generalisation...if people see an Indian person generalising about their culture other people think they can too.” Simi echoed Meena’s concern when she worried that the presence of an Indian narrator created a sense of India as a cultural monolith: “Oh, in India...or this is ‘the Indian way’, [she] always says that...being that the main character is from India makes it seem like all Indians are that way.”

Interestingly, when I asked Raj and Salim, the two Indo-Canadian boys, how they felt about the same passage, their responses were much more matter-of-fact:

Raj: Losing your family is a very tragic thing. I don’t know how I would handle it. Especially if you’re a woman in the Hindu religion and you don’t have a family...like if you had a family and then your family died it’s harder for you to find somebody to live with. If you were a man and your wife died it’s a lot more acceptable for you to get married again. Like my uncle’s wife died and he got married again really easily. But my mom’s friend’s husband died and she hasn’t been married for 15 years...

Salim: I think she mentions it because it shows how in Indian culture men and women are treated different. I don’t agree with it but it’s there.

Both young men appear to be less troubled by the portrayal of a double standard for men and women in the story. They seem to be more pragmatic than the young women, perhaps because they perceive the double standard as working in their favour.

When I asked the European-Canadian students to comment on the possibility that stereotypes might be confirmed by the story they appeared unconcerned with the idea that readers might walk away from the story with unsubstantiated beliefs about

India; however, Meena and Simi's concerns might be valid in the light of Alex's statement that at the end of the story he "totally wanted to know what was custom and what was reaction." Colin provided an interesting insight into the relationship he perceives between types of readers, the texts they choose (or are asked by researchers to read), and the mitigation of the fear of stereotyping. When I asked him whether there were aspects of the story that might contribute to stereotypes about India, he responded with:

Oh, definitely. But, by the same token, she's inadvertently protected herself against that happening...if you're not, I don't want to say intelligent, but if you're not up enough with it to realize what's going on to follow [the story], then you're not going to understand what's going on because it jumps around. It's not a hard read, but you can't be watching TV and reading it, you have to concentrate on it. Someone who would come away thinking hey, I know about Indian people, probably, by virtue of the fact that they thought that, they wouldn't probably get enough out of it to think that at all. It's hard enough of a read...I guess that I'm pigeon-holing people who would come away from it that way as kind of less intelligent or ignorant...that's almost fair, don't you think, really?

Ultimately, Colin lays the responsibility for the creation of stereotypes in the hands of readers rather than authors, and in an argument that responds to many of the concerns raised by Meena and Simi, he defends Mukherjee's authorial choices regarding the character Pam by saying: "She doesn't say 'Pam is one of *those* girls'. Because that, then, is stereotyping. She says 'Pam is like this' and if you want to make the connection then you can. But then that's *you* stereotyping, *I'm* not talking about anybody but Pam."



Interestingly, the Euro-Canadian students' responses to the question of the danger of stereotyping is consistent with the observation by Pieterse (1992) that:

In as far as stereotypes form part of the psychological and cultural furniture of those in society's mainstream, to criticize them is to undermine the comforts of the mainstream existence. From the point of view of the comfortable strata of society, and those who aspire to join them, no problem exists; there is a problem only from the point of view of those on the margins. (Pieterse, p. 12)

Perhaps it is also significant that the Indo-Canadian girls were the readers who were the most passionately concerned with this issue. One might consider the possibility that as non-white young women they brought a heightened awareness of issues of marginality to their readings of this story.

***Pam and 'The Neon Lights of the Mall'***

In "The Management of Grief," (Mukherjee, 1988) Pam is the daughter of a woman, Kusum, who has lost both her husband and her youngest daughter on the bombed airliner. Pam is described as

the daughter who's always in trouble. She dates Canadian boys and hangs out in the mall, shopping for tight sweaters....[The younger daughter] was going to spend July and August with grandparents because Pam wouldn't go. Pam said she'd rather waitress at McDonald's. 'If it's a choice between Bombay and Wonderland, I'm picking Wonderland,' she'd said. (pp. 181-182)

In my own initial reading of the story, I do not recall paying particular attention to the character of Pam, so I was somewhat surprised to find that each of the Indo-Canadian students I interviewed mentioned her on their own, and all had definite opinions on her character and function within the story. Two of the Euro-Canadian students raised the topic of Pam on their own and, of these two, only one engaged in a

sustained discussion of the character without further coaxing by me. The Euro-Canadian students were willing to offer their insights on Pam once I engaged them in that particular discussion.

Despite having broached the subject of Pam on their own, the Indo-Canadian students did not have uniform responses to her character. Two of the students, Raj and Theresa, identified with Pam, and two, Meena and Simi, objected to what they perceived as judgements being passed on the character because she was “Westernised.” A fifth student, Salim, seemed to bridge both points of view. Meena, one of the students who felt that Pam was portrayed in a negative light, said that she understood how Pam might be ostracised in that particular community, but “I don’t think...that in *all* Indian communities she wouldn’t be accepted...I don’t think that’s a common experience at all.” Simi explained her point of view by saying that her objection was with

how they said that she wears tight sweaters and dates Canadian boys, and therefore she is bad. Like I guess my *grandma* would have that point of view, maybe, [but] even she’s so open-minded. But I guess if you pushed it out of her, I guess she would admit that she had that point of view. She’s [Pam] not bad. She’s just not like her sister who’s a ‘typical’ Indian girl you can take home to your parents. Just because she’s rebellious doesn’t mean she’s *bad*.

Salim offered a perspective that indicated both an identification with the character and a discomfort with how she was presented in the story. He says “I didn’t really like how [the author] kind of turned on Pam in her writing. How the Westernised Pam seemed like a negative character.” Later in our discussion, Salim revealed that his older brother “was like that, too” and that in Pam he could see some

of the difficulties faced by his brother as the eldest in the family breaking new ground for his younger siblings.

Raj, a practising Hindu, identified with Pam because his “mom says that I’m the bad one even though I’m the only one of the three of us who speaks Hindi.” He also commented that he sees her rebellion as realistic and identifiable:

It’s hard living in a place like this with a culture that’s in the minority. I can see why Pam would try to rebel and would want to. Because if you’re not sure of yourself and not confident, you will bend the other way and try to become normal. It’s really hard to become normal if you aren’t. In Canada the norm is Christian.

Interestingly, Raj is the only one of my interviewees who used the word “normal” without implied quotations or a sense of irony. He is also the only Indo-Canadian student to reveal incidents of racism directed against him, mostly in the form of name-calling (“your gods are mutants”) in grade nine.

Theresa was another student who said that she identified

really well with Kusum’s daughter...she’s the daughter who’s always in trouble and like, even though my parents are quite liberal in their thinking they’re still concerned about what other...people in the community think. So, like when I got my belly button ring or when I’m dating a Canadian guy they’re like ‘what are other people going to think?’ ...I argue with my parents sometimes that...I’m Canadian, I was born here and that’s the exact same kind of argument she’s using. I could identify with that...

Despite the arguments with her parents, Theresa reveals an awareness of her parents’ dilemmas as immigrants raising children born in Canada when she says, “I know my parents are kind of torn. They are *way* liberal compared to other

parents...but they struggle between sticking with the culture and tradition they've had and letting us do what is accepted here. They *do* struggle with that.”

Alex, the only Euro-Canadian student who initiated a sustained discussion of Pam, began by seeing a familial connection similar to that expressed by Salim. The topic arose when I asked him whether there were elements, characters, or ideas in the story with which he could identify. Alex replied with:

Possibly that one girl, the one who works at McDonald's, because she's totally been Westernised and you see her values are different from the rest of the family values. I don't know, in my family, there's like my big brother who's like, quote, 'the trouble-maker' and I'm the 'happy-go-lucky' one. So in a way their family is like a mini-reflection of mine, even though it's nothing like that.

Alex continues the discussion with a story about the international school that he attended in England:

There was a Sikh in my old school....His family was incredibly wealthy...they had like seven houses all over Turkey and India and England. His dad was super stick-to-your-culture, keep it straight, remember your roots. This guy...he was a lot like Pam...in that he had been completely Westernised and he didn't want to keep the whole custom thing going on and stuff. He wore a turban, but he trimmed his hair and stuff.

What interests me most about Alex's comments is his use of the passive construction when he talks about Pam and the Sikh boy he went to school with. He says that both had “been Westernised,” as though they were passive subjects to whom the active “Westernisation” happened. He is clearly sympathetic to both, yet his choice of language is somehow revelatory.

Mary, the second Euro-Canadian student to refer to Pam, does so as an example of cultural difference rather than similarity, unlike Alex's initial comments about being able to recognize elements of Pam in his own personal experience. Mary said: "Like the one kid, Pam, I guess she wanted to be more Canadian than she was Indian and she was being rude to her mother and stuff, that showed differences between the cultures, I guess." Later in our discussion I asked about Pam again and Mary responded with,

She was a snob, I didn't like her. I don't know if they were trying to show her as being deep into Canadian culture or whatever, because that's not really Canadian culture. Like, not everyone works at McDonald's, goes shopping and dates Canadian boys. She could date anyone she wants...like they make a point of saying Canadian boys...maybe she's trying to rebel against her parents by dating a Canadian boy.

Joanne, another Euro-Canadian student, responded somewhat similarly when I asked her about Pam. According to Joanne, Pam

acted like a, not really typical teenager, but a stereotypical teenager, I would say...and also one that, that...I don't know if she's trying to forget...kind of trying to repress her culture I suppose. Maybe she was ashamed of it or something like that because she kept trying to downplay it, like she would wear American clothing or Canadian clothing and stuff like that. Whereas the other daughter used to sing or something like that, right? So yeah, she seemed really confused and I did pity her. I thought it was realistic...I'm sure there are...well there *are* people like that, I do know...Yeah, they want to fit into the culture they're surrounded by but they can't really forget their roots type of thing so they try to ignore them or pretend they're not there...

I am interested here in Joanne's notion of "pity" for "people like that" and the idea that the balance between two cultures is difficult to maintain. The implication is an echo of Alex's belief that Pam had "been Westernised" as opposed to having chosen

which elements of Western culture to adopt. Perhaps Meena's and Simi's concerns regarding stereotyping are somewhat grounded.

The last two European-Canadian students provided interesting viewpoints on Pam as a character, largely because of their own personal backgrounds. Colin had been dating an East Indian girl who attended the largest and most culturally diverse high school in Edmonton. It has a population of over 2000 students, and teachers estimate that 53 different languages are spoken there. In contrast, the school Colin attended, and where I taught, has a student body of less than 900 and the "ethnically diverse" population stands at fewer than a dozen students. As a result of his relationship with his girlfriend, Colin has had contact with a truly ethnically diverse group of young people that he would likely not have known otherwise and this made him an interesting addition to my study. Colin also read a great deal outside of school and was interested in questions of culture and ethnicity.

Kristine was another student who provided some surprises. When I asked my English 30 International Baccalaureate students to consider volunteering for this study, Kristine was happy to participate. She was highly intelligent and, as a result of being accelerated from grade eight to grade ten, she was the youngest student in her class. I included Kristine in my sample of students of European background, and it was not until well into our interview that Kristine revealed that she is half Sioux and half Norwegian. Kristine is aware that since she does not "look Native" and since she is able to "pass" for white, she occupies a unique space on the Canadian cultural landscape.

Neither Kristine nor Colin initiated the discussion surrounding the character Pam, but once I asked them about her they were happy to share their observations and insights.

When I asked Kristine what she made of Pam she responded by revealing that:

I definitely saw my mom's culture in Pam. From my experience, I have lots of cousins who can't really cope with being different and they kind of go off the tracks. Like when you're obviously different you can run into problems. Like my [younger] brother, he's a lot darker than I am, and he gets treated differently all the time. Now he's learning to deal with it. I've seen kids from different worlds try different things and try to rebel. She's just a typical multicultural kid. I have a cousin who's Japanese...half Native and half Japanese...and she said her Japanese cousins, a lot of them try different things and do exactly the opposite of what their families want just because they're trying to be more Canadian.

Later in the interview, when I asked Kristine whether there were parts of the story she could identify with, she responded by saying that she could identify with Pam,

who is lost because she comes from a different background. I have a cousin who ran away, but eventually she came back...I could see what she was trying for...trying to get away from her own culture to be more Canadian, like White Canadian, well, they have all the power and the money, as people see it.

Kristine's identification with Pam did not rest exclusively in her ability to see others in this character. She recognised that Pam "tried to conform but she was resisting her culture. I do the same thing sometimes. I won't tell people that I'm Native, I just let them think I'm white until I get to know them better."

Kristine's comment that Pam is "just a typical multicultural kid" provides an interesting counterpoint to Colin's explanation that "because it's a short story and you

can't throw in a whole bunch of detail, the author puts in characters as representatives of whole stereotypes." He goes on to clarify how he sees Pam by saying:

there's a term I've heard Asian people use, like Chinese Asian, to each other and the term is 'white-washed.' They call each other 'white-washed.' I hear that as racist, I'm not sure if it is or not. But that's, I think, what Pam is supposed to be portraying. She's the Indian girl who does not care one bit about her Indian heritage...She'd rather waitress at McDonald's and hang out with her boyfriend than go to India. So she represents that, not generation, but section of the youth who see the lights, the neon lights of the mall, instead of what their parents have left. I don't think that it's necessarily a negative take on that. I think she just represents that. And I don't think that Pam is a negative character – she sees what she wants and she's going to take it.

In addition to his discussion of Pam, Colin's question about whether the term "white-washed" is *actually* racist, although it does sound racist to him, indicates that he is aware that his own relationships with race and ethnicity are not entirely defined. Multiculturalism in Canada results in complex interactions and identities for both white and non-white citizens alike and it would be a mistake to assume that a white Canadian is assured of a fixed and complete ethnic identity.

***Judith Templeton: "The Icon of White"***

In "The Management of Grief" (Mukherjee, 1988), Judith Templeton is "an appointee of the provincial government," whose "mandate is bigger" than multiculturalism (p. 182). She arrives within days of the bombing to elicit the help of the narrator, Mrs. Shaila Bhave, in negotiating "the complications of culture, language, and customs" (Mukherjee, 1988, p. 183) associated with the tragedy. The students' responses to this character were quite clearly split along cultural lines. The



Indo-Canadian students generally found Judith to be quite unsympathetic. Meena begins her comments sarcastically by saying:

It seemed like she was, oh, ‘the kind Canadian lady just trying to help out everyone.’ She said all the...government wants to do is give these people money and they’re too stubborn to accept it. I don’t really agree with that very much because they’re portraying her in a way like the government is just being so...kind of...being so *nice* to people but actually a lot of bigotry went along with this bombing. There was a lot of racism surrounding it...the way the Indian community was portrayed on the news and stuff wasn’t very respectful.

This dissatisfaction with the character of the “kind Canadian lady” is evoked more emotionally with Theresa’s comment that:

It made me cry...it wasn’t so much that it was about death...like that was sad, but this is going to sound strange...but you know [Judith] and how she’s not necessarily racist, but she’s so almost like, *ignorant* of culture and other peoples’ culture...I don’t know, but I’ve never encountered racism directly, but you still kind of feel it. I don’t know, but that just kind of hit.

Simi articulates a sense of ambivalence of about the dissonance between the character’s motives and the reality of her methods:

[The story] made it seem like [Judith] was so good...made it seem like she was only trying to help, but she didn’t really know anything about the situation. I didn’t really know what to think of her.

The two Indo-Canadian boys, Raj and Salim, both echoed Meena and Simi with their observations:

**Raj:** At first I thought she was a nice person and just trying to help but I after reading what that old couple said...you don’t want help from other people, you support your family...and how she kept persisting on them to do it [sign the power of attorney papers], I kind of started getting mad. Like, let them live their life the way they want. I don’t think it’s her place to go in to somebody and say you have to sign this to make your life better. How does she know it will make their life better and not worse?

Salim: She tried to help them, but she didn't respect their need for closure, I guess, their own way to grieve. It was like she wanted to pay them off or something....It's like she's *using* [Shaila's] nationality.

These students appear to be unwilling to excuse Judith's ignorance in the name of her benevolence despite the fact that all of them do acknowledge the difficulty of her task.

In contrast, many of the Euro-Canadian students, even while recognizing her problematic status within the story, appeared to empathise with Judith's predicament.

Joanne comments that:

...she had good intentions I think... she was trying hard to do in her mind what would be the best for these people, but I think that the cultural differences were just so great that she didn't do a very good job of it at all. She insulted her [Shaila] when [Shaila] got out of the car and walked away and ... she totally couldn't connect with the old lady and the old man. Like nothing she could say...like they were on two different wavelengths. Right, so, she was nice and...I kind of empathised with her...'cause she tried so hard but she just couldn't connect at all.

And Alex, despite making the observation that Judith "totally represented cultural ignorance," went on to reveal a more personal response to Judith's actions:

...I'm sure her heart was in the right place...what she was doing was trying to make these people's lives better, but she didn't ever try to step out her own little viewpoint and realize that there might be other viewpoints around...If you look at all the major colonial instances in history it's always been the coloniser coming in and saying 'these people are wrong. We have to educate them, we have to conform them to what's good.' She obviously was [doing] that but I don't think it was intended...I can possibly understand how that would happen. I'm sure I've been guilty of it lots, too. I'm sure I offended hundreds of people in my old school because of my own viewpoints and how I don't really think about stuff.

Mary's response indicates a genuine confusion about Shaila's motives towards the end of the story. She says:

I don't know why [Shaila] got so mad at her. [Judith] just seemed like she wanted to help. I can understand how she might have been pushing that old couple too hard, but I don't know why [Shaila] would have gotten out of the car. That lady was just trying to help.

Even Kristine and Colin, with their own interesting relationships with multiculturalism in Canada, respond with some measures of empathy toward Judith.

Kristine: ...I can understand why, being white, she would want someone of that cultural background to help.

Colin: I still see Judith as being representative of white people. And I think it's fair because she's really well meaning, but she's totally off base.

Most of the students of European heritage responded to the ambiguity of Judith's position within the story. They acknowledged that, despite her good intentions, her assumptions about Shaila and the Sikh couple were inappropriate.

Joanne: She thought her way was the only way that was going to get things resolved, so she could have been more open to different possibilities. Obviously, if it wasn't working she should have tried different things.

Alex: Like she didn't ever try to say 'why don't these people want it? What's going on in their minds, what makes them click that way?' Instead, she was like, they're obviously wrong...She doesn't perceive the difference between Hindu and Sikh. She's like, 'here, you're that type. Talk to them for me because I'm not that type. I'm not your kind.'

Kristine: I thought it was a horrible thing to do...when [Judith] asks [Shaila] to help with the Sikh people, I thought that was really insensitive because she just lost her whole family in that plane crash. And she never even thought enough to realize that just because they're from the same country...there are different cultures. [Shaila] even told her, 'they're not going to talk to me. I can't help them.' And she couldn't understand that.

Colin: I kind of have to see Judith as the icon of white...that's how white people treat everybody. And that's as good as it gets. It gets a lot worse, but that's as *good* as it gets...and that's the way white Western people go somewhere to help out the 'savages' and when they want to be *nice* about it then that's how they treat them. If they *don't* want to be nice about it, it's something else.

They're very condescending, as though getting along for thousands of years must have just been a fluke. So, if that's the intent, then it was a fair representation, if Judith was that.

Colin's somewhat cautious suggestion that perhaps Judith symbolically functions as the personification of Canadian official multiculturalism echoes Mukherjee's (August 28, 1988) assertion that "Canada is a country officially hostile to the concept of assimilation...[it is] a comfortable but unwelcoming environment" (p. 1). In response to Judith, the official government representative, each participant in the study recognised, however cloaked by "niceness," the element of hypocrisy that Mukherjee clearly feels is an element of contemporary Canadian society.

### *The Journey's End*

At the end of "The Management of Grief" Shaila, after selling the suburban home where she lived with her family and taking a small apartment in Toronto, finds that she no longer experiences visions of her husband and sons as she sleeps and, she says, "I take it as a sign" (Mukherjee, 1988, p. 196). A sign of what, she does not reveal; however, the last lines of the story provide several possibilities for interpretation. Walking home from an errand, Shaila describes her final experience thus:

I looked up from the gravel, into the branches and the clear blue sky beyond. I thought I heard the rustling of larger forms, and I waited a moment for voices. Nothing.

'What?' I asked.

Then as I stood in the path looking north to Queen's Park and west to the university, I heard the voices of my family one last time. *Your time has come, they said. Go, be brave.*

I do not know where this voyage I have begun will end. I do not know which direction I will take. I dropped the package on the park bench and started walking. (p. 197)

Without exception, all of the students involved in the study appreciated the ending of the story and Kristine's response illustrates what her fellow participants expressed: "I liked the ending. The story's sad and it's a sad ending, but I think the ending relates to the rest of the story and the whole spiritual journey... I like stories that end with options"

All of the students, with one exception, saw the ending as optimistic. Raj, the only participant who seemed to feel that the ending was pessimistic, was quite certain that the package Shaila dropped on the park bench was a bomb. He explains his interpretation by saying "she was keeping her emotions bottled up inside and the end, pop, she just released it. That's how I think she showed her anger. She left the package on the bench and walked away." Raj's understanding of the end was unique, and even when I suggested the possibility of his interpretation to other students they could not reconcile it with their own understandings of how the story concludes.

The other nine participants felt that since the final words of the story tell us that Shaila "started walking" the ending must be optimistic. They saw the dropping of the package on the bench as an act of ridding herself of the "baggage" of the bombed airplane. By walking unencumbered, Shaila is moving forward and prepared to fulfil her family's legacy in a new land. Colin expresses most vividly and completely what many of the other students hinted at in their responses:

She may well have had a package or parcel or something, but I think it's like she's no longer Hindu, she's no longer East Indian, she's no longer Canadian, she's no longer anything. She's going to drop that on a bench, figuratively, and start walking. I think of that as kind of a nomadic kind of thing. She's not part of a country anymore. She just wants to go. Walking may also be symbolically like back to the Jewish Exodus and stuff. So I would see this as after all of this that's gone on, she's watched all of this misunderstanding go back and forth and you know and she's kind of been impartial, because she's watched these two [Judith and the Sikh couple] and she can see well, they're not communicating properly, they keep misunderstanding each other.

Here, Colin's interpretation focuses on what he considers to be one of the central issues in the story: how cultural differences can often interfere with interpersonal communication. He elaborates on this idea of the potentially oppressive weight of Shaila's cultural 'baggage' by saying,

I think she's sort of saying I'm going to get rid of all of this, I want to become a nobody...I no longer want to be Hindu or Canadian or Christian or whatever. And she's just going to go and see it all from an impartial viewpoint. And that's sort of maybe a message for what we all kind of need to do, to a lesser extent, if we can just say well, okay, I'm no longer anything, I'm going to put myself in their position and see how that goes. That's sort of what I think...kind of walking away from it, but not away from it forever.

Colin's discussion of how he sees the end of the story can be viewed in terms of intercultural relations. By suggesting that Shaila is attempting to rid herself of the political and cultural forces that construct elements of her individual identity, Colin relates to Mukherjee's view of what she sees "good fiction" as being able to do.

According to the author:

Good fiction concentrates on the emotional, intellectual and physical responses of a small cast of characters when they are thrust into a situation that is not routine for them. Politics and history, or rather political and historical events, provide the *context* for the characters'

varying reactions. And, by forcing the reader to live through the particular characters in their particularized situations, the author hopes that readers will make an epiphanic connection to the world of real politics and issues around them. (Chen & Goudie, 1997, paragraph 82)

Colin's perceptive articulation of the connections he makes between the story and the real world provides some fruition to Mukherjee's hope that the real and the imaginary will be bridged through her readers. Mukherjee asserts that she is her own ideal audience; however, she clarifies by explaining that as a writer "one is always divided between the person punching the keyboard, and the person reading the screen" (Hancock, 1987, p. 39). Even while recognizing that the act of writing, like reading, is a solitary activity, Mukherjee acknowledges her potential readers by revealing that "[t]o know that one's fiction has reached even one person is staggering; it's humbling. I believe in the word. The word creates or locates its own audience" (Hancock, 1987, p. 39).

### ***The Great Filing Cabinet of Literature***

I completed my interviewing of students with a somewhat whimsical question about where they would file "The Management of Grief" if they had a file cabinet organised according to geographic location. Would they file it under Canada or India? This issue emerged for me when I was literally attempting to find a way to file stories by country for Dr. Johnston's research study. My frustration with the difficulty of organizing literature geographically encouraged me to seek student input on this issue. Interestingly enough, the student responses to this question were clearly split along cultural lines.

All five of the students of Indian descent stated that they would file the story under Canada because, according to Meena, “the tone is like she’s from India but has lived here for a long time...it’s different from other Indian authors I’ve read [Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Seth].” Salim summarised the reasoning of the other students when he explained that the story begins and ends in Toronto and for him that makes the story Canadian.

Four of the five students of European background stated that they would file the story under India because, according to Alex, “the focus wasn’t on Canada” and, according to Mary, “it just didn’t seem like a Canadian story.” Colin, the lone Euro-Canadian student who would have filed the story under Canada, explained in terms similar to Salim’s – the setting of the story determined his choice, not the ethnicity of the author or the characters.

The issue of whether a story is Canadian or not emerges periodically in discussions around award-winning Canadian fiction written by immigrant writers. When Rohinton Mistry’s *Such a Long Journey* was nominated for the 1991 Governor General’s Award, for example, controversy arose when a Calgary-based critic suggested that the novel was not *really* Canadian because it was set in India and did not appear to have any connection to Canada, despite the fact that the only criterion for nomination is that the author be a Canadian citizen. Interestingly, this issue has never arisen around an author who is white, and the Governor General’s Award jury appears to have been unaffected by this critic’s views since Mistry’s novel did win the award in 1991.



## CHAPTER SIX

### Discussion and Conclusions

This study has explored the responses of ten Canadian students to Bharati Mukherjee's short story "The Management of Grief". The Indo-Canadian and Euro-Canadian students involved in the study were all raised in the same predominantly white, middle-class suburb of Edmonton, Alberta and each student responded to the story in complex and individual ways. While it might be possible to categorise these students' responses according to cultural background, other factors proved to be important as well and seemed to cut across cultural categories. In some instances issues of gender were especially relevant and, in other situations, individual students from each group responded contrary to my expectations. The complexity of the responses to the text rests largely in the fact that the students involved in this study were themselves complex individuals, as are all readers. The young men and women who volunteered to participate in this research were, without exception, intelligent, motivated and thoughtful high school students. During the interviews I was continually and pleasantly surprised by the insightful and unexpected directions in which they took our discussions.

One of my original research questions was whether readers who share a "cultural proximity" to a text read a literary work significantly differently than those who are more "culturally distant" from the same text (Larsen & Lásló, 1990, p. 428). To begin each interview I asked each student volunteer to discuss his or her general response to the story and their answers to this request provide some insight into

questions of proximity and distance. Here, responses were split on cultural lines: the Indo-Canadian students were personally and emotionally engaged by the cultural specificity of the story. Their responses focussed on the appreciation of their unaccustomed positioning as “insiders” to the culture of the story. In contrast, the Euro-Canadian students generally regarded the culturally specific details with a detached, “outsiders” curiosity, and most of these students began their initial commentary on the story by referring to elements they did not understand or about which they had questions.

Simi’s reaction is somewhat illustrative of the other students of Indian heritage. She says,

I don’t know if it was just me, but it was so weird for me to read this story because I think that I would have such a different opinion of this story than someone else. I think that someone from here who had lived here all their life that had no connection with Indian roots, no matter what culture they were, if they read this story, I don’t think it would hit them the way it hit me. Because I can relate to it. I’m like what if that was my family that was on that plane and nobody cared? Like, I can relate. Whereas someone from here would be like no, my family wouldn’t be going to India on an Air India flight.

Another student, Salim, revealed that he “liked how [he] could relate to stuff more...[he] knew what she was talking about, like the words she uses.” While all of the Indo-Canadian students suggested that they felt close to the text because of a variety of cultural resonances and partly due to Mukherjee’s use of Hindi words throughout, some did express reservations about the possibility that the story could be taken as “representative” of “the Indo-Canadian experience.” This troublesome prospect has been explored by Mukherjee herself, who states that:

We're very, very different kinds of Indians. Simply because of skin color and South Asian ancestry, the non-South Asian is likely to lump us together...as a writer, my job is to open up, to discover and say 'we are all individuals.' In fiction we are writing about individuals; none of them is meant to be a crude spokesperson for whole groups, whether those groups are based on gender or race or class. (Chen & Goudie, 1997, p. 12)

Interestingly, none of the Euro-Canadian students I interviewed raised this potential for seeing any of the characters as “a crude spokesperson” as an issue of concern. Their initial responses to the story were somewhat removed and intellectualised, in contrast to the more personal reactions of the Indo-Canadian students. For example, Alex responded that he thought the story “was more like an examination, in terms of exploring cultures, lifestyles, ways of thinking.” Mary, in an unconscious affirmation of Simi’s suggestion that a non-Indian reader might not relate to the “culture” surrounding an Air India flight, said: “I thought it was weird that there were so many connected people on the same flight.” With these revelations and their somewhat ‘anthropological’ initial approach to the story, it is appropriate to say that the “culturally distant” Euro-Canadian students did, in fact, read “The Management of Grief” significantly differently than their Indo-Canadian counterparts.

What, then, is the nature of this difference? As Larsen and László (1990) explain,

readers must construct for themselves an understanding of the imaginary world with which the text deals...however, [this explanation] seems insufficient to account for the fact that different readers, even with similar cultural background and present

circumstances, may react very differently to a given work – and that the same person may react differently at different times. (pp. 426-27)

In order to account for these individual and varied reading experiences, Larsen & László (1990) go on to suggest that,

To understand a text about a universe of discourse...highly specific to a certain culture and historical period, the reader has to call upon his or her knowledge and experiences with that kind of cultural and historical setting...[and] – *culturally proximate* readers – will thus be reminded of more concrete events, and in particular, of a larger proportion of personally experienced events than readers who are unfamiliar with the setting and events of the story (*culturally distant* readers). (p. 428)

These “reminders vary in their degree of personal relevance” and are related to the resonance a reader might feel while engaging with a text (Larsen & László, 1990, p. 428). These notions of proximity and distance did seem to be at work for the participants in my study. When asked whether there were aspects of the story they found difficult to identify with, all of the Euro-Canadian students referred to the tension Shaila, a Hindu, experiences at the end of the story when she visits the Sikh couple with Judith Templeton. These students were aware that they were missing details about the interaction between the characters, but they were unable to construct a satisfactory explanation from the contextual information embedded within the text. None of these students was aware of the religious conflicts that plagued India in the 1980s and that made their way to Canada via Air India Flight 182. The responses of the Euro-Canadian students to this question suggests that their historical and cultural distance from the event being described denied them access to any possible

“reminders” to help them construct a personally relevant response to this aspect of the story.

In contrast, none of the Indo-Canadian students in the study mentioned this religious conflict as an obstacle to their understanding of the story. This lack of notice suggests that perhaps, regardless of their current cultural reality, these “culturally proximate” readers were able to call upon a variety of “reminded events” in constructing their responses to this aspect of the text. Larsen and Lásló (1990) state that “two categories of reminded events can be distinguished, representing very different degrees of personal relevance (*cf.* Larsen, 1988): (1) Events experienced personally by the individual; (2) events reported to the individual by others” (p. 428). Given that all of the Indo-Canadian students involved in this study were raised in the same suburban community and that none of them revealed any instances of inter-faith conflict, it is possible that the varying “degrees of personal relevance” they experienced when they read “The Management of Grief” came about as a result of “reminded events” they had experienced through others in the community.

None of the Indo-Canadian participants offered any details from the story that they found difficult to identify with, except that Salim “thought it was weird that [Shaila] took Valium. Indian people don’t usually take medications like that.” This somewhat offhand comment about “medications like that” did provide some insight, however, into the effect on readers of cultural information embedded within a text. Salim’s cultural proximity to the text allowed him to voice his perceptions on a particular cultural view regarding mental health and his insight into the actual success

of Shaila's 'grief management'. With his observation, Salim revealed that, indeed, Shaila was not managing her grief very effectively by Indian standards. This question of the impact of taken-for-granted cultural information embedded within a text was especially appropriate for gaining an understanding of the Indo-Canadian students' responses. It also supported the notion that while the Euro-Canadian students did miss the subtlety of several of the nuances of the story, they were nevertheless able to engage in a "good enough" (Mackey, 1996, p. 91) reading of the text.

When I asked what they thought about Mukherjee's use of Hindi words throughout the story, the Indo-Canadian students revealed that they felt that their readings were enriched by the fact that they could understand the other language of the text. The Euro-Canadian students, however, did not appear to feel especially "dislocated" by this same language use. They all explained that they were able to figure out that the Hindi words Mukherjee used related to food, music or religion, and they were satisfied with that knowledge. The notion of a "good enough" reading of a culturally distant text is significant for teachers who teach literature from other cultures; in the encounter with difference there is a space to honour the diverse readings of a text offered by our students and to recognize that the culturally proximate reader does not provide a "definitive" understanding of a work.

Dasenbrock (1992) reminds us that "[t]he informed position is not always the position of the richest or most powerful experience of a work of art" (p. 39).

Thus far, my discussion of cultural proximity and distance to a text has implied that those readers who are culturally "closer" to a text will experience a richer

reading than will those who are more distant. For example, the Indo-Canadian readers of “The Management of Grief” were able to identify with many of the various cultural and linguistic references embedded within the story, while the Euro-Canadian students were not. However, perhaps Meena’s and Simi’s readings reveal how proximity to a text might act as a kind of obstacle to a reader’s engagement with the story. These two girls appeared to read with a double consciousness: on the one hand, they appreciated the story for its links with parts of their identities not regularly affirmed by the mainstream culture; on the other hand, their proximity to the culture of the story caused them to read with a heightened awareness of how this culture was presented in the text. They were concerned with stereotyping and the perceptions of India by “other” readers and this may have, in some ways, distanced them from the text. In contrast, the Euro-Canadian students, with their distance from the story, were able to read less “sensitively”. By being removed from the culture on display, these students were able to be observers and to ask questions that would clarify their understandings of the story. This shifting of what it means to be the “Other” reader provided the Euro-Canadian students with new perspectives on commonly held conceptions of centre and periphery. As members of the cultural mainstream in Canada, most of these Euro-Canadian students had rarely read literature from cultural heritages outside of their own.

When asked about which aspects of the text they found most compelling, all of the participants in this study revealed that they were most affected by interactions between characters and the varying ways in which they dealt with their grief.

Regardless of their cultural background, the participants in this study were most deeply affected by Pam, Shaila and Dr. Ranganathan. Judith Templeton also evoked strong responses from each of the readers, regardless of whether they viewed her with sympathy or scorn.

The students were also empathetic to the scope of the tragedy and the possibility of losing one's entire family in one catastrophic event. All of the students empathised with Shaila's grief and almost all of the students saw the conclusion of the story as optimistic and they were pleased rather than frustrated by the indeterminate ending of the story. They liked the possibility of multiple interpretations and two of the students asked whether all of the participants could meet and engage in a group discussion of the story. These young women were quite certain that the story would generate a great deal of discussion and debate around questions of culture and they were most interested in hearing what others had to say about the end of the story. Unfortunately, this was difficult to coordinate among students of two different high schools and we were not able to have such a group discussion.

A number of more individual and even less generalisable revelations occurred during the interview process. One such moment happened when I asked Salim, one of the Indo-Canadian students, whether there were details in the story with which he particularly identified. He replied, "Yeah, the Stanley Cup. When we get together in my family we all watch hockey." Such moments serve as a reminder of the unexpected and often unarticulated interactions between culture and text for



individual readers. I was also reminded that discussions of specific reading experiences often reveal only a fraction of what is happening in those moments of engagement between the reader and the text and then between the reader and the researcher.

For teachers such as me, who choose to introduce literature that may be more culturally proximate to some students than to others, these study findings serve to remind us that while cultural proximity does make a significant difference in how students negotiate their way through a text, their reading will remain individual and particular. This study also reinforces the value of introducing diverse texts not only to students who might be culturally proximate to the literature they study, but also to students who, in Dasenbrock's terms might be "uninformed readers" of multicultural literature. In a similar vein, I was reminded that while we might choose to teach "ethnic writing" in our classes, there may not be such a thing as "ethnic reading".

How authors and readers create meaning is necessarily different from one another. Authors create a text by distilling their influences and choices in order to construct the works they have conceived. Readers, however, approach a text with of their experiences, influences and "reminders," all of which include, but are not limited to, cultural background. To assume that an individual reader will respond to a particular text based solely on his or her ethnicity is to limit the reading experience. An author who chooses to write "ethnically" does so largely by craft; for a reader to do the same is quite a different matter. Readers will engage with any number and combination of elements in a text and these connections are unpredictable. The

cultural markers chosen by an author are accepted as significant or glossed over as mere detail according to who we are and the “reminders” we bring to the text.

Literature teachers in North America have more opportunities for cross-cultural teaching than have existed in the past: new literatures in English and in translation, combined with the increasing ethnic diversity of schools, provide spaces for the interrogation of identity and its constructedness. Through literature, students, regardless of their positioning in relation to the cultural mainstream, can be encouraged to investigate many of the taken-for-granted assumptions about culture and ethnicity that accompany current notions of Western multiculturalism.

The value of multicultural literature for creating a sense of inclusiveness for minority students is clear; however, the presence of the Other in literature, as well as in real life, provides students who are part of the cultural mainstream with opportunities to negotiate through their own understandings of culture and identity. My study reinforces the value for students of culturally proximate reading, especially for those students who are unaccustomed to seeing their experiences reflected in school literature. This study also emphasizes the potential richness of a reading that repositions as Other, students who are accustomed to seeing themselves reflected in the cultural mainstream. These students, when they leave the confines and security of home, will find themselves in sites of negotiation and interrogation and perhaps their exposure to literature from other cultures can “transform [their] sense of what it means to live, to be, in other times and different spaces...” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 256).

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Interview guide**

**After you have read the story “The Management of Grief” please consider the following questions and think about which of these questions are most important to you and your understanding of the story. Also, feel free to add any other questions you think are important.**

- What does this story mean?
- What is this story about?
- Where and when does this story take place?
- What does this story tell you about the author and his/her feelings and beliefs?
- What does this story tell you about the cultures presented and why the characters are the way they are?
- Is this story representative of a particular culture?
- How can we explain the way people behave in this story?
- What is your personal response to this story?
- Are there any aspects of this story that could take place where you live? Which aspects?
- Does this story remind you of any other stories/novels/films? Which ones? In what ways?
- Does the author use words and phrases differently from most writers you know?
- Is this an appropriate subject for a short story?
- Is it a good story?
- Does this story teach any lessons about human life and society?
- Which aspects of the story were you able to identify with?
- Which aspects of the story were difficult for you to identify with?
- What details or information could the author have added in order to ease your understanding of the story?
- What does the ending of the story mean to you?

**APPENDIX B**  
**Cover letters to participants**

September, 1999

Dear Parent or Guardian:

I am writing to ask your permission to interview your son/daughter/ward about their responses to a piece of literature. This story, "The Management of Grief" by Bharati Mukherjee, conforms to the mandate of the Alberta program of studies and has been chosen to reflect the increasingly multicultural perspectives of Canada's population. I am interested in hearing students' responses to this text. This is not a test and there are no right or wrong responses. Students' answers (or their refusal to answer) will not affect their class mark in any way.

This study has been approved by the school administration and by the school board. If you and your son/daughter/ward agree to this audiotaped interview, the student will be asked his or her opinion about the story but will not be required to offer any personal information. Interviews will likely be approximately two hours long. All those who participate in the study will be given a pseudonym (or false name) and their real name will not be used at any time. They will have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time without affecting their school mark in any way.

I hope that you and your son/daughter/ward will agree to take part. The opinions of students about multicultural literature are very important to me and to other teachers and administrators.

If you agree, would both the student and the parent or guardian please sign and return the attached sheet as soon as possible. Your son/daughter/ward will not become involved in this research until a consent form is returned.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at the school.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Jyoti Mangat

### Sample Letter to Students

September, 1999

Dear Student,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research project in which we explore your responses to a short story called "The Management of Grief". These responses are extra to the assignments and course work that will be expected of you as part of your regular English course.

If you agree to participate in this research, I will be asking you about your personal opinions of the selected story. There is no such thing as a right or wrong answer to any of these questions; I am simply interested in your opinions. Your answers (or your refusal to answer) will not affect your class mark in any way.

If you agree to take part in the study, you will be given a pseudonym (or false name), and your real name will not be used at any time. You will have the right to refuse to answer any questions. You will also have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without affecting your school marks in any way. The interview will be audiotaped and be approximately two hours long.

I hope you will agree to take part. Your opinions about the story are important to me and to other teachers.

If you agree, would you and your parent or guardian please sign and return the attached sheet as soon as possible.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Jyoti Mangat



**Sample Consent Form**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, the parent/guardian of  
\_\_\_\_\_ consent to the participation of my  
son/daughter/ward in research concerning literature related to his/her English class. I  
realize that he/she may refuse to answer any particular questions and may withdraw  
from the research at any time. I also realize that his/her name will never be used and  
that the research will have no impact on class marks.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent or Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the research  
concerning the short story "The Management of Grief". I realize that I may refuse to  
answer any particular question and may withdraw from the study at any time. I also  
realize that my real name will never be used and that this research will have no impact  
on class marks.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent or Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date