

Chapter 17

Building Bridges Across Canadian and Indian History: Interrogating the ‘Twin Disasters’ of Indo-Canadian Migration Through Literature and non-Fiction Representations



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The category “Canadian” clearly applied to people who had two things in common: their white skin and their European North American (not Mexican) background. There were two colours in this political atlas- onea beige-brown shading off into black and the other white. These shades did not simply reflect skin colours- they reflected the ideological, political and cultural assumptions and administrative practices of the Canadian Stat...A “Canada” constructed on this basis contains certain notions of nation, state formation and economy. Europeanness as “whiteness” thus translates into “Canada” and provides it with its “imagined community”. (Bannerji 2000, p. 64)

The words of Professor Himani Bannerji, as articulated in *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender* (2000), throws light on the stance that the Euro-Canadian society has maintained not only towards the immigrant population who do not partake of the privilege of ‘whiteness’ but also the indigenous communities of Canada, from the years of Confederation to the present age of multiculturalism. Such ‘assumptions’ about certain racial and ethnic groups on the basis of their ‘visible minority’ status form the basis of racism as Peter S. Li states in *Race and Ethnic Relations in Canada* (1990). This stance is no doubt responsible for shaping the official discourse of history in Canada as a singular monolithic entity that harps only upon the history of the ‘founding nations’ (the English and the French) without taking cognition of the multiple histories that inform the lives of its racially and ethnically diverse population. Some of the most significant chapters of such deliberately excluded, even repressed, histories are those that encapsulate the pain of colonial battering—the appropriation of hunting-fishing-gathering rights, loss of land and language, cultural genocide and the ban on traditional ritualistic practices—that has been an integral part of the existence of the Inuit, Metis and the First Nations People of Canada for the last five hundred years. Other such neglected strands of

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histories are largely concerned with the issues of migration, identity, belongingness and citizenship of Canada's diasporic community of non-European origin. From being the victims of the racially selective exclusivist immigration policies of the government of Canada to being discriminated against by the mainstream 'white' population once they have been granted entry to the 'Land of promise', their lives have often been informed by transnational and transcultural events that have exceeded geopolitical boundaries to have far-reaching effects on both their 'homeland' and the 'new country'.

This paper would highlight two such chapters in the history of Indo-Canadian migration—the KomagataMaru Incident of 1914 and the Air India Disaster of 1985 which the so-called neoliberal, non-racist, multicultural Canada would like to push under the carpet, in the light of certain works of fiction and non-fiction that not only strive to build bridges across Canadian and Indian history but also address and thereby interrogate the racial exclusions that have long been an integral part of the nation-building process of Canada. These works include two non-fiction research-based representations of each of the 'twin disasters' of Indo-Canadian migration: one is the award-winning documentary film *Continuous Journey* (2004) by the Indo-Canadian filmmaker, writer and a professor of Film Production (in York University) Ali Kazimi (b. 1961–) while the other is project entitled *The Sorrows and the Terror The haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy* (1987) undertaken by Bharati Mukherjee (b. 1940–), an American writer of Indian origin (formerly a member of the Indo-Canadian diaspora) and a professor of English in the University of California, Berkley, and her husband, the English-Canadian writer Clark Blaise (b. 1940–). The paper would further look into a literary representation of the two incidents as found in Indo-Canadian writer Anita Rau Badami's (b. 1960–) novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006). How do these works explore the intricacies and implications of events that remain largely unexplored within the mainstream academic and administrative paradigm, in their own unique ways? How has the representation of these incidents been shaped by the different mediums of expression that inform the three texts? These are some of the issues that the paper strives to address.

17.1 The KomagataMaru Incident: Immigration and Exclusion

The KomagataMaru was described as an incident, but it was not incidental to the immigration policy of that time. It was part of a continuum of creating Canada as a white settler state. The notion of 'white' Canada was repeated over and over again in public discourse. It was in the handset records, parliamentary debates. It was clearly enunciated in all the immigration documents. It [Canada] has had a policy of creating a European settler state.... It is only after we get over this denial that real conversation can start. (Simon Fraser University 2012).

It is this 'denial' on the part of the Euro-Canadian society that Ali Kazimi refers to in his interview entitled *KomagataMaru: Continuing the Journey—York Professor and filmmaker Ali Kazimi* which rendered the making of a film like *Continuous*

Journey relevant and even necessary nine decades after the KomagataMaru incident actually took place. Since the late nineteenth century, the aspiration to build Canada as a ‘white-man’s country’, the concern for maintaining racial homogeneity harboured by Anglo and French Canadian nationalists, churches and social service providers and the fear of appropriation of job opportunities of the ‘white’ workforce, led to the introduction of the racially discriminatory regulations, into Canada’s immigration policy towards the aspiring ‘non-white’ immigrants. 1905 onwards British Columbia saw a steady influx of immigrants from India, mostly Punjab, who had been recruited to work in the steamship companies and other industrial projects therein. It is with a ship full of such aspiring immigrants from Punjab, a north-western province of India—340 Sikhs, 24 Muslims and 12 Hindus—that the Singapore-based Sikh entrepreneur Gurdit Singh arrived at the Burrard Inlet on 23 May 1914 only to be deemed unsuitable to enter Vancouver for not abiding by the Continuous Journey Regulation (1908) and not fulfilling the ‘Landing money requirements’ expected of ‘East Indians’. It is this systemic and systematic racism on the part of the government, the court of law, the immigration officials, port authorities and even the erstwhile mass media that Kazimi brings to the forefront through a digital enhancement of vintage photos, archival footages and newspaper reports and also through the interviews of historians and the descendents of the victims. He frames the entire film by his own voice-over, harping upon his subjective position of an immigrant who has been born and brought up in India, and who feels strongly connected to both the nations. Kazimi’s preoccupation with the KomagataMaru Incident and his emotional attachment to the project at hand lends the film a tone of intimacy that prevents it being reduced to a mere presentation of the facts and the evidences that prove their authenticity. In the very first frame, as the camera focuses on the Pacific waters of the Vancouver harbour, the filmmaker confides to the audience how his personal struggle to carve a niche in Canada as an immigrant from India helps him identify with those aboard that doomed ship, thereby striking a perfect balance between the objective and the subjective:

As an immigrant from Canada to India, I find myself fascinated by the story. Maybe because in this harbour the history of Canada and India directly collide, maybe because few know that people like me have been shut out for decades, maybe because the story helps explain why Canada looks the way it does and maybe because I am trying to understand how I fit in (*Continuous journey* 2004)

Kazimi delves deep into the probable causes that intensified the already existing Euro-Canadian hatred towards the potential ‘East Indian’ immigrants: when Vancouver emerged as one of the major centres for the consolidation of what has been known as the Sikh-Gadar movement (1907–18), often hailed as ‘the first declared India freedom war fought by majority international Sikhs’ (Mann 2013 p. 1), the (majorly) British colony of Canada felt a greater need to exclude them from the nation-building process of the country. Kazimi highlights in his film how an ideal opportunity to carry out this act of exclusion came in the form of a report on Oriental labour by Mackenzie King in 1908 which harped upon the inability of the ‘East Indians’ to adjust to the Canadian climate (Canada Department of Labour 1908, p.7),

thereby paving the way for a hike in the landing money requirements of the 'East Indians' from \$50 to \$200 while it remained just \$25 for the immigrants of European origin. The nomenclature of the film is a deliberate, conscious and sarcastic attack on the infamous Continuous Journey Regulation (1908) which gave the Minister of Interior, Frank Oliver, the authority to prohibit the entry of East Indians 'unless they came to Canada from the country of their birth or citizenship by a continuous journey on through tickets purchased before leaving the country' (Kelley and Trebilcock 1998, p. 148), a regulation which was rendered more rigid by a later amendment in the requirement of a continuous journey from the country of origin of the potential immigrants. The regulation appeared to be fair and unbiased except for the order issued by the government to Canadian Pacific Railways (CPR), the only shipping company to offer direct passage from Canada to India, not to sell any tickets to Canada from its Indian outlets. The fact that the apparent legislative equality was nothing but eyewash is further enunciated by Kazimi by drawing the audience's attention to the instructions issued by Frank Oliver to his officers:

Please bear in mind that the newly issued order-in-council regarding the clause of 'continuous journey' is absolutely prohibitive in its terms but that it is only intended to enforce it strictly against the really undesirable immigrants. You will understand therefore that a great deal is left to your discretion with regards to the application of this particular order (Mehta 1973, p. 140)

The fact that the passengers of the Japanese steamer that had travelled to Canada from India via Hong Kong were forced to stay cooped up inside the ship and left to starve just outside the Vancouver harbour for two whole months summed up 'white' Canada's approach towards the number of veterans of the British Indian Army aboard the ship. In the words of Sharon Pollock as found in her play *The Komagataru Incident* (1978): 'We don't mind them dying for us, we just don't want them living with us' (p. 10). This stance was articulated in the mainstream media reports as well, clippings from which find place in Kazimi's film. *Vancouver Sun* one of the leading dailies goes to the extent of describing the passengers on board as the 'Hindoo invaders' in its report on the arrival of the KomagataMaru (dated June 23, 1914), thereby associating the value-loaded term 'invasion' with the simple act of immigration. In order to highlight the dichotomy of the situation, such reports have been consciously and deliberately juxtaposed with snippets from letters written by members of the KomagataMaru passenger committee to the Editor, Daily New Advertiser, Vancouver where they spoke about the misery of being held 'prisoners' inside the ship. The film posits Gurdit Singh as a hero, who champions the cause of his countrymen to the best of his abilities, by showcasing excerpts from letters written by him to the minister of Interior with a request to allow him to disembark and sell the coal the steamer was carrying in order to meet the landing money requirements of the passengers or to allow him to present himself in the court of law to defend the cause of the aspiring immigrants onboard, but in vain.

Kazimi uses the montage technique to present rare photographs of the eminent members of the Punjabi community, who irrespective of their religious affiliation assembled in a gurdwara to find out ways to help their compatriots. He delves into the

archival papers to bring out the petitions filed in the court in favour of the passengers by the lawyer Edward Bird, who had been appointed by these men. An interview with his grandson Richard Bird reveals the harsh criticism and ostracism that the lawyer had to face from the members of his own community for helping the ‘Hindoos’ (Kiefer 2012). As Justice McPhilip’s dismisses the pleas of the ‘people of non-assimilative races’ (Kelley and Trebilcock 1998, p. 150), the passengers lose all hope. Kazimi incorporates the archival footage of the incident that acted as a final nail in the coffin for KomagataMaru—that of the warship HMCS Rainbow gearing up for mid-sea confrontation with KomagataMaru by the orders of Prime Minister Robert Borden—which finally forced the ship to set sail for India. The conversational and self-reflexive tone of the voice-over backed up by thorough research and interesting filmmaking techniques, especially the montage of photographs and letters, helps unfold an incident which had been at the verge of disappearing from the larger Canadian consciousness. The image that remains with the audience is that of the proud Gurdit Singh standing dignified and determined (along with his son) even as the outline of the ship looms large in the background. The bewildered passengers stand huddled on the deck.

In the interview conducted by Fanny Kiefer in 2012 on Kazimi’s book *Undesirables: KomagataMaru and White Canada* (2012), Kazimi harps upon the necessity to take cognition of the ‘Indian chapter’ of the KomagataMaru incident, one that hardly finds a place in his film except in an interview of the nephew (himself a Canadian citizen) of one of the potential immigrants on board. At Budge harbour, many of the physically and mentally weakened passengers perished when the British Indian Police, who fearing them to be rebellious, opened fire on them. Those who survived were scarred for life. It is with a peek into the psychological trauma of such a survivor that the Anita Rau Badami begins her novel *Can you hear the Nightbird Call?* In an attempt to fictionalize a real historical event, the author uses retrospection as a narrative strategy. Snippets of the tragedy that befell Harjot Singh and his fellow passengers are offered to his infant daughter Sharanjeet through his reminiscences. More than what is said, all that is left unsaid evokes the horror of the child and reader alike; the plight of the man speaks more than a words:

He rarely spoke, never left the house and always looked lost as if there was something that he had forgotten and he could only lie helplessly in the cot, staring off into the distance until it came back to him... In his mind his was continents away in a green and blue city called Vancouver, which he had once seen from the deck of a ship- a place that had turned him away from its shores as if he were a pariah dog (Badami 2006, p. 10).

The depression finally culminates in him leaving his home one fine morning, never to return. His deep unfulfilled longing for Canada sets the foundation of the novel in which many of the major characters, including two of the protagonists, Bibiji and Leela, immigrate to Canada and try to curve their own diasporic identity therein. For a woman born and brought up in India who has spent much of her adult life in Canada, this novel emerges as an attempt to highlight ‘this baggage of history’ that has become an integral part of the Indo-Canadian diasporic identity. The very structure of the novel, which connects the KomagataMaru incident and the Air India disaster through

the lives of its major characters, is a conscious and deliberate attempt at foregrounding the state of perpetual non-belongingness of the immigrants/potential immigrants from India who aspire to make Canada their 'home'. Even after Canada officially became a multicultural nation in 1971, the government refrained from acknowledging the injustices done to the passengers of KomagataMaru till August 2008 when the erstwhile Prime Minister Stephen Harper offered an apology in the Gadri Babian de Mela event in British Columbia and announced that the National Historic and the Community Historic programs would take initiatives to commemorate the incident and make the future generations aware of it. Present Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has finally come forward to offer an official apology on behalf of the Government of Canada for their role in the incident, in the House of Commons on 18 May 2016—an event that truly promises to be one of historical significance in Canada.

17.2 The Air India Disaster: Transnational Histories and the Politics of Identity

Politically the tragedy (Air India disaster of 1985) was “unhoused,” in that Canada wished to see it as an Indian event sadly visited on these shores by uncontrollable fanatics, and India was happy to treat it as an “overseas incident” with containable financial implications... Like India, Canada does not welcome the scrutiny of its communal difficulties. Both Canada (“the peaceable kingdom”) and India (“the world’s largest democracy”) pride themselves on their images in the world. (Blaise and Mukherjee 1987, pp. IX–X).

The fact that both Canada and India tried to shrug off their responsibilities in the context of an incident in which a bomb planted by a Sikh separatist group of Khalistanis operating from Vancouver caused Air India Flight 182 *Kanishka*, which was flying from Toronto and Montreal to New Delhi, to crash into the Atlantic Ocean (110 km off the coast of Ireland) claiming the lives of 327 passengers and crew on board most of whom were Canadian citizens, not only exposed the fissures within their respective multicultural and democratic societies, but also condemned the victims of the disaster and their bereaved relatives to a state of non-belongingness which was disturbing and at the same time traumatizing for them. According to the government of India, the phenomena of both the facilitators and the (majority of) victims of the disaster being Canadian passport holders diluted their claim to have been effected by the ‘Indian affairs’. On the other hand, the fact that they were Canadians of Indian origin somehow made them less ‘Canadian’ in the eyes of the mainstream Euro-Canadian society. Therefore, while Bharati Mukherjee and her better half Clark Blaise try to understand and analyse this tragedy in the light of the imbrications of Canadian and Indian history in their work *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy*, they also take cognition of the fact that though Canada has come a long way from the KomagataMaru Incident of 1914, ‘the continued exclusion of immigrant citizens from full participation in the Canadian sense of justice suggests that multiculturalism in Canada is still an incomplete project’ (Gustar 2016, p. 112). Mukherjee, whose day-to-day experiences of racial discrimination during

her decade-long stay in Canada result in her disillusionment with Canada's multicultural policy, calls for a critical examination of the same referring to it as nothing but 'the corner stone of Canada's eternally agonized self-definition' (p. X). Badami's novel *Can You the Nightbird Call?*, on the other hand, chooses to interrogate the causes and consequences of the disaster through the intertwined narratives of the three protagonists whose lives testify to the fact that 'the effects of historical events cannot be geopolitically contained' (Gustar 2016, p. 105). While trying to go deep into the probable cause(s) of the mid-air bomb blast in Air India Flight 182, eighteen months after the tragedy takes place, Blaise and Mukherjee study the government documents, transcripts and back-files of newspaper and attend trials to find much of its roots in the colonial history of India, more specifically in the largely unfulfilled desire of the Sikh community for an independent nation in the form of Khalistan. The plantation of the bomb was a part of a process of 'ongoing, self generating, self justifying vengeance' (Blaise and Mukherjee 1987, p. XIX) which began with the Operation Blue Star of June 1984 that claimed the lives of not only the extremist separatist group of Khalistanis who had taken shelter in the Golden temple in Amritsar but also that of many innocent pilgrims. The relationship between the Sikhs and Hindus in India deteriorated for the worse when Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards on 31 October of the same year and the moderate Sikhs had to bear the brunt of the actions of the extremist in the ensuing riots. The Air India disaster was planned by the Khalistanis operating from Vancouver under the leadership of Talvinder Singh Parmar as a counter-revenge on the government by inflicting severe losses (financial and otherwise) on one of the major Indian government installations (Air India) functioning in Canada. The point was to send out a strong message on the month of the one-year anniversary of 'Operation Blue Star' that the Khalistanis could go to any extent to preserve their *izzat* (honour) and fulfil their dream of an independent land for the Sikhs.

Badami interrogates the causalities of this string of violent incidents through the lives of the protagonist, Bibiji, Leela and Nimmo, as their day-to-day existence and even their basic sense of identity undergoes a transformation in the tumultuous circumstances. The shifting chronotope takes the readers across continents and often back and forth in time, thereby exploring how certain apparently India centric phenomena had affected Canada in more ways than one. Though a primarily third-person narrative, the three sections of the novel named after the three women strives to look at the series of events from their (geopolitically, socially and ideologically differential) perspectives. While Bibiji, a Canadian citizen of Indian origin, loses her husband Pa-ji—a moderate Sikh who does not endorse the cause of Khalistan in any way—in Operation Blue Star, the family of her niece Nimmo, who resides in India, falls victim to the anti-Sikh sentiments brewing in the country post the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi. The character of Dr. Randhawa who comes to Vancouver to encourage young impressionable men like Jasbeer, the eldest son of Nimmo and the foster child of Bibiji and Pa-ji, to engage in a blood for blood revenge through his passionate speeches, represents the basic principles of the separatist Khalistani movement:

Lately it seemed to Pa-ji that there were far more immoderate than moderate people in this community. These days whenever he opened his mouth to object to the politics of power and violence that seemed to be taking over their temple, he was angrily shouted down. At the temple, a visiting preacher from India had delivered a fiery speech about an independent Sikh state. He had ended his speech by passing around a box for funds to set up this state. When the box came to him, Pa-ji had shaken his head.... "What I am not wishing to do is to interfere in the business of another country. I am Canadian, why should I pay for more partition of India?" (Badami 1987, p. 182)

Not only had the invasion of Golden Temple begun to wedge a gulf between the moderate and extremist Sikhs settled in Canada, but also had created a Hindu-Sikh divide within the Indo-Canadian diaspora which would reach new heights with the Air India disaster. Jasbeer plays an active role in bringing about the tragedy in which one of the closest friends of his foster mother, Leela, loses her life. Though Bibiji gets a prior indication about the catastrophe, she does not bother to intimate her Hindu friend, who once she had truly cared for. It is interesting to note that the Air India disaster happened way before Badami had emigrated to Canada and when as she herself admits in her interview with *Canadian Living*: 'Canada wasn't even a part of my imaginative world' (2006, p. 1) while she was residing in India. The only way it had affected her was that one of her neighbours had been a passenger in the plane and had lost his life therein. In fact, it was the Hindu-Sikh riots in North India following Mrs. Gandhi's assassinations that had touched her more deeply because of her first-hand experience of it on her way back to Chennai from her honeymoon via Delhi. It is only after she moved base to Vancouver in 1991 that she was able to identify how the repercussions of certain historical incidents move beyond the boundaries of nation and nationalities in the light of the deteriorated relationship between the Hindus and the Sikhs in Canada:

I started thinking about how immigrants of all stripes manage to carry this baggage of history, of loss, of anger along with them, even while they are trying to leave behind that place where all this history occurredHow long do we carry this attachment to that other place? How long does this history stay with an immigrant, before that immigrant starts to learn that, okay, I no longer belong to that place, I belong to this place. (Canadian Living, p. 2)

But while Badami's novel ends with individual narratives of the three women culminating and coming together in the Air Indian Disaster, Blaise and Mukherjee continue to explore its aftermath by meeting the bereaved families and chronicling the experience of these encounters in their research-based project. Certain lesser known (and hardly acknowledged) causes of the tragedy get revealed too. As they delve deep into how the baggage containing the explosives made its way into the doomed flight, they uncover the fact that though violence unleashed upon the passengers aboard *Kanishka* on 23 June 1985 at 3.14 am EDT (and also on the two baggage handlers at Narita Airport, Tokyo fifty-five minutes before it) was closely connected with the contemporary sociopolitical and religious turmoil in India, Canada too had its share of responsibilities in the disaster, which it is yet to come in terms with, for the terrorist attack had been planned on the Canadian soil. In spite of having certain information about the incident, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) chose not to take it seriously. In spite of the Indian High Commission's request to

the Royal Canada Mounted Police (RMCP) and Transport Canada to provide the Air India flights leaving from Canada to India with extra security during June 1985, lapses in the process of security checking in Toronto and Montreal airports were responsible for the tragedy to a great extent. But the biggest shortcoming perhaps lies in the way in which 'white' Canada dealt with the aftermath of the Air India disaster. The fact that Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney expressed his deep condolences to the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in the morning of 23 June 1985 for the loss of lives of the passengers, 280 of whom were Canadian citizens, invites an interrogation of Canada's multicultural policy that reinforces differences in the garb of fostering and endorsing ethnic diversity. Moreover, the mainstream society branded all Sikhs residing in Canada as 'terrorists' without taking cognition of the fact that the violence had been facilitated by only a certain section of the Sikh community, the Khalistanis. Perceiving the entire incident as 'their' tragedy instead of 'our' tragedy, the government of Canada and even the Canadian embassy in Ireland continued to treat the shattered and bewildered relatives of the victims with aloofness as is revealed through their interviews. They felt abandoned by their country in such a time of crisis:

The press followed the relatives to the hospital. How well have Canadian officials handled this tragedy? On camera, one or two men blew up at what they perceived as consular callousness or white-Canadian coldness. "Where are those bastards?", one relative demanded. "Are they sitting tight in cozy chairs?"...The Canadian High Commission, some said, had not only refused them (the relatives from India) visas but had behaved badly, had treated them with unnecessary rudeness. They said that the Canadian visa officers had acted suspicious, as if these were not families rallying in time of monumental tragedy, but just one more immigration scam to sneak into Canada (Blaise and Mukherjee 1987, pp. 74–75)

These interviews elevate the work from a mere analysis of facts, figures, dates and causalities as the couple allow the readers a peek into the personal history of some of the victims and the families torn apart by the disaster. While the sudden and violent end to the dreams and aspirations of the dancing prodigy Lita Sarangi or the newly wed Vijaya Thampi throws light upon the pathos of the entire situation, the grievances of Rakesh Bedi, who had lost his whole family in the tragedy, highlight how the racial biases lurking within 'white' Canadian consciousness prevented the Euro-Canadian officials from providing the right human touch that the situation demanded. The business-like attitude with which the Canadian officials offered monetary compensations or urged the relatives to go through sessions of counselling paled in comparison with the sensitivity displayed by Gardai Siochana (Irish Police) and the members of the Regional Cork University of Ireland. Mukherjee later narrativises this situation beautifully in one of her short stories entitled 'The Management of Grief' (2008) through the conversation between one such unfortunate 'relative' Mrs. Bhavne and Judith Templeton who emerges as the perfect example of this alleged insensitivity of the government on this issue:

"In the textbooks on grief management", she replies "there are stages to pass through: rejection, depression, acceptance, reconstruction." She has compiled a chart and finds that six months after the tragedy, none of us still reject reality, but only a handful are reconstructing...How do I tell Judith Templeton that my family surrounds me, and like creatures in

epics, they have changed shapes? She sees me as calm and accepting but worries that I do not have a job or career. My closest friends are worse off than I. I cannot tell her my days, even my nights, are thrilling. (Mukherjee 2008, p. 170)

It is ironical that these lapses identified by the scholar couple as early as 1986 were finally 'discovered' and acknowledged in the report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Investigation of the Bombing of Air India Flight 182 called *Air India Flight: A Canadian Tragedy*, twenty-five years after the incident. It is in this report that the commissioner Justice John Major accords the incident the status of a national tragedy: 'I stress that this is a Canadian Atrocity' Major said in releasing his report, 'For too long the greatest loss of Canadian lives at the hands of terrorists has somehow been relegated outside the Canadian consciousness' (Smith 2010). Canada's differential treatment of its immigrant population who belong to the 'visible minority' status has indeed surfaced in the long drawn court case which has largely failed to provide justice to the victims and their relatives even after a lapse of 31 years since the Air India disaster. Till date, Inderjit Singh Reyat, the auto electrician from Duncan who had made the explosives, whom Blaise and Mukherjee had identified as one of the chief suspects, remains the lone convicted criminal in this trial (Dhillon, 13 March 2014). His perjury has allowed his accomplices to walk free. The words of Justice Mary Saunders, who dismissed Reyat's appeal against the charges of perjury in January 2016, opened up fresh debates over the sincerity and integrity of Canada's judicial system in dealing with a tragedy which primarily concerned her immigrants of non-European origin:

Mr. Reyat's false testimony, by which he hid the extent of his knowledge of the conspiracy alleged in the (Ripudaman Singh) Malik/ (Ajaib Singh) Bagri trial concerning this most serious mass murder, is a stain on the Canadian trial process, leaving the record in that singular case incomplete. No case before has considered false professions of lost memory in circumstances of such scale, (Milewski, 27 Jan 2016)

The victims are yet to get their equal share in Canada's sense of justice; it is only after the publication of Justice John Major's report that Stephen Harper offered a formal apology for all the legal and institutional failures and social harassments the victims and the relatives had to suffer, in the twenty-fifth anniversary of the tragedy. For twenty years after the disaster, the memorial monument erected in Ahakista in the Irish coast in 1986 remained the only one of its kind that commemorated the victims. It is as late as 2006 that the first memorial monument was erected upon the Canadian soil (in Vancouver), which was closely followed by others in Toronto, Ottawa and Lachine, bringing some consolation to the bereaved.

17.3 Conclusion

Not only do the fictional and non-fictional representations of the KomagataMaru Incident and the Air India disaster strive to understand the Indo-Canadian diasporic identity in the light of the overlapping episodes of India and Canada's history that

hardly finds a place within the official discourse of history writing in Canada, in their own unique ways, but they also highlight the disjunctions within the ‘multicultural mosaic’ of the nation. While the formal apologies offered on behalf of the government are perhaps the first step towards Canada’s ability to come in terms with certain shameful chapters of her history for what they are, the ‘twin disasters’ of Indo-Canadian migration continue to highlight the necessity of a more inclusive approach of mainstream Canada towards its ‘non-white’ immigrant population.

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