

## Space, Symbols and Speech in Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's *Behzti* and its Reception

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### Abstract

In December 2004, the staging of Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play *Behzti* at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre triggered protests by some members of the Sikh community who considered it offensive. By unearthing and exploring tensions in the play's representation of a Sikh community, this essay sheds light on some of the tensions in multicultural Britain in order to complicate and challenge an interpretation of the dispute in terms of a reductive binary of creative freedom versus religious censure and censorship. While for the liberal secularist critic and proponent of free expression the explosion of taboos is vital to an expansion of freedom, a hardline adoption of this position which fails to take into account the material specificities of a religious response to a creative work, including the demography of the protestors, can result in a curtailment of the freedom of a religious minority. Reading the play in dialogue with the controversy it generated, the essay seeks to ground the outbreak of religious minority offence in its local material conditions, and, by doing so, to underline the unequal access to social, cultural and spatial capital that shaped the controversy. -It focuses in particular on religious symbols, space, and speech, exploring how they figure in both the literary and social texts.

### Keywords

Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, *Behzti*, freedom of speech, offence, Sikhism, multiculturalism, class.

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*Who shall have control over the story? Who has, who should have, the power not only to tell the stories with which, and within which, we all lived, but also to say in what manner those stories may be told? (Salman Rushdie 360)*

The freedom of speech principle which claims to be democratic is, in fact, deeply racially coded. (Sarita Malik, "Limits")

## **Introduction**

In December 2004, the staging of Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play *Behzti* at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre triggered protests by some members of the Sikh community who considered it offensive. When the protests turned to violence and the police could no longer guarantee audience safety, the theatre management took the decision to cancel the play.<sup>1</sup> The "*Behzti* affair", as it came to be known, generated substantial media and political discussion in Britain, resonating as it did with the controversy surrounding Salman Rushdie's 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses*, and coinciding with heated parliamentary debate about whether to make it an offence to incite hatred on religious as well as racial grounds.<sup>2</sup> Less than a year after the *Behzti* affair erupted, the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed in Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, and the global protests that followed, helped keep the spotlight on Bhatti's controversial play. Subsequent disputes surrounding the film adaptation of

Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* in 2006, the publication of Sherry Jones's novel *The Jewel of Medina* (2008), and the publication in French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* of cartoons satirising the Prophet Mohammed and Islam (2006, 2011, 2012, 2015) have added further layers to the debate.<sup>3</sup>

As has been well documented by Ralph Grillo and Helen Freshwater in particular, the *Behzti* affair was widely and reductively represented as a battle between freedom of speech and creativity on the one hand, and religious censure and censorship on the other (Grillo, "Artistic Licence"; Grillo, "Licence to Offend?"; Freshwater 139-58). The absolutist valorisation of freedom of expression that emerged in the wake of the *Satanic Verses* controversy dominated responses to this subsequent dispute, particularly in Britain's media and literary establishment, with the Sikh protestors constructed as regressive, repressive and destructive (see, for example, Hytner; Jury). At the height of the controversy an open letter appeared in *The Guardian*, signed by over 300 members of the theatre profession, who defended the play and objected to the protests in uncompromising terms (Freshwater 144). Writer Hanif Kureishi's comments were typical of the thinking that underpinned this defence:

the Sikh community should be ashamed of the fact that it is destroying theatres. Destroying a theatre is like destroying a temple ... Our culture is as crucial to the liberal community as temples are to the religious community and I think that the right to speak, the right to be heard is crucial to the lives of all of us in this country. (Kureishi)

Kureishi reductively polarises religiosity and creative expression, and elevates the latter to a position of sanctity while failing to acknowledge the play's potential denigration of an actual religious site.

This article offers a reading of *Behzti* in dialogue with the controversy it triggered. By unearthing and exploring tensions in the play's representation of one particular Sikh community, it sheds light on some of the tensions in multicultural Britain in order to complicate and challenge normative representations of the dispute in terms of creative freedom versus religious offence. In particular, the essay seeks to ground this outbreak of religious minority offence in its local material conditions. Building on my earlier work on the *Satanic Verses* and *Brick Lane* affairs (Ahmed ch. 2 and 4), as well as on Anshuman A. Mondal's scholarship on the politics of free speech and Muslim offence, the article underlines the significance of power to the *Behzti* affair, specifically the unequal access to social, cultural and spatial capital that shaped it. The framing of the affair in terms of a courageous artistic voice fighting against reactionary forces of repression papers over the social chasm between the privileged arts establishment with its advocates of freedom of expression and the Sikh community in Birmingham specifically and Britain more broadly. As Mondal writes:

What is being performed in the giving or taking of offence is *power* or, rather, to be more precise, the *positioning of oneself in a power relation*. To give offence is to display one's ability to do so; to take offence is to signal one's subordinate position in that power relation, to display a vulnerability that marks oneself as a victim or object of power – to perform one's powerlessness. (23)

To apply this thinking to *Behzti* is by no means to suggest that Bhatti, or the play's director Janet Steel, set out to give offence. But it is to propose that the fact that the play caused offence demonstrates the theatrical establishment's position of power; and the fact that the protestors took offence demonstrates their vulnerability and subordination. While for the liberal secularist critic and proponent of free expression

the explosion of taboos is vital to an expansion of freedom, a hardline adoption of this position which fails to take into account the material specificities of a religious response to a creative work, including the demography of the protestors, can result in a curtailment of the freedom of a religious minority. Therefore, as Mondal suggests, “freedom”, or “liberty”, must be rethought so that it can be “unshackl[ed]... from ... contemporary liberal discourse” (2). To be more inclusive, crucially, the idea of freedom must encompass a recognition of the inequalities of the public sphere which mean some people are freer than others, and as a consequence it must exercise a degree of restraint (2-3). Or, as Janelle Reinelt advises, “the notion of individual liberty” must be balanced with “a communitarian notion of equality and social justice” (14).

Certainly in Europe, the majority of high-profile artistic controversies involving religious offence have had Islam at their centre. That the focus is rather on Sikhism in this case points to the significance of class and of the liberal aversion to the expression and practice of faith in the public sphere – factors which I suggest bind the *Behzti* affair to its Islamic counterparts, superseding the specificity of the religion in question. While Sikhism was undoubtedly central to the protestors, their protest was also underpinned by their class position; British Sikhs, as Grillo points out, are an under-privileged minority group, facing economic deprivation as well as race discrimination (“Licence to Offend?” 8). This points to the importance of reading religiosity in an intersectional manner, in dialogue with class and race, as well as gender and sexuality. Further, the mainstream response to the protest was shaped by stereotypes of Sikhism which – not unlike stereotypes of Islam – are rooted partly in the visibility of minority British adherents of the faith (e.g. their turbans, kirpans (or swords) and karas (or steel bracelets)), as well as their class position.<sup>4</sup> Jasbir Puar, in her analysis of American responses to turbaned Sikh men in the wake of 9/11, explores the overlaps in

perceptions of Sikhism and Islam. Noting that, “[l]ike veiling, turbaning generates anxiety in the observer, the sense of inaccessibility, of something being out of place and out of time, of incomprehensibility”, she infers the role of visible symbols of difference in entrenching constructions of otherness (Puar 181).

Religious symbols form a key focus of both the play and the controversy alongside space and speech. My reading will explore how these three tropes or concepts figure in the literary and social texts. It will trace within *Behzti* tensions that are often buried just beneath the surface of public and political discourses about British multiculturalism and that erupted on through? the play’s staging.<sup>5</sup>

## Space

Diane Parkes, in her review for the *Birmingham Evening Mail*, describes *Behzti* thus:

We have homosexuality, rape, violence against women, suicide, murder and thwarted love ... if this is an attempt to lift the lid on the problems within Sikhism it leaves us a little disappointed. What begins as a sharp and black look at a modern family dilemma sinks beneath its own weight.

Indeed, Bhatti’s play bombards us with a litany of patriarchal crimes against a British Sikh community’s women. Its two protagonists inhabit the margins of the community. Balbir has suffered a stroke and needs constant care from her daughter Min whose father Tej, we discover, committed suicide when Min was a child after she discovered his homosexual relationship with his friend Mr Sandhu. Mother and daughter’s attempt to re-enter the community by a visit to their local gurdwara to celebrate the birth of

Guru Nanak ends in Min's rape by Mr Sandhu, now a senior figure at the gurdwara, her physical abuse by two women, Polly and Teetee (themselves victims of abuse within the gurdwara in their youth), and finally Sandhu's murder by Min's mother Balbir (Bhatti, *Behzti*).

The play offers a potentially important critique of the silencing and abuse of women within a British Sikh community. Further, its focus on the domestic everyday might appear to position it outside the "exoticism and fanaticism" that James Procter rightly identifies as characterising representations of British South Asian culture (78). Yet, its immersion in emotional, physical and sexual abuse tips into sensationalism and inevitably feeds stereotypes of patriarchal oppression within South Asian communities, with its title, which translates as "honour", connoting the spectre of "honour crime" that haunts the margins of the play. Given its sensational content, it is hardly surprising that it provoked members of the Sikh community. Rahila Gupta is right that the fear of pandering to racists must not silence voices that seek to expose crimes against women in minority communities. Nevertheless, it remains crucial that we recognise that a play like *Behzti*, freighted as it is with a "burden of representation" (Mercer), *will* be read as representative of Sikh culture and communities, and not primarily as "universal", as Bhatti herself and critic Sumana Ray suggest (Bhatti, "Warrior"; Ray 95-96), or as about "the behaviour of individuals" (Steel, cited in Freshwater 151; Kotak). The fact that British Sikhs have limited access to artistic representation increases the representative weight of any single cultural work that features "their" community. This also means that members of the minority group of Sikhs (especially those who are economically disadvantaged and socially disenfranchised) are more likely to feel disowned, or displaced, by the few such works that do enter the public domain – in particular those that descend into stereotype.

Freshwater, in her chapter on *Behzti*, remarks on the prescience of the publicity image of an enormous pair of white knickers obscuring the face of a woman dressed in a red shalwar kameez (reproduced as the front cover of the published script), which suggests “the washing of a community’s dirty linen in public” (140). It might be argued that the image was selected long before the controversy erupted. However, the play’s provocation was in fact anticipated by the playwright and director who, following the advice of the Director of Communications for the Diocese of Birmingham, consulted community leaders prior to its staging. This led to the distribution of a leaflet to audience members outlining Sikh representatives’ objections to the play (Grillo, “Licence to Offend?” 10). I will return to these consultations in the final section of this article. For now, I will consider the principal objection to the play on the part of the Sikh protestors: the portrayal of rape in the space of a gurdwara (Singh Rai). The emphasis here was on the sanctity of this space and the defilement of this sanctity and that of the Guru, as Jasdev Singh Rai, director of the Sikh Human Rights Group, explains. In *Behzti*, the sacred space was subsumed under the secular space of the theatre – where, according to absolutist advocates of creative freedom, such as former Artistic Director of London’s National Theatre Nicholas Hytner, “there literally should be no limit to what the creative imagination can imagine. And ... no limit to what the creative artist is allowed to imagine or to publish or perform” (40). The protestors’ emphasis on the sacred was beyond the comprehension of secular liberals such as Hytner; the sense of injury the protestors felt at the corruption of the gurdwara – which was for them more than a mere signifier standing apart from its divine referent – could not be translated into terms that their antagonists recognised.<sup>6</sup> Yet the significance of the gurdwara extends beyond the sacred to encompass the material too. It is a space of community, as the Council for Sikh Gurdwaras in Birmingham emphasised in their 2001 Annual



Report, supporting welfare and educational provision for a minority group which has suffered marginalisation and economic deprivation (Grillo, "Licence to Offend?" 9; Ballard 109). Further, as Sarita Malik writes in an article on the controversy, the gurdwara is "one of the few shared, community public spaces where Sikh communities [in Britain] ... feel integrated" ("Censorship"). While the source of the protestors' offence was located beyond western tradition, as Freshwater, among others, points out, it was also rooted in local British structures of class and race (152). Indeed, this imbrication of the sacred and the material is present in the play's representation of the gurdwara, which initially emerges as a potential sanctuary for those who lack a place or are out of place.

The play opens in Balbir and Min's flat, a place of relative poverty. The flat belongs to the council – something which, we later discover, is a source of humiliation for Balbir in particular (Bhatti, *Behzti* 77). The loss of their home, which served as a space of refuge for other members of the Sikh community, followed Min's father Tej's suicide. At that moment of crisis Sandhu and other members of the Sikh community sold off the house, and Min and Balbir were made homeless (56, 68, 77). The deep significance to an immigrant family of ownership of place is underscored in the play, even when this place is "a filthy, crumbling end of terrace" (56). Min and Balbir's council flat is a negative place of isolation for Min, one to which she clings out of a fear of the outside world approaching agoraphobia. By contrast, the gurdwara has the capacity to function as a positive place of community. Min describes it as "brilliant ... All of it. Like when you wash up and clean in here, you're doing it for everyone. Not yourself. But you're still doing it because you want to ... And the people around you, they're good" (79). Yet this glimpse of the communitarianism of the gurdwara as supportive and enabling is undermined by the abuse Min suffers within this space, just as the loss of

Balbir's house at the hands of the community undermines the positive notion of collectivity suggested by its function as a refuge. Balbir remonstrates:

All of you shitters, taking refuge under my roof ... No murmurings or mutterings when the bricks and mortar slipped through my fingers and my name ... My name was no longer spoken. Instead ended up written in red ink on a pocket blue rent book. (68)

Indeed, in the play a positive notion of community is repeatedly evoked only to be fractured, and the space of the gurdwara is finally revealed as little more than a sham. Min's "happy ending", her liberation from her flat into the outside world, can only be achieved by exiting the gurdwara and Sikh community. In this flight she is accompanied by her lover Elvis, who is her mother's young black caretaker and the only non-Sikh in the play (136-38). Elvis's presence in the gurdwara and Min and Elvis's developing relationship initiate a transgression of cultural and religious boundaries – or at least communication across such boundaries.<sup>7</sup> In the end, such transgression or communication cannot be actualised within the gurdwara, or more broadly the Sikh community (of which it can be read as a microcosm), but only beyond it. Hence, while the sanctity of the space of the gurdwara is defiled by the play's representation of sexual abuse within it, the possibility of the gurdwara as a place of social sanctuary is ultimately evacuated in the play.<sup>8</sup>

This points to a binary of individual freedom for women versus a repressive patriarchal religious collective which, I suggest, shapes the play as well as normative responses to the dispute it triggered. This is entrenched in both the play and responses to it by a separation of the space of the gurdwara/community from its social context. In the play, there is very little sense of the gurdwara/community's location in and

subordination to majority Britain. As a consequence, the oppressive and criminal behaviour on display is rooted solely in the community rather than in a wider context of intersecting hierarchies of class, race and religion, as well as gender, in which the community sits. Just as the relational nature of space – the fact that the community and its context are connected in a relationship of power – is obscured within the play, so it was obscured within constructions of the controversy it triggered.<sup>9</sup> Rather, the theatre and the gurdwara, or, more broadly, the secular sphere of the creative arts and the sphere of religious faith, were portrayed as being polarised, as in Kureishi's and Hytner's responses to the affair. Speaking of the Renaissance period, Hytner writes: "The theatre actively promoted the humanist point of view to a society still gripped by religious absolutism ... The theatre was, and is, a secular space demonstrably interested in the fate of man, in *this* life" (41, emphasis in original). Similarly, theatre managers at a conference held in the wake of *Behzti* concluded that "intolerance" and "religious zealotry" were a "growing threat to freedom of speech" (Jury). Such a dichotomy of creative freedom and religious repression unfastens both the gurdwara and the theatre from their moorings in the material.<sup>10</sup>

What Hytner and other like-minded critics of the protests did not fully understand is that the gurdwara, while a sacred space, extends into the domain of the secular and exists within social and racial hierarchies, as does the theatre (one is subordinated within these hierarchies and the other dominant). As Doreen Massey reminds us, space and place are "the product of social relations which are most likely conflicting and unequal" (151); gurdwara and theatre exist within these unequal relations. Sarita Malik represents them as relational rather than dichotomised by juxtaposing the significance of the gurdwara for British Sikhs regarding "the disconnection and disengagement between minority ethnic communities [in Britain]

and 'our' gallery, museum and theatre spaces" ("Censorship"). In this context, it is not surprising that the representation – and perceived defilement – of the space of the gurdwara within an arts space from which members of the Sikh community feel excluded might trigger what Malik describes as a "rise in defensiveness, honour and communal pride" ("Censorship"). Massey's emphasis on the sociality of space is also important here. For Massey, "a spatialised subjectivity" is one that looks outwards, with a recognition that "others" exist alongside "us" in an unequal relation of power but embody ways of being that are just as valid as ours (59). To spatialise the *Behzti* affair and its protagonists is to recognise the significance of the sacred to the protestors as well as the impact of their subordinate position on their response to the staging of their place of religious worship in a theatre in their city.

It is instructive, too, to zoom outwards from the space of the theatre to the city of Birmingham, which is home to over 30,000 Sikhs and has a history of minority struggle (BVSC). In particular, the area of Handsworth, where many of the metropolis's Sikhs live, has seen uprisings by members of its Afro-Caribbean and South Asian communities on several occasions, most famously in 1981 when "race riots" spread across several major British cities. While these riots saw black and Asian protestors come together in solidarity against racist nationalism, in the 2005 riots in Handsworth and neighbouring Lozells, which took place less than a year after the protests against *Behzti*, the Afro-Caribbean and South Asian communities were arrayed against each other. Kenan Malik situates these riots against the backdrop of the city's multicultural policies, which were put in place in response to the 1985 Handsworth riots. Following the Greater London Council's lead, Birmingham City Council created nine faith- and ethnicity-based organisations to represent their communities (K. Malik 65-67). Malik is deeply – and in my view problematically – critical of this approach. He argues that these policies were

not only divisive and homogenised ethnic groups that were in fact highly diverse, but also that they created inflexible religious and ethnic group identities – “segmented society and fixed identities,” as he puts it (70). Here Malik minimises the value of ethnicity and religion for minority communities as well as divesting them of agency (they are only capable of using definitions that others have imposed on them, apparently), and severs rioting from its roots in poverty and disenfranchisement. To contextualise these riots in inequalities of class, race and religion, conversely, reframes them as a form of territorialisation, or space-claiming, by the disenfranchised. By doing this, we might also read the contemporaneous *Behzti* affair not as a manifestation of a boundaried and repressive religious culture, but instead as an assertive attempt by the Sikh protestors to claim their “right to the city” (Lefebvre) as well as to the sacred space of the gurdwara.

## **Symbols**

In addition to the location of sexual assault in the gurdwara, there were two other specific objections to *Behzti* on the part of Sikh community representatives, as Grillo points out (“Licence to Offend?” 11-12). One of these was to the use of religious hymns as background music to certain scenes. In particular, protestors objected to the use of the Ardas, a prayer in which Sikhs remember atrocities committed against them, to accompany the scene where Min is raped by Sandhu (Bhatti, *Behzti* 109). The third objection was to the perceived abuse of Sikh symbols, such as the kirpan and the turban. Grillo cites one example of this: the placing of a turban on a shoe rack (shoes, which are taken off on entry to a gurdwara, are associated with dirt in contrast to the purity of the turban) (“Licence to Offend?” 11). Other examples include the placing of a flowery

feminine headscarf on Elvis's head, which echoes the subversion of norms of gender and sexuality that is threaded throughout the play; the use of Teetee's scarf to gag the vulnerable Min; the proximity of a kirpan and a darts board on Sandhu's office wall; and the eventual use of the sacred sword as a murder weapon (Bhatti, *Behzti* 61, 108, 118, 47, 133). Within the play, the use (and perceived abuse) of these symbols point to the gap between an external display of religiosity, which is exposed as superficial or a sham, and internal faith, demonstrated most powerfully by Min. Despite their pious façade – emblematised by scarf, turban or sword – the gurdwara regulars are abusers who exploit these emblems, and the status they confer on them, to carry out and conceal their abuse. Indeed, the overt artifice of the theatrical stage contributes to the notion of the Sikh symbols, including the gurdwara as a symbolic space, as hollow, as mere props. Min describes the gap between external symbol and internal faith:

All you lot in here ... perhaps you talk too much ... best sometimes to keep things inside ... why do you always have to Say and Show and Make it known what you are? ... Seems to me like everyone's pretending the same as each other. Just letting the outside sparkle and twinkle like ... fairy lights ... And my praising, it's nothing to do with this. (134-35)

Bhatti, too, gestures towards the significance of this gap in her foreword to the play, stating: "Much store is set by ritual rooted in religion – though people's preoccupation with the external and not the internal often renders these rituals meaningless" (Bhatti, "Foreword" 17-18). Yet the protestors' response suggests that they did not perceive external rituals or icons as meaningless.

We might read the deeply felt importance of symbols to Sikhs in the light of Saba Mahmood's exploration of the significance of religious icons in her discussion of the

Danish cartoons controversy. Mahmood highlights the form of relationality that, for Muslims, binds the material object to the sacred subject, an intimate connection that does not accord with the separation of signifier and signified that stems from Protestantism but now shapes western secular modes of thinking. For the religiously observant subject, then, icons, interpreted broadly, can have an affective power that means their denigration causes real harm (Mahmood 842-50). Roger Ballard has also explored the significance of physical and cultural symbols to the construction of a group identity for Sikhs. He cites the adoption of the name Singh by Sikh men and the name Kaur by Sikh women, alongside the sporting of beards and turbans by men, as examples of the means by which Sikhs construct and underline a *collective* identity, one that is visibly distinct from majoritarian Britain (Ballard 88). This is important as a way of signalling one's adherence to a particular religion which necessitates a subordination of individual autonomy to a shared set of prescriptions and therefore to a group identity.

Perhaps even more significantly, this distinguishability functions as a means of asserting a beleaguered subjectivity, one that has been marginalised and denigrated both in the context of hierarchies of class, race and religion in contemporary Britain and also more broadly, across Sikh history, given their minority status in every nation they inhabit. The solidarity that comes from belonging to a group or community is essential to such an assertion. Tariq Modood writes, "The non-white groups that are the focus of multiculturalism have a visibility and are subject to forms of exclusion that continue to sustain group identity" (106). In other words, it is the experience of exclusion or oppression that contributes to the forging of a group identity. Therefore, to cite Modood again, "a denigration of a group identity, or its distortion, or its denial, the pretence ... that a group does not exist, the withholding of recognition or misrecognition is a form of oppression" (52).<sup>11</sup> Modood highlights the conspicuousness of non-white groups. As

well as racial visibility, it is visible cultural difference which has been the subject of controversy over the last few decades. This visibility marks a refusal to assimilate into majoritarian British culture and a collectivism that disturbs liberal secular commentators, and breaches the liberal private–public division. The dichotomy of private individual faith (deemed legitimate) and the external symbols that make visible that faith (deemed shallow or feigned, but also, paradoxically, threatening) has been prominent in contemporary discourses about Islam in particular (for example, in discussions of “veiling”), as a means of differentiating “good Muslim” from “bad Muslim” (Mamdani). However, such binary thinking has also emerged in discussions of Sikhs. It is evident, for example, in debates around whether British Sikh men should be exempted from wearing motorcycle helmets because of their turbans which culminated in legislation protecting their rights in 1976; in disputes about Sikh boys wearing the turban to school in Britain, especially surrounding the landmark case *Mandla v. Dowell-Lee* in 1982–83; (Parekh 243-44); and, more recently, in the case of Welsh schoolgirl Sarika Watkins-Singh’s 2007-08 battle to wear the kara to school (Gillan). Inevitably, attempts to make these symbols of difference invisible, as well as racist denigration of or attacks on them, only work to increase their affective power and significance for adherents of the faith. The objection to the use of symbols in *Behzti* must be read in this material context, as well as in the religious context Mahmood illuminates.

Returning to the play’s treatment of the symbolic, it is significant that when Balbir attacks Sandhu with the kirpan in defence of Min (Bhatti, *Behzti* 133, 138), it becomes a tool of resistance against patriarchal abuse within the community rather than a means of defending the Sikh faith from oppression. The Ardas prayer is reconfigured in a similar way: while in Sikhism it is associated, historically, with a defence of the faith from attacks from outside the religion, in the play it accompanies



the atrocities committed within the religious community, or by its members.<sup>12</sup> In the first instance, it forms a symbol around which Sikhs cohere in opposition to external attacks, while in the second instance it emphasises a cleaving of the community, dissension within it, or even collapse of it, whose primary cause is patriarchal abuse. The prayer silences the screams of Min as she is raped. Afterwards, Min struggles to articulate her rape – “I don’t quite know how to speak this...”, she says – and she is subsequently silenced, quite literally, by Teetee’s chuni, or headscarf, which is tied around her mouth as Teetee and Polly beat her (Bhatti, *Behzti* 116-18). The play’s commitment to highlighting and critiquing devastating patriarchal violence in a British Sikh community is commendable. Yet, especially given their affective power, the use of key Sikh symbols as a means of doing so points to the implicit presence in *Behzti* of a troubling dichotomy constructed between gender equality and minority religious culture. It is not insignificant, moreover, that the play’s two most likeable characters, Elvis and Min, both transgress gender norms. The former is feminised when he dons a headscarf as well as through his role as Balbir’s carer and his dancing and singing, while the latter is masculinised throughout the play. In particular, Min’s transgressive gendered identity and the privatisation of her faith make her compatible with a secular liberalism that recuperates some brown minority subjects in order to safely expel others as illegitimate, as Puar, among others, has shown. Min’s subversion of gender norms is juxtaposed with the patriarchal values and homophobia of the Sikh gurdwara/community which implicitly led to her father’s depression and suicide. For if Min can be read as the transgressive but domesticated religious minority subject, compatible with liberalism, then the community leader Sandhu embodies the “sexually pathological and deviant” minority subject that must be expelled—his turban,

repeatedly highlighted in the play, signifying hypermasculinity and homophobia but also, paradoxically, a perverse homosexuality (Puar xxiv).<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, it is against a backdrop of the recuperation of Min as acceptable, and the important critique of patriarchy as well as oppressive norms of gender and sexuality, that the play's problematic culturalism is screened. That Min's non-Sikh liberator is not white but black, moreover, works to deflect or conceal an implicit "gender exceptionalism" (Puar 5), the idea that white British culture is singularly superior when it comes to gender equality. This "gender exceptionalism" or "missionary discourse" (Puar 5) can also be traced in some criticism of the protests against the play. Several commentators emphasised the fact that the protestors were predominantly older men who would inevitably be provoked by a play that highlights patriarchal abuse against women in their community (Swain; Hundal; Singh; Ray 94-95; Sharma). While this insight is certainly legitimate in itself, it becomes troubling when it works to silence the protestors altogether or dismiss their voices as illegitimate. As Mondal points out, to dismiss protest as illegitimate on the grounds that it is not representative of a community (for example, when it is articulated predominantly by older men) is effectively to dismiss all protest, given the diversity of most communities (19). When the protest is articulated predominantly by older men, moreover, this dismissal smacks of ageism. The failure to listen to the protestors' voices echoes the play's failure to take seriously the deep significance of Sikh symbols for the faithful. *Behzti's* reductive use of such symbols to critique the community's patriarchal practices constructs gender and sexuality rights as antithetical to those of a communal religiosity, obstructing the path towards an inclusive multiculturalism.

## Speech

Min's gagging by Polly and Teetee is echoed by other incidents of silencing in the play. Teetee herself recalls her own gagging in the gurdwara as she was raped by Sandhu in her youth, and in the opening scene of the play Min gags her mother with sticky tape when she can no longer tolerate her verbal abuse (Bhatti, *Behzti* 125, 40). This theme of limiting speech, or limited speech, intersects with that of intercultural relations. Min, after her rape, redraws the boundaries which had been broken down slowly between her and Elvis by saying: "You have no right to address me. You're not even anything to do with me ... you're prancing round, in this religious area, saying things. Things that don't concern me" (112). Notably, this redrawing of boundaries, configured as a breakdown in communication, or silencing ("You have no right to address me"), is located within and attributed to the community (to Sandhu's abuse of Min, which means she retreats from Elvis). *Behzti*, then, seems to polarise the community as inward-looking and censoring against a liberation from the community which implicitly enables intercultural communication.

The trope of patriarchal gagging, or silencing, of women within *Behzti* is explicitly echoed in Bhatti's subsequent play *Behud* (or "Beyond Belief"), a response to the controversy surrounding *Behzti*, which centres on a playwright struggling to be heard and features a gagged woman on its front cover (Bhatti *Behud*). Of course, it is also apparently echoed beyond the stage in the form of the protests which sought to silence the playwright. Here, as in the play, silence is imposed from within the community – by the predominantly male British Sikh protestors, on the female British Sikh playwright. Hytner, along with the majority of the arts establishment, declared "the demands of faith communities that we should be silenced" to be non-negotiable (43).

Listening to the voice of a playwright who seeks to expose the silencing of women's voices in her community is crucial. Yet, the subordination of the British Sikh voice of dissent by the arts establishment – their failure to listen to the Sikh protestors, both preceding the opening of the play and in the extensive media coverage following the protests – is also a form of silencing that must be considered alongside and in tension with the silencing of Bhatti.

Freshwater, in her astute chapter on *Behzti*, asserts:

The Birmingham Rep ... made a serious effort to solicit feedback before the play opened, and to address the concerns raised: meetings were arranged with the city's inter-faith council and representatives from the community; members of the council were allowed to attend a dress rehearsal; and notes were included in the programme which described Sikhism in positive terms. (148)

Further, in an interview Freshwater conducted, director Janet Steel claims that she did take into account Sikh sensitivities in her direction of the play, diverging from Bhatti's script in order to avoid unnecessary provocation. Certainly, these are important gestures on the part of the theatre. That said, Freshwater underlines Steel's own emphasis on the fact that these divergences were *not* a "result of the interventions of the Sikh community's representatives" (151). The implication here is that to permit members of the Sikh community to negotiate changes to the play would have been unconscionable. Indeed, as Grillo points out, during the dialogue between the theatre officials and the Sikh community representatives, while the latter thought they were engaged in "negotiations", the former viewed their exchange as a "consultation". The difference here is between a two-way, dialogic process, where both parties play an active and equal role, on the one hand, and a hierarchised situation where one party

(the theatre) retains a position of power, granting the other party speech but only within prescribed parameters, on the other. Grillo argues that in *Behzti* “there was room for manoeuvre: Sikh representatives were prepared to accept much of the play’s content, provided that changes were made to the setting and use of symbols, and this is where dialogue was possible” (“Licence to Offend?” 22). Yet, the theatre could not, or would not, take seriously the protestors’ perspective, underpinned by their religiosity.

Drawing on Iris Marion Young’s use of Jean-François Lyotard’s notion of the *differend* in her study of democratic communication, we might suggest that the “regulation’ of the conflict” between the two parties was conducted on the terms and “in the idiom” of the theatre, which could not articulate the wrong felt by the Sikh community members (37). In other words, the Sikh offence could not be translated into the secular liberal terms of the theatre, and so it was diminished in its significance while not entirely dismissed. A genuine dialogue could have been facilitated only by a recognition of the coexistence of different and sometimes irreducible ways of thinking, and of the legitimacy of religious injury (no less than racial injury).<sup>14</sup> If, as Mondal argues, speech is a social, communicative act, and literature is transactional – reliant on, and operating through, a transactional relationship between reader (or viewer) and writer – then one purpose of free speech and creative freedom must surely be to enhance communication between different peoples in a multicultural, multireligious society. This is a purpose that theatre, with its affective power, is particularly well equipped to fulfil (Mondal 9, 60, 77). In the long run, the functional authoritarianism of the British arts establishment, predicated on and screened behind a secular liberal understanding of free speech and freedom more broadly that underpins the play itself, helped to shut down dialogue and debate. To grant a legitimate voice to a disempowered minority group is also, sometimes, to grant a legitimate voice to religious

offence. As such, the need is for a form of secularism that listens to religiosity rather than silencing it or putting it in its place, as well as an understanding of the unequal relationship between protestors and arts establishment, gurdwara and theatre, community and context.

In the play, Sandhu's sycophancy and pandering to the white majority is ironised (Bhatti, *Behzti* 129-31), yet there are no Sikh voices of oppositionality or resistance against the community's marginalisation in Britain. Beyond the stage, however, and outside the theatre walls, a challenge to what was perceived to be an offensive representation of their religious culture did make itself heard. The insularity or circularity of the Sikh community in the play was disturbed or broken when the play entered the public domain (see Ahmed ch. 4). While there is of course no excuse for the violence of some of the offended, the articulation of their offence through protest must be understood as a result of the marginalisation or muting of their voices during discussion.<sup>15</sup> Further, the fact that their speech finally took the form of protest, which involved placards and slogans – forms of speech that are often subordinated and delegitimised in public discourse and debate – does not mean that we should not listen to it or take it seriously, because speech, in the forms it can take as well as in its volume, is shaped by social, cultural and economic capital. Young, in her discussion of inclusive communication as a criterion of democracy, makes this important point, underlining the correlation between dispassionate forms of speech, which are taken more seriously, and privilege (63). She writes:

Demonstration and protest, the use of emotionally charged language and symbols, publicly ridiculing or mocking exclusive or dismissive behaviour of others, are sometimes appropriate and effective ways of getting attention for issues of legitimate public concern, but which would otherwise not be likely to

get a hearing, either because they threaten powerful interests or because they particularly concern a marginalized or minority group. (67)

Young's reference to symbols here is notable, again underlining the significance symbols can assume for minority groups, especially the religiously observant.

Since Young was writing and since the controversy surrounding *Behzti* took place, social media, in its various and expanding forms, has opened up new avenues of communication for disadvantaged minority groups, arguably democratising debate and even, albeit marginally, diminishing the gap between establishment and dissenting voices by giving the latter access to written forms of protest. Further, it is significant and heartening to note that the decision by PEN to award their Freedom of Expression Courage prize to *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015, in the wake of the controversy, provoked objections by six high-profile writers (including Peter Carey and Michael Ondaatje) because of the magazine's offensive depictions of Muslims as well as "the disenfranchised generally", suggesting the emergence of a more nuanced approach to such issues among literary and cultural gatekeepers (Flood and Yuhas). In his reading of the *Behzti* controversy, Grillo, too, notes the restraint exercised by British newspapers in the wake of the Danish cartoons controversy. In contrast to their French and other European counterparts, they made the decision to refrain from publishing the cartoons on the grounds that freedom of speech did not equate to a licence to offend (Grillo, "Artistic" 122-23).

Yet, notwithstanding some evidence of more nuance and understanding in recent approaches to literary controversies involving religious offence, a liberal secularist blindness to the context-bound nature of religious sensitivities and the racial and religious coding of the "freedom of speech" principle continues to prevail (S. Malik,

“Limits”). In his 2012 memoir *Joseph Anton*, Salman Rushdie, with reference to the furore over his 1988 novel, asks “*Who shall have control over the story?*” For him, this was the question at the heart of the *Satanic Verses* controversy, and for him, the answer is “*Everyone and anyone has, or should have that power*” (Rushdie 360). Here (and elsewhere) Rushdie is engaged in a staunch defence of his right to tell his story, against censoring and censorious protestors – yet the qualifying words “should have” in his response to his own question suggest a fleeting recognition of the inequality of access to speech or story-telling. Read against the grain, these words point to the lack of control of beleaguered minority religious communities, such as the working-class British Muslims who protested against Rushdie’s novel, or the British Sikh protestors against *Behzti*, over their story and the manner in which their story is told. A recognition of the unequal access to storytelling or speech, and an expansion of the parameters of legitimate speech to encompass religiosity and religious offence, are crucial to attaining a multiculturalism of reciprocity and respect in Britain today.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2010, there was an unpublicised reading of the play at the Soho Theatre but this was only advertised to the audience of *Behud*, Bhatti's subsequent play.

<sup>2</sup> For a contextualisation of the *Behzti* affair in these legislative debates and manoeuvres, see Grillo, "Artistic licence" 117-119.

<sup>3</sup> For a helpful overview of literary controversies involving minority religious offence since the Rushdie affair, see Mondal 21; Grillo, "Artistic Licence" 108. For a helpful overview of cases of censorship in the performing arts, including that of *Behzti*, as well as an analysis of the multiple and shifting meanings and uses of the term "censorship", see Reinelt.

<sup>4</sup> For the significance of the turban in particular to Sikhs, see Puar 196. It is worth noting here that unlike Muslim women, Sikh women are generally less visible than Sikh men (as it is less usual for women to opt to wear the turban, which is the most visible marker of the religion).

<sup>5</sup> Here, my approach echoes my readings of controversies in Ahmed ch. 2 and 4).

<sup>6</sup> For an illumination of the unintelligibility for secular liberals of religious injury caused by insult to material objects and "icons", see Mahmood, especially 842-50.

<sup>7</sup> \*\*\*

<sup>8</sup> For a similarly negative representation of the gurdwara as of limited hospitality, see Sahota.

<sup>9</sup> See my reading of *Brick Lane* in which the community is similarly cut off from its context (Ahmed ch. 4).

<sup>10</sup> Saba Mahmood and Peter G. Danchin, among others, have written on the untenability of the binary of the secular and the religious, which are, as they demonstrate, intertwined in different ways in different national contexts (see Mahmood and Danchin).

<sup>11</sup> Here Modood cites Charles Taylor.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, [www.discoversikhism.com/sikhism/sikh\\_ardas.html](http://www.discoversikhism.com/sikhism/sikh_ardas.html).

<sup>13</sup> See also Puar's discussion of the turban in ch. 4 of her book.

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<sup>14</sup> See Mahmood 852-53, 860. For the irreducibility of secular, “rational” modes of thought and those underpinned by the sacred, or supernatural, and the importance of maintaining that irreducibility, see also Chakrabarty 97-113.

<sup>15</sup> The protests did attract some members of extremist groups whose politics or actions are clearly not legitimate (Grillo, “Licence to offend?” 12).