TOLERANCE AND OFFENCE - *BEHZTI*

This article looks at the nature of protest at literary work using the stage-play *Behzti*. It questions the nature and limits of both 'tolerance' and 'offence'. It raises questions about the role of writers within multi-cultural societies and the responsibilities of citizenship within democracy.

Key Words: tolerance, offence, multi-cultural society, mob-rule, free speech, democracy

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With the threat of communism gone and western capitalism triumphant, it seemed that all the major political questions had been resolved. Certainly democracy and personal values, such as freedom of speech, freedom of opinion and the tolerance of other cultures and opinions within multicultural societies all seemed assured. Now, the growth of terrorism and the collision between individual freedoms and issues of faith test the resolve of democrats and multiculturalists alike. Events in Birmingham early in 2005 and the responses to BBC's broadcast of *Jerry Springer: the Opera* have also made it clear that a benign shrug and passive tolerance may not be sufficient to guarantee artistic or democratic freedoms.

Now we have to ask: How can any democratic society preserve hard won individual freedoms while at the same time making a safe and secure space for faith communities – particularly those who feel belittled and beleaguered by the brashness of the commercial world and besieged by a Godless majority opinion?

Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, a Sikh, was born in Watford. She studied modern languages at Bristol University then worked as a journalist, refugee worker and actress. She won attention with her work on a writers' course run by Carlton TV when it was working on the resurrected TV soap *Crossroads.* She also began work on her first play, *Behsharam* (Shameless) which dealt with a dysfunctional Sikh family. This premiered at the Soho Theatre in London before transferring to Birmingham Rep in 2001. While some critics disliked the play's soapy qualities they applauded the author's writing talent.

Nicholas De Jongh, writing in the London *Evening Standard, said it* 'might pass muster as an elaborate trial-run for a Channel 4 soap opera about a working class Asian family in England'. Michael Billington, writing in *The Guardian*, deplored the dominance of 'situations' over ideas, but said she had 'definite flickers of promise'. She then went on to write scripts for *East Enders*, *Westway* (the BBC World Service radio soap), *The Cleaner* (a film for BBC 1) and the script for a film called *Pound Shop Boys,* which had been co-commissioned by the film council. Her second play *Behzti* (Dishonour) was commissioned by Birmingham Rep; Manchester Royal Exchange had also commissioned a new play from her.[1]

Behzti (Dishonour), about the visit of a mother and daughter to a *gurdwara* (Sikh temple: from Punjabi meaning literally 'gateway to the guru') and the resulting memories of a past trauma, was almost certain to cause unease: it concerned sexual abuse, corruption and the efforts of Sikh leaders to cover up homosexuality, rape and suicide inside a *gurdwara.* It is difficult for non-Sikhs to appreciate the difficulty of such a suggestion. The central section of the *gurdwara* is a holy area, but surrounding it there are sections of general social access; the temple is very important to Sikh social and community life and about a third of any Sikh community visit their local temple at least once per week. To even suggest that the sacred section of the temple had been the scene of a sexual attack was difficult for the community to accept; to suggest that these

[1] L. Jury, 'Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti', *The Independent*, 21 December 2004: www.news.independent.co.uk/people/profiles/story.

acts had been committed by a priest and then covered up by religious and community leaders was also very difficult.

Initially Sikh elders had asked that the setting of the play be transferred from inside a Sikh temple to a community centre, or at least that it be made clear that the events of the play had not taken place in the central section of the temple, but in one of the social areas. Some changes had been made to the play, but discussions with the theatre and the author had broken down.

Peaceful demonstrations outside the theatre got out of hand and escalated into violence and demands that the play be banned. On Saturday 19 December 2004, 300-1,000 Sikhs (depending on which account you read) confronted 80 police, 30 of whom were in riot gear, and stormed Birmingham Rep. The audience from the main auditorium had to be evacuated, eggs and stones were thrown, windows were shattered and equipment broken: 5 police officers were injured, 3 Sikh demonstrators were arrested but later released on bail. Shortly afterwards threats of abduction and murder from members of the Birmingham Sikh community forced the playwright to flee her home and go into hiding. Gurdial Singh Atwal, chair of the Sikh Council of Gurdwaras in Birmingham said:

> *Behzti* is an insult to our Sikh community. Initially we just wanted them to change the setting of the play. But they didn't listen. So, we stopped the show.[2]

A spokesperson for the Repertory Theatre said that the theatre respected the right of the Sikh community to criticise the play and raise issues of concern, but insisted that the Rep had consulted widely with the Sikh community before the opening night and that several changes had been made to the play as a result. Short of blatant censorship of abandoning the play the Rep felt it could not have done more to consider the Sikh community. They had invited the Sikh community to produce a written statement expressing its views on the play, and this had been distributed to everyone in the audience and they had agreed that peaceful public protest would go ahead. They also insisted that the play is a work of fiction and makes no comment on Sikhism as a religion. The author had also produced a Forward to the play in which she made her

[2] P. Sonwalker, Indo Asian News Service, 'Play Makes no Comment on Sikhism' *Yahoo! India News,* 20 December 2004: www.in.news.yahoo.com.

ideas clear.[3] However, the spokesperson said, while the theatre had a commitment to artistic freedom it also had a duty of care towards its audiences, and as the theatre feared for public safety it had decided 'purely on safety grounds' that it had no option but to withdraw the play from production.

While women's groups expressed dismay at the decision and a 700 strong petition from leading writers and theatre people appeared in *The Guardian*, Sikh community leaders greeted this decision as a 'victory for common sense'. Kim Kirpaljit Kaur Brom a City Councillor and spokesperson for the protesters said:

> We congratulate the theatre for making its decision after we exercised our democratic rights to protest. There are no winners and no losers. The end result is that common sense has prevailed.[4]

Comment on the issues has been wide-ranging and disturbing in equal measure. There can be little doubt that the decision to cancel the play has backfired on the Sikh community in Britain (numbering about 600,000). It has turned a controversy that was confined to the Sikh community into a national debate – and it has done so at a time when the Government is considering the extension of laws concerning blasphemy and when the clash between minority sensitivities and majority law, freedom of expression and the threat of mob rule, democratic rights and religious intolerance are becoming increasingly problematic. It has also highlighted once again what appears to be the clash between repressive traditional practices and the apparently amoral life of modern secular society.

Sikh Birmingham City Councillor Lal warned that the play had caused a lot of frustration among the Sikh community that the play was a gross offence and that violence would escalate and become an international issue if the Repertory Theatre attempted to stage the play. Councillor John Alden on the other hand, as a Cabinet member in the area of Leisure, Sport and Culture criticised protestors saying that they had damaged the City's reputation and that neither the government nor the City would be forced into any kind of censorship.

Dr Mohammed Naseem, Chairman of the Birmingham Central Mosques, said he thought that the play gave a false impression of the Sikh community, but condemned violent protest. Birmingham Perry Barr MP Khalid Mahmood stressed that religious and racial integration in Birmingham had been very extensive and that it was unfortunate this had to happen here, but accused the Rep of showing 'a lack of sensitivity', blamed the playwright for using Sikh symbolism in an attention seeking publicity stunt, but condemned violent protest. Parv Bancil, a Birmingham playwright said:

> The problem lies in the portrayal of Asian men as women eaters, while Asian women are shown to aspire to marry white men in order to escape their tyrannical men. I guess this is what is upsetting the community.[5]

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[3] Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, 'Forward to *Behzti*', Asians in Media, www.asiansinmedia.org/news/article.

[4] T. Branigan & V. Dodd, 'Writer in Hiding as Violence Closes Sikh Play', *The Guardian* (21 December 2004): www.guardian.co.uk/arts/news/story.

Estelle Morris, minister for the arts and a Birmingham MP, said that although it was a sad day for freedom of speech, she thought the theatre had made the right decision. Vincent Nichols, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Birmingham, said the play was offensive to people of all faiths and that even a fictional violation of a holy place demeaned sacred places of all religions. [6]

Sewa Singh Mandla, Chairman of the Council of Sikh Gurdwaras in Birmingham, who had been involved in discussions with the theatre about the play, said:

> On the one hand she agreed with me when I said these things did not happen in *gurdwaras*, but she said that it was fiction so should go ahead. On the other hand the fact that she said she wished to expose hypocrisy implies it was based on fact. Such protests against a play have rarely, if ever, happened. Doesn't that suggest this really hurt people and that they protested for a good reason? [7]

In the same article Hannana Sidiqui of Southall Black Sisters said:

> We have the right to express our views either in an artistic form or political protest. We know of women who have been raped by religious leaders – we don't know if it has, but it is possible that it has happened in a temple, church or mosque. The wider issue at stake is whether a person has a right to express themselves.

Fiona MacTaggart, the Home Office Minister for Race Equality, Community Police and Civil Renewal, MP for Slough, which has a very large Sikh community, refused to offer support for either the theatre or the author. She said that whether they put the play on or not and how they responded to protests about it were matters for the theatre, not the government. She also said that the play would probably be helped by the closure:

> I think that when people are moved by theatre to protest, in a way that is a sign of free speech which is so much a part of the British tradition. I think that it is a great thing that people care enough about a performance to protest.[8]

The Minister did not seem to realise that the violence was not caused by people who were moved by the play, but by people who had not seen the play at all. They simply wanted to prevent the play being seen by anyone.

Writer Minette Marrin described minister Fionna Mactaggart's defence of the protester's right to free speech as 'lilly-livered', 'wittering' and 'pusillanimous'. She accused the minister, in 'constantly avoiding the glaringly obvious point', of appeasement. She went on to say:

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[5] P. Sonwalker, Indo Asian News Service, 'Play Makes no Comment on Sikhism' *Yahoo! India News* (20 December 2004): www.in.news.yahoo.com.

[6] N. Walia, 'Halla Bol!', *The Times of India,* (24 December 2004): www.timesofidia.indiatimes.com/articleshow.

[7] A. Asthana, 'Tempest of Rage Shakes Sikh Temple', *The Observer* (26 December 2004), 13.

[8] BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme, 21 December 2004.

> British Sikhs in Birmingham – perhaps only a few – simply don't understand the problem with censorship at all. To describe what happened as 'a victory for common sense', when it was a victory for thuggery, is perhaps better than issuing threats… but not much.

She then went on to point out that art had a duty to offend; that if it did not offend then perhaps art was not doing its job and she concluded with a swipe at the government's planned extension of legislation:

> Any new law that curtails the freedom to offend, in the name of multiculturalism or of religion, or a confusion of the two, will be a bad law and cultural cowardice.[9]

Salman Rushdie, an Indian Muslim writer who in 1989 was sentenced to death by Iranian clerics after he used apocryphal sections of the *Koran* and portrayed the prophet Mohammed as a man with sexual urges in his novel *Satanic Verses*, went into hiding with police protection from Special Branch until 1998, and had this to say on the events in Birmingham:

> It has been horrifying to see the response. It is pretty terrible to hear government ministers expressing approval of the ban and failing to condemn the violence, when they should be supporting freedom of expression. The minister is sending entirely the wrong message. It should be quite clear that in this country, it is the liberty of any artist to express their view of their own society and their own community. Frankly bookshops and theatres are full of things that would upset an interest group. In 1989, when *Satanic Verses* was attacked, all political parties were united in their condemnation of the violence and their support for the principle for freedom of expression. It seems that the Blair government's capacity to disappoint knows no bounds. If being upset is the only requirement to banning something, there will be nothing in the theatres. Should we ban Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* for being anti-Semitic? Where do you stop? This seems to be a trend that has come from India, where extremists have attacked a number of artistic and cultural events, with very little control. Works by some of India's most revered artists have been attacked by Shiv Sena (an extremist Hindu grouping), and now the Sikh community here are travelling down a similar path. The question *Behzti* raises is whether such things are actually happening within the Sikh community. If it is true that things are going on in *gurdwaras* that should be exposed, then this episode needs to be examined in a new light.[10]

In terms of race there is never a time that is not a 'sensitive time'.

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[9] M. Marrin, 'One Puff and our Temple of Free Speech Falls Down', *The Sunday Times*, 26 December 2004, 15.
[10] R. Syal, 'I'm disgusted Ministers did nothing', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 26 December 2004, 10.

In terms of race and ethnic identity there is never a time that is not a 'sensitive time'. However, Sunny Hundia media commentator on 'Asian Affairs' had a rather different take on the issues and emphasised that these events had little to do with Birmingham or with theatre but were part of a debate within the Sikh community about the difficulties women have in finding a space to express themselves within a male dominated culture. Her comments have been widely quoted in Indian newspapers:

> The name of the play is important. The central premise is that there are people in the Asian community who are more afraid of dishonour - *behzti* – than actually confronting injustice. Ironically that is what is being played out here. People are objecting to the play not because of its content… but because it raises issues they'd rather not discuss. Especially in front of white people, in a major venue, and at such a 'sensitive time'.

When Nicholas Hytner, Director of the National Theatre, was asked to define how theatre might offer to support a politically correct sensitivity to religious belief and the right of people not to be offended in their religious beliefs, replied that people do not have any right to be protected from comments and opinions expressed in works of art.

Theatre writer Shakila Taranum Maan, who staged her own peaceful protest in favour of freedom of speech outside the Birmingham Rep said:

> In my view the alternative to cancelling the play was to maintain the police presence and to permit the play to complete its run. It would have demonstrated that freedom of speech cannot be silenced by intimidation. This, after all, is the principle the government claims to uphold in Iraq.[11]

A spokesperson for the West Midlands Constabulary said that the theatre's decision was its own affair but had the theatre decided to continue with the play, controlling a large crowd of protesters would not have been a problem. Helena Kennedy, QC, wrote:

> The issues depicted in the Birmingham Rep play *Behzti* - rape and corruption – need to be exposed, however shaming it is for the communities involve. Southall Black Sisters point out that in the mid-nineties a Sikh woman was raped by a Sikh priest but when she found the courage to proceed with criminal charges she was subjected to a sustained campaign of vilification. Ramanathan Samanathan, a Hindu priest, was jailed for twelve years in February 2005 for rape of a vulnerable woman in a temple in Croydon, south London. Minority religious communities hate the exposing of their dirty linen because they already feel so marginalised. Taslima Nasrin, a Bengali novelist, had a fatwa created against her in 1993 because one of her books, Shame, criticised Islamic texts which are used to oppress women.[12]

[11] Shakila Tranum Maan, 'The Mob has Spoken', *The Sunday Times*, 26 December 2004, 14.
[12] H. Kennedy, QC, 'Postcript', L. Appignanesi (ed.), *Free Expression is no Offence*, Penguin: London, 2005.

However narrowly government ministers might seek to present proposed new legislation on religious hatred as of interest only to a tiny minority with little real opportunity for wide application in normal daily life, it is clear that proposed laws planned to mollify Muslim leaders after the invasion of Iraq are in danger of being used by *all* religious groups to prevent *any* discussion, comment or criticism.

The government's failure to respond to a clear breach of the law in Birmingham, the failure of two of its ministers to offer a stand against censorship in favour of freedom of expression, indicates very clearly that this government may not have thought through the consequences of its proposed legislation. What set out to prevent hate speech may actually stifle mature debate and promote censorship of any and all religious discussion. It is possible they simply did not want to offend Sikh Labour voters in the run up to a general election. However, the proposed new blasphemy legislation and the government's attitude to events in Birmingham also mean we may need to be much more alert to the government's willingness to trade democratic freedoms for electoral success.

Most religions have their dissidents. Jews have objected to the work of Philip Roth and Joseph Heller; the Papal Index has banned the works of Voltaire, Flaubert and James Joyce; Muslim clerics have reacted badly to Salman Rushdie and Naguib Mahfouz. Most religions have something to say on the subject of helping our neighbour, toleration, respect for other religions and the preservation of life – the same issues most democratic societies aim to address. Most religions also encourage a culture of intolerance, and in this they differ from democratic communities.

However, since the fulfilment of religious communities lies not in this world, but in the next, secular and religious systems are bound to clash even in the most tolerant and well-ordered of societies. Since the time of Mary Tudor Britain has been unusual in the world for not punishing its religious rebels. The poet P. B. Shelley wrote a pamphlet entitled *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811). This was an intellectual assault upon the oppressiveness of the Church of England. It may have lost him his place at Oxford University, but Shelley was sent down not for writing the pamphlet but rather for his behaviour towards the college authorities when they came to question him about it.

In a secular society Art does more than celebrate God. As Shelley demonstrated, Art challenges orthodoxy. That is one of its major functions. It is a way of airing ideas and debating issues. Art is always a particular challenge to the opinions of those who refuse to see it. Freedom of speech and opinion does not mean freedom from criticism, and it does not protect the artist from getting it wrong. But if we are to have art censored by the clerics we will certainly have less literature, less art, less humour, less debate, less understanding. In time we may have no multicultural society at all, since censorship and clericalism also encourage intolerance.

How are we to reconcile the very different claims of religious and democratic societies? In order to get anywhere near an answer we have to ask some very difficult questions of religious communities living in societies. For example am I likely to think less of a particular religion because of the way some people practice it? Am I likely to confuse the Spanish Inquisition with Roman Catholicism as a whole? As result of this play, am I likely to think less of Sikhism because of Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play or because of the violence at Birmingham Rep? Am I likely to confuse Sikhism as a whole with those who took part in that event? Am I more likely to think less of Islam because of

Rushdie's comments or because of the *fatwah* against him? Am I likely to confuse the Ayatollah who condemned Rushdie with the millions of Muslims who did not?

In a democratic society, writers, readers, viewers and audiences are under no obligation to be neutral or to agree with the majority: that is the nature of democracy. We are all free to criticise the artistic level of the work on offer, and to offer comment on the accuracy of the content. All citizens have the right to express themselves freely, even when that gives offence. All citizens are free to protest, vigorously, vociferously and publicly if they feel offended.

What we are not free to do is behave violently. What we are not free to do is prevent other people from expressing their opinions – whether we like their opinions or not. We do not have the right to destroy works of art because they offend us. As Mark Lawson put it:

> The proper outrage against the banning of *Behzti* was clearly muted in some areas by a fear of sounding anti-Sikh. For this reason, while attempted censorship in the 1970s made artists more determined to speak out, there's a risk in this mind-your-language climate of subjects becoming no-go areas for the arts. Cultural commissioners have also made a tactical error. Whereas their 1970s predecessors routinely told objectors to bog off, the new approach is to 'consult' and 'advise' the wounded parties. This device backfires because the censorious take 'consultation' to mean veto. They demand cuts and rewrites during their consultations, and are even more outraged when the project proceeds intact.[13]

In a democracy the responsibility of the state authorities is to uphold the rights of *all* its citizens, not by invoking censorship, by calling on dissidents to be silent, by asking them to exercise restraint, nor by legislating them out of legitimate existence. In a democracy we are all volunteers – in church, in the theatre, in a bookshop, in a political party. We don't have to take part in anything we don't want to, and we can, by and large, believe anything we choose to believe.

Perhaps the way forward, if we want to persist in creating a multicultural democratic society, is in seeing tolerance not as something passive, but as something active. Perhaps we also need to consider the possibility that respecting and encouraging another person, even when we disagree with them, is more important than our own particular religious, cultural or political viewpoint.

Perhaps we also need to actively teach, understand and develop the idea that in a democracy we all have the right to think and say what we want – regardless. In a democracy the real crime is not thinking what you want or even saying what you think. It is preventing someone else from saying or thinking what they want. The only restraints on this are that in what we think and say we should not encourage others to hatred or violence. There is a big difference between saying 'I do not agree with certain attitudes, practices or beliefs common in Catholicism, Islam or Sikhism' and encouraging people to go out and attack Catholics, Muslims or Sikhs. If atheists can tolerate deeply held

[13] M. Lawson, 'Censor in the Stalls', *The Guardian*, 5 March 2005, 22.

religious beliefs, it should be possible for this tolerance to work the other way too - atheism is often a deeply serious moral and ethical position.

Perhaps we also need to ask whether we can protect and promote a multicultural society better by repealing *all* laws on blasphemy. Perhaps we need to think less about legislating tolerance into existence and more about how we make citizenship a respectable activity, about how we persuade *everyone* to take part in debate rather than in violence, and how to encourage wider understanding and tolerance of both secular and religious values.

Follow-up Work

- How is this topic relevant to the theme of Responsibility?
- To what extent are creative artists free to say just what they like?
- Do artists have the right to expose others to criticism – particularly in the areas of race, sex and religion?
- Does revelation and criticism necessarily provoke hate-speech?
- Do artists have any special right to say what others cannot?
- What are the limits to freedom of speech? Are writers ever above the law?
- In what ways are these events relevant to a discussion of writing and responsibility?
- What are the responsibilities of the writer when it comes to free speech and hate speech?
- Are religious and ethnic groups ever above the law?