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***Ghost Town and The Casual Vacancy:* Sikhs in the Writings of Western Women Novelists**

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Abstract

In 2012 the president of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee demanded that the novelist JK Rowling remove offensive text from her novel, *The Casual Vacancy*. This article focuses on the appropriateness of the Sikh-related content of two 21st-century novels – JK Rowling’s *The Casual Vacancy* and Catriona Troth’s *Ghost Town* – against the backdrop of previous fictional portrayals of Sikhs. Further context is provided by both Sikh and non-Sikh responses to western novelists’ portrayal of Sikh characters and social issues. Sikhs feature – as incidental figures and as protagonists – in a substantial body of English-language fiction, much of it by British women. While the portrayal of Sikhs in 19th- and early 20th-century novels is framed by empire and needs to be viewed in the context of Orientalism, and especially the image of the ‘martial’ male Sikh, many later 20th- and the 21st-century novels (mainly by women writers) are situated in the UK diaspora and their authors express a multicultural sensibility, attentive to aspects of the Sikh faith. This, I suggest, counters one critical opinion, namely that white writing is inherently Orientalist and that (only) South Asian writers can avoid this white hegemonic approach. However, writers’ affirmation of diversity needs to be interrogated for an essentialism reminiscent of Orientalism: Rowling’s treatment is on occasion exoticizing and binary, even though Sikhs’ response to *The Casual Vacancy* has been appreciative, with the exception of the SGPC’s reaction. Moreover, while action-packed historical novels by white authors, focusing on warlike male Sikhs, have given way to diaspora fiction with a greater concern for female Sikh characters and youth, the tradition of historical novels featuring Sikhs continues.

Keywords: Fiction, Sikhs, western women, Orientalism, JK Rowling, Catriona Troth

Introduction

In 2012 the media reported Sikh anger directed at JK Rowling, celebrity author of the Harry Potter novels. The reason for this anger was the way in which, in Rowling’s novel, *The Casual Vacancy*, a school bully had insulted his class-mate, a young Sikh woman. The resultant news coverage spotlighted Sikh sensitivity to portrayals of Sikhs in fiction. The present article examines how Sikh characters are portrayed and how Sikh-related issues are addressed in *The Casual Vacancy*, in parallel with a less well-known novel, Catriona Troth’s *Ghost Town*. I contextualize

these two novels by offering an overview of a century of novels (mainly by non-Sikhs) featuring Sikh characters, and by some Sikh (and other) critics' responses to recent fictional portrayals. While historical fiction involving Sikh warriors has largely given way to socially aware fiction set in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, I suggest, nonetheless, that a critical alertness to Orientalist tendencies is pertinent when examining novels such as Rowling's and Troth's.

The Casual Vacancy and Ghost Town

Foregrounding young Sikhs, both authors' novels appropriately acknowledge aspects of Sikh religion. Both *The Casual Vacancy* and *Ghost Town* are set in England: *Ghost Town* in the West Midlands city of Coventry in 1981 and *The Casual Vacancy* in the imaginary West-country village of Pagford at some point in the present century (we know this much because Facebook plays a key role in the action). For both writers their Sikh characters – two young men, Baz (Bhajan Singh Lister) and Vik (Vikram Singh), in *Ghost Town* and two women, Sukhvinder Jawanda and her mother, Dr Parminder Jawanda, in *The Casual Vacancy* – are central to the action. Moreover, the detail of their depictions and their own statements about the writing process suggest that both writers had researched Sikhs and Sikhism, as well as being familiar with the diasporic setting, in the interests of accurate portrayal.

Rowling's novel begins with the death of Councillor Barry Fairbrother creating a 'casual vacancy' (the technical term) in the council. Factions then form in the run-up to the ensuing election and the candidates are horrified when they find that their darkest secrets have been publicized on the council's online forum by three angry teenagers, one of whom was Sukhvinder Jawanda. An academic failure, because of her dyslexia, Sukhvinder had disappointed her high-achieving doctor mother and was also the victim of merciless bullying. However, by risking her life in an attempt to save the brother of her socially challenged peer, Krystal Weedon (who lives in the 'Fields', a deprived housing estate, rife with addiction and violence), Sukhvinder emerges as the novel's unexpected star, acting out of courage and altruism.

No less socially engaged, Troth's novel surges with the racial tension between skinheads and young Asians (i.e. people of South Asian ethnicity) in Coventry in 1981. That year (in real life) a young Sikh man, Satnam Singh Gill, and an Asian doctor, Dr Amal Dharry, were murdered and *Ghost Town*, a single recorded by The Specials, a successful English Two-tone and ska revival band, was released and played at an anti-racist gig. In the novel, Baz (Bhajan Singh), as a professional

photographer, not only films fatal conflict that erupts but also takes a stand, together with Maia, a white unemployed graduate who is committed to social action. Their base is a center for the homeless (based on one which Troth knew well from a period as a volunteer). The homeless center and the city's famous Two-tone music play an important part in the novel.

Sikh and Non-Sikh Responses to Fictional Portrayals of Sikhs

Sikh protests at fictional (mis)representation of members of their community first made headlines as early as December 2004, because a Sikh screenplay writer and former actress, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, had included an imaginary rape scene, set in a gurdwara, in her stage drama *Behzti*. Sikhs' protests in Birmingham resulted in the cancellation of the planned performances (Singh and Tatla 2006). Darshan Singh Tatla and his co-author Gurharpal Singh reflected on Sikhs' anger at Gurpreet Kaur's *Behzti*. They outlined the range of Sikh responses, including denying that such events took place in gurdwaras; commending Sikhs' reasonableness in trying to negotiate a compromise with the theatre; and objection both to the 'double standards' of British society which upheld Christian and Jewish criticisms when religious sensitivities were inflamed, and to a patronizing liberal tendency to sermonize on the right to freedom of expression. In *The Guardian* newspaper, rather than condemning Bhatti for offensive subject-matter, Gurharpal Singh's analysis of the protests was 'Sikhs are the real losers from Behzti... In a single act the community has overturned years of hard work and reverted to type as a militant tradition fixated with narrow communal interests' (2004).

In Rowling's case in 2012, it was not her portrayal of any misconduct, let alone rape, or any sacrilege, by a Sikh protagonist but her imagining of 'corrosive racism' (see Majhail 2018, quoting Rowling) in the form of hostile male pupils' hateful allusions to Sukhvinder's facial hair that drew an angry reaction from Avtar Singh Makkar, the president of the SGPC or Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee in Amritsar, Sikhs' most authoritative elected body. Having received several complaints, Makkar called the fictional bully's descriptions of Sukhvinder 'a slur on the Sikh community'.¹ He further commented: 'Even if the author had chosen to describe the female Sikh character's physical traits, there was no need for her to use provocative language, questioning her gender. This is condemnable.'²

¹ See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/9580177/First-Middle-England-now-Rowlings-novel-upsets-Sikhs-as-well.html> (accessed 6 October 2018).

² See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/9580177/First-Middle-England-now-Rowlings-novel-upsets-Sikhs-as-well.html> (accessed 6 October 2018).

Rather more Sikh readers, however, expressed appreciation for Rowling's sympathetic treatment of her Sikh characters, whose religion provides the book's moral compass. For instance, the New York-based creative writer, Navdeep Singh Dhillon, posted an online defence (2012). Dhillon satirized the SGPC president's expression of disproportionate outrage at a single sentence in Rowling's book rather than being exercised by France's continuing turban ban or by the abhorrent sexism in contemporary bhangra songs, and for that matter rather than expressing disapproval of other aspects of Rowling's 'dark' novel. Dhillon endorsed Rowling's decision to 'use a Sikh family, not just as tokens in this story, but as very human characters' and he defended the use, in its particular context, of the (odious) bully Fats's insult: 'mustachioed, yet large mammariated, scientists remain baffled by the contradictions of the hairy man-woman'. Instead of the author resorting to exotic stereotyping, Dhillon suggested, 'a genuine effort has been made by Rowling to integrate Sikh values into several characters in the novel, so I don't think we should start our morchas [protests] and book burnings just yet'. Dhillon probably spoke for other Sikh readers in appreciating Rowling's incorporation of 'Sikh values' – presumably a reference to Sukhvinder risking her own life in her courageous altruism. Indeed, according to another Sikh commentator, Harjinder Singh Majhail, 'Though Sukhvinder resorts to self-torture after undergoing racism, she emerges victorious like a brave Sikh by her self-determination and emerges a heroine by helping everybody in Britain' (2019). *The Guardian* also published a spirited defence of Rowling's novel by Balpreet Kaur, a young Sikh woman who had personal experience of coping with reactions to her own facial hair (Kaur 2012).

These fulsome endorsements by Sikhs are especially noteworthy in the wider context of criticisms of Rowling's work, for example for cultural appropriation in relation to her homogenizing treatment of Native American 'wizardry' with regard to the wizardry of the 'Potterverse' (see Little 2016 and Dixon 2018). Indeed, by 2020 Rowling was embroiled in another controversy, this time not because of her publications but because of her 'transphobic' and 'condescending' tweeting about transgender people (Sky News 2020).

It is also worth noting that, by contrast with the affirmative assessments by Sikh reviewers of Rowling's treatment of Sikhs, some other recent novels (by, as it happens, authors of South Asian background) that feature Sikh characters have met with a more negative response from their Sikh readers. Thus, regarding the Californian Punjabi author Bhira Backhaus's novel *Under the Lemon Trees* (2009), one Sikh reviewer, Manjyot Kaur, commented that it provided an 'unpleasant surprise' for its 'rather bleak portrayal of Sikh spirituality and practice' (Kaur

2009). Kaur mused regretfully that 'It would have been gratifying to have encountered at least one character who was positively portrayed as both a committed Sikh and a likeable, multi-faceted human being' (2009), even though she endorsed Backhaus's finely observed exploration of relationships in her own immigrant Sikh community as the Book of the Month selection for January 2010 on the sikhchic.com website.

In the field of Sikh Studies, three Sikh scholars, Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh, Darshan Singh Tatla and Gurharpal Singh, have also criticized fictional portrayals of Sikhs. Nikky Singh's published critiques concern Kip (Kirpal Singh) in *The English Patient*, a novel by Michael Ondaatje, a Canadian of Sri Lankan/Dutch heritage (Ondaatje 1982). While Singh commended Ondaatje's characterisation of Kip (Nikky Singh 2001), she deplored the impoverishment of this portrayal in the film of the novel (Nikky Singh 2004). In the case of novels by the Bengali American writer, Bharati Mukherjee (Tatla 2004 on Mukherjee 1988 and 1989) and a Punjabi Canadian writer, Iqbal S. Ramoowalia (Tatla 2017 on Ramoowalia 2005), Tatla took issue with both novelists for their political bias regarding Canadian Sikhs and their alleged implication in downing an Air India plane in 1985.

As an aside: by contrast, and perhaps surprisingly, amid all the Muslim outrage at Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, Sikhs had been silent about the fact that Rushdie began his narrative with the imagined hijacking of a plane by Sikhs over the English Channel (Rushdie 1988), so reinforcing a stereotype of Sikhs as terrorists. Perhaps this was because the writing itself somewhat obfuscates the terrorist act.

Singh and Tatla have also, authoritatively (and more affirmatively), surveyed British Sikhs in other novels too, written by both Sikhs and non-Sikhs (2006: 197-198), from Iqbal Singh in *The Immigrants* (Massey and Massey 1973), Rupinder Singh (Ruby) in *The Turban-Wallah* (Webster 1994) and Surinder, Danny's Sikh girlfriend in the award-winning *Pig* (Cowan 1994), through to – in the present century – Manjit in Bali Rai's *(Un)arranged Marriage* (2001), who discovers the discrepancies between Sikh religious values and his dad's Jat Sikh culture, and Sushminder in Bally Kaur Mahal's *The Pocket Guide to Being an Indian Girl* (2004).

As for non-Sikh writers' responses to fictional representations of Sikhs, Canadian Punjabi author Shauna Singh Baldwin's Partition novel, *What the Body Remembers* (1999), has been the subject of scholarly reviewing by Deepti Misri (2011) and Jennifer Randall (2014). However, in this case the reviews have focused on the

author's sensitive handling of Sikh women's experience of violence of many kinds, rather than on any treatment of the women *qua* Sikhs. Similarly, neither the novelist Ravinder Randhawa, nor critic Chris Weedon, identify Kulwant Singh (a character in Randhawa's novel, *A Wicked Old Woman*, 1987) as 'Sikh': Weedon simply expresses approval for Randhawa's novel as an exemplar of 'British Black and South Asian' writers 'contesting stereotypical white views of ethnic minority populations' (2006: 55). This article will return later to the assumptions embedded in Weedon's remarks.

Overall, little has been published on the ways in which Sikhs are represented in fiction since my own cursory survey, over thirty years ago, of Sikh-themed stories intended for younger readers (Nesbitt 1988). This survey briefly mentioned Helen Griffiths' novel, *Hari's Pigeon*, alongside other junior fiction including David Martin's *The Man in the Red Turban* (1970) and Len Webster's *The Turban-Wallah: A Tale of Little India* (1984). The authors had, in my view, written realistically about Sikhs in Britain, or (in Martin's case) Australia, and they shared a certain moral stance, showing Sikhs to be 'rich in distinctive culture yet not so different from everyone else after all' (Nesbitt 1988: 383).

By contrast, however, as I illustrated, Dickinson's unfortunately titled futuristic story, *The Devil's Children* (1970) simply involved Sikhs because the writer needed, for his fantasy, a community of people 'already resident in Britain, cohesive among themselves, good mechanics, different from the British in dress and behaviour' (Dickinson, personal communication, 1987). The Sikhs in Dickinson's story are idealized and alien, like 'a procession in fancy dress' (Dickinson 1970: 13), they spoke a 'strange language' (1970: 19) like 'the call of a bird' (1970: 17), and they were 'a soldier people' (1970: 31) who reminisced about military life (1970: 63). This was on the basis of Dickinson's father's wartime memories of Sikhs (personal communication, 1987).

Rowling's and Troth's Attention to the Sikh Faith

Whereas Dickinson had exoticized and idealized Sikhs, and set them in an imagined future, the other above-mentioned authors referred to elements of Sikh tradition to enrich their portrayal of credibly characterised individuals in true to life Sikh community settings. Similarly, in *The Casual Vacancy* and *Ghost Town*, Sikh characters inhabit convincingly realistic British settings – one more rural, and the other urban. Both Rowling and Troth provide carefully researched detail to enhance their characters' experience of wider social malaise, whether society's prevalent racism or young people's quest for identity. Aspects of Sikh tradition – the 5 Ks,

the Guru Granth Sahib and Harmandir Sahib (the Golden Temple, Amritsar) – all feature in ways that are integral, rather than tangential, to each novel’s plotting and characterization.

The ‘5 Ks’ are the five outward signifiers of Sikh identity, incumbent on initiates into the Khalsa, those Sikhs with a distinctive commitment to the faith. The formulation of the 5Ks is attributed to the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh. Through the imagined experiences of Sukhvinder Jawanda, Rowling raises the issues posed by one of the Ks, the *kes* (uncut hair), for Sikh women in the twenty-first century diaspora. First, Rowling imagines how in primary school the ‘boys had pulled Sukhvinder’s long, blue-black plait; it was the easiest thing to catch hold of when playing tag, and it had once presented an irresistible temptation when dangling, like now, down her back, hidden from the teacher’ (Rowling 2012: 120). More significantly, she describes how, in secondary school, this teasing had escalated into tormenting Sukhvinder about facial hair. The bully, ‘Fats’, was her chief tormentor, sending daily quotations and images ‘about hirsutism’ to her Facebook page (Rowling 2012: 120) and insults of the sort that so offended the president of the SGPC.

Rowling is highlighting a live issue: by the late 20th century, some Sikh women and girls living in the UK were increasingly worried about the implications for them of the Khalsa requirement to maintain *kes*. This rule was being interpreted as involving a taboo on removing any unwanted female facial hair. At the same time, British South Asian schoolgirls in general were acutely aware of peer pressure to remove body hair.

Feelings about hair and identity could run deep for men too. In the diaspora, Sikh men’s hair and turbans had become the site of racialization by the dominant white society, and many male Sikhs anticipated and experienced prejudice because of their distinctive appearance. At the same time they risked parents’ disapproval if they had their hair cut and stopped wearing a turban. Young Sikh men’s sensitivities surface in the edgy banter between Troth’s characters, Vik (Vikram) and Baz (Bhajan Singh):

Baz remembered. ‘You’d just cut your hair, and your father gave me the third degree [i.e. interrogated me] about why I’d grown mine long and who my father was and why I didn’t wear a turban or a beard.’ (Troth 2013: 311)

Non-Sikh peers’ questions could be uncomfortable too, as when Baz’s and Vik’s friend Maia asked: ‘Don’t Sikhs grow their hair like Baz? And wear turbans?’

‘Vik’s a *mona* [i.e. short-haired, shaven] Sikh,’ said Baz. ‘Cuts his hair, shaves his beard. His parents don’t approve, which is why he’s so sodding prickly about it.’ (Troth 2013: 87)

Troth’s dialogue realistically portrays the painful choices facing male Sikhs.

Regarding the other Ks, in Baz’s case, it had only been when, aged 13, he had disobediently opened a battered suitcase in his (English) mother’s bedroom, and discovered a *kirpan*, that he realized that his long-deceased father must have been a Sikh. He recognised too the symbolic importance of the other items: ‘the bangle, the combs, the shorts, the linen that could be folded into a turban.’ Inside the suitcase he had found a red sari:

Underneath lay a package wrapped in a linen handkerchief that sat heavy in his palm. He unfolded it and found a plain bangle made of heavy white metal and a pair of wooden combs. Below that was a strip of blue linen, at least five yards of it, and a pair of what looked like white cotton shorts.

He felt again in the suitcase. Something was buried in the folds of the shawl. A curved shape, smooth to the touch. He drew it out, gasped and nearly dropped it.

A small curved blade in a polished wooden sheath, hanging from a wide ribbon embroidered with symbols he recognised but couldn’t read. He’d seen one like it in Auntie Harjit’s house. Knew it was carried by all adult Sikhs.

The *kirpan*. (Troth 2013: 137)

Thus Troth draws on background knowledge of Sikhism to deepen her recounting of Baz’s self-discovery.

So too, well-judged reference by both authors to the Sikh scripture, enriches the narrative without laboring Sikh religiosity. In *Ghost Town*, Gurinder-ji, Vik’s father, warns Vik against seeking revenge for skinheads’ violence by quoting words of ‘the Guru’: ‘Do not turn round and strike those who strike you, kiss their feet and return to your own home’ (Troth 2013: 357). These are, in translation, Sheikh Farid’s words on page 1378 of the Guru Granth Sahib. Similarly, Rowling describes Sukhvinder’s mother, Parminder, turning to scripture for comfort in her grief at the death of Councillor Barry Fairbrother:

She jumped up again, strode back into the sitting room and took down, from the top shelf, one volume of the Sainchis, her brand-new holy book. Opening it at random, she read, with no surprise, but rather a sense of looking at her own devastated face in a mirror.

O mind, the world is a deep, dark pit. On every side, Death casts forward his net. (Rowling 2012: 40)

Rowling suggests realistically that Parminder kept portions (*sanchis*) of the scripture, rather than the full volume, at home and that these were kept on a top shelf (as a mark of respect). The words she read are a rendering of one of the medieval saint-poet Kabir's verses on page 654 of the Guru Granth Sahib. 'Opening it at random' suggests the Sikh practice of taking a *vak* (a reading for guidance) from the Guru Granth Sahib.

Parminder is shown too intoning Guru Nanak's composition, the 'Kirtan Sohila':

There was a terrible weight on Parminder's chest, but did not the Guru Granth Sahib exhort friends and relatives of the dead not to show grief, but to celebrate their loved one's reunion with God? In an effort to keep traitorous tears at bay, Parminder silently intoned the night-time prayer, the *kirtan sohila*.³

*My friend, I urge you that this is the opportune time to serve the saints.
Earn divine profit in this world and live in peace and comfort in the next.
Life is shortening day and night.
O mind, meet the Guru and set right your affairs...* (Rowling 2012: 144)

Rowling's reference to Harmandir Sahib, too, strengthens the text with a delicate realism. Of all the Sikhs' historic shrines, Harmandir Sahib is unquestionably the most powerfully symbolic devotional centre for Sikhs worldwide. In Rowling's narrative Parminder had dismissed her husband Vikram's suggestion of a family visit to Amritsar and the word 'betrayed' suggests the pain that her refusal inflicted on herself no less than on her husband:

She felt dimly that she had betrayed something, in refusing the Golden Temple. A vision of it swam through her tears, its lotus-flower dome

³ Guru Nanak's composition on pages 12 to 13 of the Guru Granth Sahib.

reflected in a sheet of water, honey-bright against a backdrop of white marble. (Rowling 2012: 436)

Both Troth and Rowling also address issues of gender in Sikh society. Rowling parenthetically imagined Parminder Jawanda's feelings about the prospect of having a marriage facilitated by her family. The brackets seem to reinforce the persistence of Parminder's friend Tessa's memory that Parminder's marriage had been 'arranged' and also the ambivalence of Parminder's feelings in the face of an outsider's (Tessa's) likely condemnation of an aspect of her own (Parminder's) family convention:

('It's only an introduction through the family,' Parminder had told her in the early days of their friendship, defensive and annoyed at something she had seen in Tessa's face. 'Nobody *makes* you marry, you know.'

But she had spoken, at other times, of the immense pressure from her mother to take a husband.

'All Sikh parents want their kids married. It's an obsession,' Parminder said bitterly.) (Rowling 2012: 292-293)

However, Troth, in her recreation of Coventry's Punjabi youth culture in 1981, a generation before Rowling's more contemporary Britain, suggests young British Sikh women's growing assertiveness. Mohan, Vik and some of their male friends are planning a march and Narinder, a young Sikh woman friend, demands: 'What about us?' and 'You going to be like your father and tell us the women are meant to stay behind and make food for the *langar*?' (Troth 2013: 333). Moreover, Narinder, suggests an advantage for a Sikh woman in going out with someone who was not as spoilt as Punjabi males tended to be:

'You wonder why I don't want to go out with a Punjabi boy? When you're all like little princes with *laddu* [celebratory sweetmeat] in your mouths, wanting everything done for you?' (Troth 2013: 169)

To assume that either Troth's Narinder or Rowling's Parminder is intended to represent, in some exclusive manner, the attitudes or experience of all their British Sikh female contemporaries is to underestimate the diversity of situations and personalities in both generations and, quite likely, each writer's awareness of this diversity. There is thus no reason to regard either Narinder's or Parminder's characters' attitudes as anachronistic.

‘Mixed’ Relationships and Cultural Fusion

Narinder’s comment on spoilt Punjabi boys leads into the matter of cross-cultural, inter-ethnic relationships. In the UK and other diaspora settings, the later decades of the twentieth century saw an increasing number of relationships between Sikhs and non-Sikhs, like Baz’s parents – his father from the Punjab and his mother from Bilston (Troth 2013: 356). Breaking the mould by embarking on ‘mixed’ relationships typically involved a Sikh man with a non-Sikh woman, rather than vice versa: Narinder’s remark challenges this emergent norm.

Rowling also suggests another dimension of fusion, the perplexing cultural messages for a young Sikh growing up in the UK, with its Christian cultural heritage. She articulates Sukhvinder’s syncretistic mix:

It was all very confusing, and she continued to enjoy Easter eggs and decorating the Christmas tree, and found the books that Parminder pressed upon her children, explaining the lives of the gurus and the tenets of Khalsa, extremely difficult to read. (Rowling 2012: 3010)

She depicts too the emotional demand on Sukhvinder of being asked, as ‘the only brown person in her class’, to ‘talk about the Sikh religion’ to her class fellows:

She had stood obediently at the front of the class and told the story of the Sikh religion’s founder Guru Nanak, who disappeared into a river, and was believed drowned but re-emerged after three days underwater to announce: ‘There is no Hindu, there is no Moslem.’

The other children had sniggered at the idea of anyone surviving underwater for three days. Sukhvinder had not had the courage to point out that Jesus had died and then come back to life. She had cut the story of Guru Nanak short, desperate to get back to her seat. (Rowling 2012: 301)

In *Ghost Town* the complexities of young people’s identity formation in relation to their Sikh backgrounds includes Baz’s sense not of cultural fusion but of himself as ‘mixed’ – having one Sikh parent and one from another culture. Baz has never known his father and being near his Sikh friend, Vik, makes him ‘aware of the thousand tiny things he should have learnt from birth’. ‘Too Paki to be white. Too gora [white] to be *desi* [Indian]’ is how he sums himself up (Troth 2013: 146).

Troth alludes too to the pain of the Ugandan Sikhs who came to the UK as refugees from President Idi Amin in 1972:

Mandeep and Daljit were older than Vik when they were thrown out of their home in Uganda. They'd carried their resentment with them. (Troth 2013: 129)

Continuities in Authorial Stance

In one view, references of this sort, not only to the Sikh religion, but also to Sikhs' cross-cultural marriages and transnational migration, serve to enrich the authors' portrayal without distancing the Sikh characters or burdening the narrative. Both Rowling and Troth had taken care to research their subject matter. Troth (who herself lived in Coventry in 1981) carefully checked her references to Sikh culture and she acknowledged the help of Sudha Bhuchar, the co-director of Tamasha Theatre, in helping her avoid 'the pitfalls inherent in writing about a culture not one's own' (Troth 2013: 458). Similarly, not only had Rowling 'had one big conversation about Sikhism that I can remember' with a young Sikh woman in London many years earlier⁴ but, we are informed, she did a 'vast amount of research' (PTI, Agencies 2012).

Moreover, both Troth's and Rowling's writing is framed by their awareness of the diversity of British society and imbued with multiculturalism, a multiculturalism that chimes with the following vignette of diverse UK society in *The Tidal Zone*, a 2016 novel by another contemporary novelist, Sarah Moss. Here the narrator remarks how in the local park he and his wife 'like the way a group of elderly Sikh gentlemen meet on the benches by the glasshouse every fine afternoon, to share tea from thermos flasks and pass around Punjabi newspapers, and the way one day last summer we could have taken a photo of the local folk dancing club doing the Gay Gordons on the grass, watched by a group of women in burqas picnicking under the trees with an assortment of small children, like a promotional film for a version of Englishness that is now not going to happen' (Moss 2016: 176).

However, just as multiculturalism has been condemned for intrinsic essentialism and tokenism – see, for example, educationist, Barry Troyna (1987) on the flawed conceptualization of multicultural, as opposed to antiracist, education – so, too, writers' acknowledgement of diversity can be dismissed as itself a variant of the binary discourse that Edward Said termed Orientalism (1978). Indeed, another educator, Mariela Nunez-Jane, has much more recently suggested that diversity is

⁴ <http://www.sikhnet.com/news/how-sikhism-fits-jk-rowlings-new-book> See also 'Front Row', BBC Radio 4 27 September 2012 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01mx27g> (accessed 2 February 2018).

itself an ‘Orientalist discourse’ (Nunez-Janes 2007: 41), albeit one in which the essentialism of people and cultures might be decoupled from their hierarchization. In other words, it is theoretically possible to stereotype communities without also ranking them as inferior or superior to each other.

In this context of the alleged Orientalism of multiculturalism it is arguable that not only Dickinson’s imagined ‘Devil’s children’ but also Rowling’s *The Casual Vacancy* exemplify an Orientalist binary discourse. Indeed, Rowling has explained, in a distant echo of Dickinson’s instrumental use of Sikhs in *The Devil’s Children*, how the Jawanda family fulfilled a purpose in her story:

I wanted the Sikh family at the heart of Pagford, and I wanted them to be second generation Britons. So they are insiders and outsiders simultaneously. In the book, it is Sikhism that provides religious morality, not the Church of England, which is represented by an empty church.⁵

Thus, it is Sikh rather than Anglican moral sensibility that is foregrounded in Rowling’s Pagford. Moreover, some readers may detect an Orientalist tinge in Rowling’s character, Samantha Mollison’s, reaction to Vikram Jawanda:

Samantha had heard somewhere, not long after they had become her neighbours, that Vikram and Parminder had had an arranged marriage. She found the idea unspeakably erotic. Imagine being ordered to marry Vikram, having to do it; she had wrought a little fantasy in which she was veiled and shown into a room, a virgin condemned to her fate Imagine looking up, and knowing you were getting that Not to mention the additional frisson of his job [as a surgeon]: that much responsibility would have given a much uglier man sex appeal. (Rowling 2012: 96)

Arguably, Rowling here provides yet another example of western fiction’s exoticizing of Sikh men. In the words of the American scholar of masculinities, Harjant Gill, ‘turbaned Sikh men have frequently appeared as objects of Orientalist fetish and desire in Western literature’ (Gill 2016).

Indeed, a recurrent trope in western writers’ fiction – and certainly in over a century of western women’s novels – is the attractive distinctiveness of male Sikhs: their princely bearing, their beards and handsome features. To quote from just two: regarding Eva Bell’s protagonist, Pertab Singh: ‘Even for a Sikh – that most

⁵ <http://www.sikhnet.com/news/how-sikhism-fits-jk-rowlings-new-book> See also ‘Front Row’, BBC Radio 4 27 September 2012 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01mx27g> (accessed 2 February 2018).

handsome of Asiatic races – he was strikingly good looking’ (Travers 1910: 30) and, similarly, the novelist Eliza Pollard’s character, Futtih Singh, ‘was a handsome man, in the prime of life, muscular and agile, the *beau idéal* of a Sikh warrior’ (Pollard 1896: 15).

Such a sentiment was also consistent with, and perpetuated, widespread British assumptions about Sikhs as a ‘martial race’. However, by 2019 when Vee Walker published a novel, largely based on her grandfather’s diaries and letters from World War 1 in France, this Orientalist view had been challenged. Whereas, eighty years earlier, the novelist and explorer Rosita Forbes had declared, ‘[t]he men are warriors by birth and training’ (Forbes 1939: 67), Walker’s assessment was more nuanced. Perhaps influenced by more recent historical discrediting of the martial race theory, she observed that her grandfather, who ‘had lived among Sikhs for most of his life and had fought alongside them in France for a year’

had once unthinkingly considered them a ‘martial race’, which most of the misguided few leading this war still did. Now he knew better. Many were gentle souls, farmers, often second sons entering the army from rural hamlets because of a long tradition of family service. (Walker 2019: 189)

In addition to the attractiveness and martial reputation of Sikh men, other shared themes, too, link novelists across the generations, although to term these ‘orientalist’ can entail an undeserved value judgement. Thus, Rowling’s evocation of Harmandir Sahib in *The Casual Vacancy* is foreshadowed by novelist Eliza Pollard’s description of the approach to the golden temple in her *The White Dove of Amritsir*:

Futtih Singh and his companions rode beneath the long baghs or groves of mango-trees on their way to Amritsir, and so beheld the golden dome of the Hari Mander glittering in the rays of the setting sun. The effect was almost magical, and, to the thoughtful soul, there was something grand and touching in the effort of human genius to produce a thing of beauty, worthy of that invisible God towards whom the immortal soul of man is for ever straining. (Pollard 1896: 33)

Rowling’s appreciation of the spiritual solace of the Guru Granth Sahib is foreshadowed by the Nobel Prize winning American novelist Pearl S. Buck, not in a novel but in her substantial contribution to the introduction of Dr Gopal Singh’s translation of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, 1938.

Shri Guru-Granth Sahib is a source book, an expression of man's loneliness, his aspirations, his longings, his cry to God and his hunger for communication with that Being. I have studied the scriptures of other great religions, but I do not find elsewhere the same power of appeal to the heart and mind as I find here in these volumes. They are... a revelation of the vast reach of the human heart, varying from the most noble concept of God, to the recognition and indeed the insistence upon the practical needs of the human body. (Buck 1987 unpaginated)

The Guru Granth Sahib is quoted too in Jane Vansittart's novel. Some fifty years after the cremation of the fictitious Sikh raja of Kumkooor, a disfigured rani, who had escaped immolation as a sati, uttered 'the words of Nanuck the great Sikh reformer', 'suttees are those that die of a broken heart.' (Vansittart 1962: 48-49, citing Adi Granth 787 as translated in Cunningham 1849: 364).

Subsequently, in the 1980s, other white UK fiction writers anticipated Troth's and Rowling's realistic and sympathetic depiction of the experiences of Sikhs living in Britain. For instance, Carol Lake won the 1989 *Guardian* Fiction Prize for what appear to have been only very slightly fictionalized 'portraits' from 'Rosehill', an imaginary British Midlands city. Additionally, Helen Griffiths had devoted her novel *Hari's Pigeon* to the experiences of Hari Singh, a Sikh boy of 'mixed' parentage (1982), who had drawn on his knowledge of the Sikh use of the Guru Granth Sahib when naming a child to find a name for his pigeon by opening his dictionary at random.

Lake's 'portraits' include 'Ajit's Story' with its glimpses of her life in Rosehill and, prior to that, in India. Lake includes observations on son preference as Ajit recalls, during her student days, visiting her father's eldest sister in India (Lake 1989: 156) as well as her firm views on 'training' children and also her recollections of a day when 'thousands of Sikhs converged on the *gurdwara*, which had been occupied by supporters of Khalistan for months' (Lake 1989: 12). Here, like Troth, Lake is referring to historical events in the UK of the 1980s, albeit not to racial conflict, but rather to the turbulence following the anti-Sikh violence in north India in 1984.

Moreover, a century before Troth and Rowling were reacting to shifting gender roles in Sikh society, the Canadian author Eva Bell (publishing as John Travers) portrayed Sikh society's expectations of women, in a subordinate position to men: for example, a young widower would remarry following his wife's death (Travers 1910: 129). Bell also suggested generational change that was underway. In her 1910 novel, *Sahib-Log*, she pointed out ways in which a Sikh soldier's second, younger

wife differed from his first wife. ‘That dead and gone mother of his sons had been of another age and of the old, old ways’ (Travers 1910: 132). By contrast, his younger wife had installed ‘wonder of wonders – a tablecloth from Birmingham’ and ‘she could read!’ (Travers 1910: 133).

The question persists, however, whether fictional portrayals of Sikhs, by non-Sikh, White authors, from before the 1980s, bear out Weedon’s suggestion of a pervasive white hegemonic stance. Certainly, Vansittart’s inclusion of the subject of *sati*, on a Sikh prince’s death, continues a tradition of western spectators’ and writers’ ambivalent fascination with the subject of widows’ self-immolation in Hindu society (see, for example, MM Kaye’s best-selling novel, *The Far Pavilions* (1978) and commentary on *sati* in Thompson 1928 and, more recently, Fludernik 1999), even if what Vansittart portrayed was not so much the heroic (or barbaric) sacrifice of unresisting beautiful women as the fugitive existence of a disfigured escapee from a Sikh raja’s pyre.

In terms of their focus, until the 1980s, novels with Sikh content by western writers, both men and women, tended to concentrate on significant military and political events, and to base them on existing source material, historical or contemporary. Published in 1848, the novelist Charlotte Brontë’s poem ‘Passion’, had evoked the high drama and carnage of the Battle of Sohraon in 1846, the climax of the First Anglo-Sikh War ‘where Seik and Briton meet in war’ (see Nesbitt forthcoming 2021). (Brontë wrote either during or very soon after the battle beside the Satluj river that provided her imagery.) Over a century later, in her novel *Prelude to Mutiny*, Jane Vansittart described the scene and the proceedings at Bhairowal, where one of the treaties that followed this battle was signed in December 1846, with ‘[a]ll the pomp of Government, all the grandeur of the Sikh court’ and ‘Dulip Singh [the boy maharaja, sitting] shyly between Lord and Lady Gough’ (1967: 219). One of her sources was her grandmother, Mary Vansittart, who was in Punjab at the time. Similarly, M. M. Kaye’s Sikh soldiers’ heroism in the Second Afghan War (1879) ‘is on record’ (Kaye 1978: 957).

Eliza Pollard’s novel *The White Dove of Amritsir* centred on Sikh combatants in the Sepoy Uprising of 1857 and their esteem for General Nicholson, a hero worship that elevated Nicholson to a reincarnation of Guru Gobind Singh, and which is attested by independent authorities (see Nesbitt forthcoming 2021).

For her ‘vision of Northern India, during the eventful year of 1931’, which she had herself experienced, another novelist, Maud Diver, explained that ‘all Indian episodes – even the least – are based on actual fact; all opinions expressed by

Indians, about themselves and the English, or about Indian affairs, are based on their actual opinions written or spoken' (Diver 1934 in unpaginated 'Author's Note'). Similarly, the events described or hinted at in her earlier novel, *Far to Seek*, have a ring of historical authenticity – for example, the detention in Germany of some Sikh combatants in the First World War and their changing attitudes to British rule (1921: 228-229). Critic Rosemary Raza's comment on nineteenth-century women writers that they had a 'more detached perspective' than their male counterparts may well be warranted and applicable to subsequent authors too. Raza's commendation of these women's capacity for crossing boundaries and 'puncturing the pretensions of power and suggesting the similarity of human experience, irrespective of colour' applies likewise to more recent novelists (2006: 209).

Certainly, the concentration, both by Rowling and by earlier women novelists, on the experience of female characters expresses a sympathetic engagement with their lives, rather than an inherent racial superiority. Rowling's foregrounding of Sikh women – as is the case more generally in the fiction of both Sikh and non-Sikh novelists, Lake, Backhaus, Cowan, Randhawa, Mahal and Baldwin – marks a shift of focus from some earlier novelists. That said, in these earlier novels too, women's expected roles and oppression surface. Examples are Jane Vansittart's attention to the dying rani who had escaped immolation as a *sati* and (in Eva Bell's *Sahib-Log*) the fury of Gulab Singh's wife at his humiliation by sahibs, and the sensitively planned initiative of two memsahibs, Esmé and Beatrice, in inviting Gulab Singh's wife to visit them.

At the same time, novelists (both white and of South Asian background), continue, like their predecessors, to explore the often horrific drama of Sikhs' history. Thus, contemporary with Troth's and Rowling's publications is the Singaporean crime novelist, Shamini Flint's *Inspector Singh Investigates: A Curious Indian Cadaver* (2012), with its heart-rending narration of the murder of a Sikh in Delhi on 31 October 1984 in the carnage following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and, most recently, Vee Walker's World War 1 novel, *Major Tom's War*, illuminates Sikhs' contribution to the war in France.

In Conclusion

Ghost Town and *The Casual Vacancy* portend a future in which Sikh characters interact convincingly with other characters, as their non-Sikh authors carefully but confidently include them in the action. The Sikhs in recent white British fiction are not stereotypes that might embody what Chris Weedon has termed 'homogeneous

white assumptions about the so-called “Asian community”. The work of both Rowling and Troth (and, for that matter, of twentieth-century authors such as Lake) suggests that writers need not themselves be, as Weedon suggests (2006: 55), ‘migrants’ in order to contest any such ‘hegemonic white-centred narratives of Britishness’ (Weedon 2006: 55).

At the same time, extreme events and continuing social tensions will continue to echo in fictional worlds. Both ‘insiders’ of Sikh – or at least South Asian – heritage, such as Gurpreet Bhatti and Shauna Singh Baldwin, and ‘outsiders,’ like J K Rowling, have risked highlighting and challenging some difficult issues in which Sikhs have been implicated, whether as agent or victim. Adverse reaction, such as Avtar Singh Makkar’s, and indeed the outcry at Bhatti’s play, briefly bring the complexities of Sikh experience and its fictional coverage to a wider public.

The positive response of Sikh critics to *The Casual Vacancy* suggests that any discernibly Orientalist tendencies of the multicultural approach of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century novelists, including Rowling and Troth, are outweighed by their evident sympathy for Sikhs and their religion and their recognition of identities as fluid. Moreover, sympathetic portrayal itself has a long pedigree: the widespread colonial regard for Sikhs’ military prowess means that Sikhs have been affirmatively represented too by colonial authors, and women’s place in Sikh society has been presented by western authors of successive generations, as changing rather than being stereotyped and immutable.

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