

MAPPING FAMILIES – An Introduction to Gurpreet Bhatti’s plays

This collection of Gurpreet Bhatti’s plays is very welcome, confirming her as one of England’s most significant contemporary playwrights. From her first play, *Besharam* (“Shameless”) in 2001 to her latest, *Khandaan* (“Family”), she has consistently mapped the contours of post-migration families; contours which are as fascinating and illuminating as the first geological map of the ground beneath our feet produced by the great 18th century geologist, Walter Smith.

Reading her plays – and even more, seeing them – is akin to an extended meditation on Philip Larkin’s bleak poem, *This be the Verse*, whose first four lines Bhatti quotes in *Behud*:

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

While family dynamics have been the subject of many plays over the years, Bhatti uniquely dissects the post-migration family, traumatised by transportation from the Punjab to England to negotiate the Scylla and Charybdis of alienation and racism.

The effect of migration is inherently characterised by a series of fictions: the fiction of ‘back home’, of ‘rags to riches’, of ‘preserving culture’, of ‘authenticity’. Bhatti’s art lies in exposing these fictions through an array of splendidly irreverent characters caught in an assortment of familial situations.

Bhatti’s debut play *Besharam* introduces us to her wonderfully zany imagination – from Sati, the younger daughter who lugs around her cardboard cut-out of footballer Ian Wright to the deliciously foul-mouthed matriarch, Beji and her druggie eldest granddaughter Jaspal, who eventually reforms herself as singer “Kiran Carpenter”. In *Behzti*, she goes further with the middle-aged Polly and Teetee, who have a penchant for stealing smart ladies shoes from the congregation in their local temple (Gurudwara), and the heroin-addled Giani (head priest).

These array of characters provocatively offer us a glimpse of far richer contemporary Asian lives than we are used to seeing in popular media. They help Bhatti expose the fictions by which her characters prop up their lives, provoking us out of a lazy homogenising sense of ‘the Asian experience’. One of the most persuasive of pressures migrants feel is that exerted within the family and the extended community to not expose its dirty laundry in public – or, as the journalist Satinder in *Behud* puts it “draw attention to things that are best left unsaid”. Bhatti’s significance in contemporary theatre lies in doing precisely the opposite.

This desire came most sharply to prominence in her second play, *Behzti* in 2005. I first heard about it via an SMS from a friend: “check this play out – right insult to the community”. Talking to some of the actors whom I knew in the show it was obvious many were very concerned about whether the show, produced by Birmingham Rep, would go on or not as the “insult” escalated to threats of violence against the writer and the performers. It struck me at the time that there was a very strange, and sad,

congruence between the sexual violence Bhatti was exploring in her play and the reaction it was eliciting in some sections of the Asian community.

Following the fatwa against Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, faith has replaced race, class, ethnicity and culture as the fault-line of social relations; a process accelerated by New Labour post-9/11. Crucially, in the run-up to the controversy surrounding the play, the government proposed new legislation to make incitement to religious hatred a crime. Sensitivity to the charge of 'Faith-crime' was rapidly becoming the litmus-test for multiculturalism.

One of the first taunts doing the rounds on Birmingham streets centred on the poster for the play. The poster depicted a woman peeping over a pair of large knickers which she was holding. Such knickers – boxers, in effect – are one of the five key symbols for male Sikhs. The taunts were aimed at young male Sikhs, who, it was claimed, were too effeminate to do anything about the shameful manner in which their faith was being paraded on the streets. Given the emergent sensitivities surrounding 'faith', it is not too difficult to see how some young Sikh men, when offered "evidence" by community leaders who had read the play, took to the streets, fuelled by drink (the area surrounding Birmingham Rep is famous for the opportunities it offers for indulging in binge drinking).

This local grievance very rapidly took on the patina of a global 'faith-crime'. And in so doing, ignored the important central issue of sexual violence in religious institutions in Bhatti's play. While today this is no longer a new or even very surprising fact, as we repeatedly hear of such exploitation in the Church, for a racial and religious minority in Britain, exposure of such practices seemed akin at the time to piling yet more pressure on an already beleaguered community. But pandering to religious sensitivities ignored one of the enduring insights of Bhatti's play - the violence victims inflict on each other. As the light-fingered Teetee explains to the carer Elvis, "Our men are cruel to our women but we get used to it and we follow the rules, letting each slap and tickle and bruise and head-butt go by. And at the end of this rubbish life, we write the rules. We find the beauty in our cruelty. My daughters-in-law suffer just as I suffered. I make sure of it."

Such cruelty paradoxically stems in part from what is widely perceived as the one of the virtues of contemporary Asian life, the strength of family. As the aggressive but physically impotent Balbir says to her daughter Min in *Behzti*, "Your flesh came out of me, it is mine, my property".

At the heart of Gurpreet Bhatti's work is this tension between the desire of parents to determine the destiny of their children and the latter's not unreasonable wish to forge their own lives. Out of this tension arise characters that are, at once, both victims and oppressors; as casually racist towards fellow others – Muslims, Blacks – as they are burdened by the all-pervasive racism perpetrated on them by the dominant white society. Resisting easy stereotypes, Gurpreet brings to the fore characters from behind the veil of contemporary multiculturalism. Like Liz in *Khandaan*, who is more "Punjabi" than the Punjabi man she's married to, cheerfully making endless cups of chai on the orders of her mother-in-law and obligingly kneading the dough for chappatis, in the hope of having a child with her husband.

In *Fourteen*, Bhatti continues her map of family through the life of Tina, charting her journey from a vivacious Keats-obsessed school-girl to a single-mum over the span of thirty years. The redemption for Tina lies not in escaping her working class roots – despite not having the heart to say “we go shopping up Southall Broadway, so I say we always visit a special spot in the West Country” – but accepting them: “Mutton dressed as Mutton”.

Fourteen echoes *Besharam*, *Behzti* and *Khandaan* in having vibrant women characters driving the action of the plays. Bhatti subverts the patriarchy which is conventionally perceived to be the engine of family life to expose another fiction, that of the dominant Asian male looking after his brood. But patriarchal forces achieve focus and are tackled head-on in her magnificent response to *Behzti*, the play *Behud* (“Beyond Belief”) in 2010. Police officer Gurpal (“Gary”) Singh Mangat, charged with protecting the writer Tarlochan Grewal, speaks for many when he explains to his boss DCI Harris “I reckon her head’s contaminated... Like when animal rights stick dead mice in tins of beans”.

Tarlochan’s exchange with bad-boy Khushwant Singh Bains, who’s charged to kidnap her, allows Bhatti to probe the confused heart of the protest against *Behzti*, exposing perhaps the most enduring of all migrant fictions, the “home-land”:

TARL Your head’s got all mixed up.
KHUSH How could it not be living in this shithole?
TARL But you’ve got a nice shop.
KHUSH I mean England.
TARL You want to nick some notes out of the till and buy one of them round
 the world tickets. Stick a rucksack on your back and see a bit of life.
KHUSH I’m going home back to the Punjab. Gonna be a farmer, drive a tractor
 and work the land, our real proper land.
TARL Like it out there do you?
KHUSH I’ve never been.
TARL You won’t last five minutes.
KHUSH I’ll be with my brothers and sisters.
TARL They’re all getting visas to come here.

In Gurpreet Bhatti’s latest play, *Khandaan*, both “home” and patriarchy appear as flip-sides of the same mythical coin. The ambitious Pal, having dragged his family into the dumps – in-itself an interesting inversion of the immigrant ‘rags-to-riches’ myth – reclaims his ancestral land in the Punjab on behalf of his son. Except that Pal, the supposed head of the family, is a failure both as a businessman and as a husband. And the son he has is swaddled in another fiction – his mother is not Pal’s long-suffering wife but a cousin from India whom he was happy to exploit. The patrimony of ancestral land in the Punjab, which he proudly wants to safeguard for his son, is tainted at its inception. A taint that both Pal and his fiery mother Jeeto wilfully collude in. It is as if they both finally affirm a central truth of migrant lives: that they are built on fictions which, in multiplying over successive generations, take on the reality of myth.

This sense of taint – shameful, dishonourable and outrageously beyond belief – stalks Gurpreet Bhatti’s plays, like the shadow of another life over every migrant’s heart, distorting relations between parents and children in an escalating dance to the rhythms of Larkin’s bleak prognosis on families. Her collection of plays offer uniquely vivid insights into contemporary English lives with a theatrical aplomb that is suffused with wit and courage to “draw attention to things that are best left unsaid”.

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