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## **“So people know I’m a Sikh”: Narratives of Sikh masculinities in postcolonial Britain**

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### **Abstract**

Drawing on empirical research and informed by recent theoretical discussions surrounding faith identities and masculinities, this article examines second and third generation, British born Sikh men’s identification to the Sikh faith. In particular, it focuses on the appropriation and use of recognised Sikh symbols amongst young British men who define themselves as Sikh. This article suggests that whilst there are multiple of ways of ‘being’ a Sikh man in contemporary postcolonial Britain, and marking belonging to the Sikh faith, there is also a collectively understood idea of what an ‘ideal’ Sikh man should be. Drawing upon Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) discussion of locally specific hegemonic masculinities, it is suggested that an ideal Sikh masculine identity is partly informed by a Khalsa discourse, which informs a particular construction and performance of Sikh male identity, whilst also encouraging the surveillance of young men’s activities both by themselves and by others within the wider Sikh collective. These Sikh masculinities are complex and multiple, rotating to reaffirm, challenge and redefine contextualised notions of hegemonic masculinity within the Sikh diaspora in postcolonial Britain. Such localised Sikh masculinities may both assert male privilege and reap patriarchal dividends, resulting in particular and specific British Sikh hegemonic masculinities which seek to shape the performance of masculinity, yet in another context these very same performances of masculinity may also signify a more marginalised masculinity *vis a vis* other dominant hegemonic forms.

**Key words:** Khalsa, hegemonic masculinities, Sikhism, appearance, ethnicity.

### **Introduction**

This paper draws on empirical research into British born Sikh male identities and masculinities and is informed by literature and theories from the fields of Sikh studies, feminism, masculinities, and the study of race and ethnicity within the UK. It is based on qualitative data, gained from interviews with young men aged between eighteen and thirty-two, who are British born, third and second generation Sikhs. The Sikh faith, which is just over five hundred years old, was founded by Guru Nanak Dev (1469-1539) in India. Followed by a further nine gurus, the last Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, laid the decree that no other living guru was to follow him, but rather that the Sikh Scriptures the *Guru Granth Sahib* were to take the position of 'religious authority' (Weller 1997: 606).

This article considers the multiple ways in which young men negotiate being a Sikh man in contemporary postcolonial Britain. In particular, it focusses on how young Sikh men construct their masculine identities and negotiate their identification to the Sikh faith, particularly through the adoption and appropriation of symbols and markers of Sikh identities; such as those adorned by Khalsa Sikhs but also those which are symbolic of the wider Sikh community. Within the postcolonial context, there are multiple patterns of masculinity, and the performance of Sikh masculinity is continually re-made and re-negotiated within specific local spaces. Yet, at the same time, whilst there are a diversity of ways in which young British Sikh men (can) identify themselves as Sikh, there nevertheless remains a distinct categorisation of what constitutes an 'ideal' gendered Sikh masculinity. The research findings drawn from young Sikh men's own narratives suggest that this ideal and 'authentic' Sikh masculinity is primarily based on the Khalsa identity, identified by theorists such as Oberoi (1997) as a 'Khalsa

episteme'. The idea of a Khalsa episteme or a Khalsa discourse within Sikh history as put forward by writers such as Oberoi (1997) has been deeply contested. Yet, it is not my intention to revisit this debate here. Rather, this paper considers the extent to which a Khalsa discourse could be said to inform young British born Sikh men within the contemporary postcolonial context, and to consider what this means in relation to 'being' a Sikh man in a postcolonial British landscape, and in the negotiation of various masculinities and positions of power. Given that discourses shift and change over time and place, this task is necessary (see for example Hall, 1992). The term discourse, and specifically that of a Khalsa discourse, is used to describe the presence of a range of narratives that inform meanings, legitimate knowledge, as well as convey what is considered normal, appropriate and acceptable (see Hall 2002). Following from this definition, it is suggested that a Khalsa discourse continues to inform what is widely understood as the 'ideal' and 'authentic' Sikh male identity and any associated performance of masculinities. Consequently, British born Sikh young men are themselves active in the articulation and contextual reproduction and negotiation of this discourse, and in the construction of patterns of contemporary Sikh masculinities and gender roles. There is complexity involved in relation to how young men negotiate this identification or non-identification with Sikhism and Khalsa identities. This diversity relates to a range of subjective experiences including family life, gender, geographical location, sexual orientation etc. that reflect the possibility of multiple Sikh male identities in postcolonial Britain. Nonetheless, despite this multiplicity in ways of 'being' a Sikh male, there is also a collectively understood idea of what an ideal and 'authentic' Sikh masculine identity is.

## **Methodology**

The narratives used to inform this discussion are derived from individual and focus group qualitative interviews conducted with British born Sikh men.

Pseudonyms have been applied to maintain the anonymity of the participants. In total thirty five young men<sup>1</sup>, between the ages of eighteen to thirty two, were interviewed and the sample was drawn from London, Leeds and the East Midlands. The participants included Sikh men who were Khalsa initiated; those who had cut their hair; as well as those who kept long hair but trimmed their beards. The research sought to examine contemporary forms of Sikh masculinities within the diasporic context of Britain where there are potentially new and emerging discourses shaping processes of identification. Access was gained through a range of different gatekeepers, as well as through using the author's personal social networks, through being a British born Sikh man. The research was conducted as part of a PhD study into emerging British Sikh masculinities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Theorising Sikh identities**

Within academia, Sikh Studies has been well established for a number of years leading to the journal, *Sikh Formations* (Singh and Talta 2006). Scholars, such as the late W.H. McLeod (see various works such as 2000), played a significant role in establishing the field as an independent area of study, although not without criticism (see Knotts 2005; Grewal 1998; Mandair 2009; Ballantyne 2002). There is an extensive range of historical literature on Sikhs, whilst writers such as Oberoi (1995), Mandair (2009) Bhogal (2013), Jakobsh (2003) and Kaur-Singh (1993), have continued to

develop this field within theology. Drawing influence from Oberoi (1995), post-structuralist analyses of the Sikh tradition by writers such as Mandair (2009, 2005) and Bhogal (2012), have further interrogated the impact of colonialism and its process of categorisation, inscription and racialisation that continues to inform ways of knowing Sikhs and Sikhism. Their work, not only highlights the need to develop a postcolonial critique of the conceptualisation of Sikhism and Sikhs, but also the notion of religion as deployed by colonial powers. For Hall (2000:213) ‘... t]he movement from colonization to post colonial times does not imply that the problems of colonialism have been resolved, or replaced by some conflict –free era. Rather, the “post-colonial” marks the passage from one historical power configuration or conjecture to another’. Historical representations of Sikh masculinities, in part informed through the colonial encounter, have constructed a hyper-masculine, martial, Sikh warrior (often Jat), as the ideal and ‘authentic’ Sikh male, in contrast to other femininised representations of South Asian men (Ballantyne 2005; Canton 1999; Shinha 1995; Kalra 2009). These discourses remain significant in the contemporary postcolonial context. Puar (2008: 63-4) comments on the work of Kalra (2005) to suggest that ‘British colonialism is therefore complicit with the fusing of the turban in the late nineteenth century with an emergent Sikh identity, one that is ironically mocked and vilified in contemporary Britain’.

Whilst theologians and historians have focused on religious texts, narratives and the interpretations of Sikhism, scarce attention has been exclusively given to British born Sikh men’s own narratives and processes of identification. Indeed, there is very little contemporary empirical research on British born Sikh masculinities in particular. James (1975) provided an

important empirical study of young Sikh children in 1970s Huddersfield whilst most other research during that time focused on South Asians as a whole, where radicalism, culture-clash and militancy were keywords (see for example Anwar 1978; Watson 1977; Ghuman 1980). As theory has developed, research has focused on different generations and identities within South Asian communities (Bhachu 1985; K. Hall 2002; Drury 1991; Ballard 1982 and Gillespie 1995). More recent work by Singh and Tatla (2006) provides a comprehensive picture of the British Sikh community through an analysis of different secondary sources. Again, utilising a range of secondary sources, Singh's (2010) work has also further contributed to the understanding of Muslim and Sikh relations in the British context (see also Sian 2011) and recent work by Shani (2005; 2002) and Axel (2005) draws attention to the continued development of discourses around Sikh nationalism and transnational ties. Katherine Hall (2002) provides a rich and insightful ethnographic study on British Sikh identities which is in some ways similar to earlier works on Sikh communities (such as Gillespie 1995; Drury 1991). Hall focuses on young people living in Leeds, England, in the mid-nineties, examining how aspects of faith, culture and belonging are negotiated within everyday spaces. Crucially, this work highlights the value of empirical research for developing our understanding of localised ethnic and faith identities within particular contexts and communities. More recently, Jasjit Singh (2010) has undertaken empirical research with British Sikhs in emerging adulthood; with some valuable contributions to our understandings of contemporary Sikh identities, particularly in relation to maintaining uncut hair for men and women.

### **Sikh identities within the British context**

The most recent census in 2011 indicates that a total of 423,000 people in England and Wales identified as Sikh. A number of Sikhs settled in Britain between the inter-war years, however the majority migrated during the 1950s and 1960s, with significant numbers arriving from East Africa in the 1970s as refugees (Bhachu 1985). Early studies on migrant experiences have not always differentiated between South Asian groups, a term which encompasses migrants from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan<sup>2</sup>. Post-war migration and settlement led to heightened racial discrimination and it was in this social climate that turban-wearing Sikhs became constructed as a key symbolic cultural threat to the nation (Mac An Ghail 1999). With the exception of the civil disorder that took place following the theatre production of *Behdzi* (meaning dishonour) in Birmingham 2004 (see Singh 2005), in more recent times, Sikhs have been posited as a beacon of successful British multi-cultural policy and as positive emblems of community cohesion.

This is a shift from the dominant representation of Sikhs in the 1980s when there was a growth of Sikh militancy; aligned with events such as the storming of the Golden Temple (*Harminder Sahib*, in Amritsar, India) and the anti-Sikh Delhi riots. Such events led to the construction of Sikhs, especially those wearing turbans, as the fundamentalist 'other' (see Axel 2001; Tatla 1999 and Singh and Tatla 2006). However, in the era post Rushdie<sup>3</sup>, and particularly since the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 in the USA and July 7<sup>th</sup> 2005 in England, it has been the category 'Muslim' and Asian Muslim communities that have been problematised in populist and governmental discourse (Worley, 2005). Nevertheless, as Kalra (2005) observes, turban wearing Sikh men continue to symbolically

represent a threat to modernity and the west, and this is produced in relation to particular gendered constructions. Therefore the turbaned Sikh male could be seen to represent a form of ‘othered’ masculinity regarded as traditionalist, patriarchal and backwards (see Kalra 2005 and Puar 2008). However, the ways in which such Sikh masculine identities are performed within particular localised spaces in the postcolonial British landscape also suggests that British Sikh men can negotiate their Sikh masculinity *vis a vis* dominant and hegemonic masculinities in particular ways, for example drawing upon their identification with the Sikh faith to act as a powerful resource and form of capital for a particular postcolonial British Sikh masculinity.

### **Theorising Sikh masculinities**

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 836) note that certain theorists have questioned how useful it is to employ the concept of masculinity, suggesting that ‘...[i]t is ultimately unnecessary to the task of understanding and contesting the power of men’. However, they uphold the importance of the concept, reasserting that ‘[m]asculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting’ (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 836). Whilst theorists tend to avoid employing a clear definition of masculinity (see MacInnes 1998, Hearn 2004) it is understood that masculinity comprises various cultural traits and values that are used to define what constitutes male behaviour. Yet these are not isolated to male bodies or male action. Rather, masculinity is understood as relational (to women, femininity and other subordinate men and masculinities in terms of

race, class, sexual orientation) and as contextual (in terms of time and place) (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). In the early phases of the study of masculinity, theorists such as Mac an Ghail (1994) and Connell (1995) highlighted the importance of recognising the multiplicity and plurality of masculinities. Yet this plurality should not be considered a ‘static typology’ of masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 837) but rather as contextual ‘configurations of practice’ (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 852) which has localised (as well as regional and global), spatial and cultural specificities. ‘Consequently, “masculinity” represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practice’ (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 841). The dominant, collectively idealised assertions of being male are characterised as being ‘hegemonic masculinities’ (Connell 1995). These are defined as ‘... the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women’ (Connell 1995: 77). This has been a widely used concept that has also been the centre of a number of critiques in the study of masculinities, echoing the debates above (see also Hearn 2012)<sup>4</sup>.

However, a key aspect of hegemonic masculinities is that they stand as relational to subordinate and marginalised forms of masculinities. As Connell (1995: 81) comments ‘[m]arginalization is always relative to the authorization of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group’. How far is it possible for hegemonic masculinities to be accessible or a desired resource for Sikh men within the diaspora? What patriarchal dividends can they procure from aspiring to it? Kalra (2005: 119) focusing particularly on

British Muslims argues that, '[i]n bringing a minority racial or demonized religious identity into conjunction with masculinity, normative and hegemonic notions of the masculine are always rendered impossible'. Connell (1995: 81) further states that '...“hegemonic masculinity” and “marginalized masculinities” name not fixed character types but configurations of practice generated in particular situations in a changing structure of relationships'. This dynamism is a core aspect of hegemonic masculinities that continues to be conveyed in Connell's work. In more recent work with Messerschmidt (2005), Connell has highlighted the need to also consider spatial and localised forms of hegemonic masculinities<sup>5</sup> (see also Hopkins and Noble 2009).

Selective literature on masculinity has focused on the concept as an active process (Connell 2000, Hopkins and Noble 2009). This enables an examination of masculinity as something that is performed by individuals within certain social contexts. The performative nature of masculinity places emphasis on the individual, as it is the individual who brings it into existence, and makes it masculine male behaviour (Connell 2000; Beynon 2002). Butler's (1990) work can be applied to masculinity as displays of male performative acts operate in the construction of gender. Discursively masculinities may stand as a regime of truths (Foucault 1990 and 1984; Butler 1990) resulting in a collective understanding of what male roles are or what masculine behaviour is within any particular setting. This leads writers on masculinity to emphasise further how male status and displays of masculine behaviour is linked to context; and in doing so, present an active and contextual construction of masculinity (Edwards and Gough and 1998; Connell 2000 and Beynon 2002) as it intersects with other modalities of

difference such as religion, ethnicity and gender. For Hopkins and Noble (2009: 813-4) social geographers have helped shift to a ‘...third phase in masculinity studies, towards a conceptualisation of masculinities as strategic; that is, where masculinities are understood as performances which are undertaken in particular contexts, drawing on specific resources and capacities’.

### **Categorisations of Sikh identities**

Historically, there has been a considerable amount of attention to the way in which Sikh identities are defined and encapsulated. A dominant categorisation relates to Amritdahari or Khalsa Sikhs (purified ones or the Guru’s own). These terms are conventionally applied to those that have chosen to publicly affirm their commitment to the Sikh faith by initiation through the taking of *Amrit* (which literally means nectar, sweetened water, taken in a ceremony that is also referred to colloquially as *Amrit shaknah*). Such Khalsa Sikhs symbolise their religious identification to the Khalsa through the wearing of the five K’s: *Kesh* (uncut hair), *Kirpan* (sword), *Kangha* (comb), *Kara* (steel bangle) and *Kachha Kachhahera* (Shorts) (Weller 1997). As Mandair (2005: 40) states ‘[i]t is customary to define Sikhs by alluding to their proximity to Khalsa identity’. The expression ‘*Keshdhari* Sikhs’, can also be applied to Khalsa Sikhs, but is a label used to describe those Sikhs that maintain uncut hair. Thirdly, the term ‘*Mona* Sikhs’ is used to describe Sikhs who cut their hair and shave their beards, whilst also maintaining a Khalsa affiliation (Singh and Tatla 2006; McLeod 1999).

As indicated, the Khalsa discourse has historical roots. However, whilst in the past it did not hold a hegemonic position, for Oberoi (1997) it has resulted in a Khalsa episteme. Indeed, it was only in the 1950s, in a post-colonial India and after various challenges, that the SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee<sup>6</sup>) released the *Rahit Maryada* (Sikh code of conduct) (Barrier, 1999). This *Rahit Maryada*, based on and adapted from various earlier *Rahit Namas*<sup>7</sup> (codes of discipline) provided a clear definition of a Sikh as:

...any person who believes in Akal Purakh: in the ten Gurus (Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh); in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, other writings of the ten Gurus, and their teachings; in the Khalsa initiation ceremony instituted by the tenth Guru; and who does not believe in any other system of religious doctrine (Barrier 1999: 46).

The above definition may seem an obvious criterion for a Sikh identity in contemporary times and this definition has been fiercely challenged, mainly because of the overall primacy it gives to the Amritdhari or Khalsa Sikh identity and the centrality placed upon the Khalsa initiation ceremony in marking Sikh identity (Barrier 1999). Yet, it is clearly informed by a Khalsa discourse, which constructs a particular way of knowing Sikhism<sup>8</sup>. It was the Tat Khalsa perspective on Sikhism as being distinct from Hinduism that played a significant role in shaping the SGPC's *Rahit Maryada* and their definition of a Sikh, informed by Khalsa ideals. This was also informed through colonialism and processes of translation initiated by early Indologists, the processes of racial categorisation, under which the British also encouraged Khalsa initiation for Sikh military recruits. Furthermore, the Tat Khalsa perspective, the work of Sikh reformists, and of Sikh scholars, whilst historically fluid, has discursively shaped what we

understand as being an ‘ideal’ and ‘authentic’ Sikh in contemporary times<sup>9</sup> (see for example the discussions by Oberoi 1997; Mandair 2009 and 2005; Ballantyne 2002; Axel 2001). Furthermore, as Mandair (2005) suggests, this process of marking religious and ‘racial’ distinction was a gendered process that constructed particular notions of femininity and masculinity as essentially Sikh.

### **The Turban / ‘Dastaa’ / ‘Pagh’ and uncut hair ‘Kesh’**

The wearing of the turban ‘*pagh*’, although practised in different cultures, is a significant feature and marker of identity in the Sikh faith (Kalra 2005). It is predominately worn by men to protect the *kesh* (uncut hair) and stands as a highly visible marker of difference (Singh 2005). Whilst a growing number of initiated Sikh women are now wearing turbans (for who it is used to undermine gendered and patriarchal religious and cultural practices, Kalra 2005), it is mainly men who do so. Feminist writing has highlighted how women are crucial in the reproduction of ethnic, racial and religious collectives and their boundaries (see for example Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1993), yet it is also evident that by wearing the turban, Sikh men become symbolic of the ethnic/religious group boundaries, as the turban acts a visible marker to differentiate Sikhs from other ethnic, religious and national groups.

When Sikh men migrated to Britain in the post war period, many cut their hair in order to gain employment (James 1975). This was a means of minimising their distinction (as the assimilation policies of the time dictated). However, as more Sikhs migrated into certain areas, many Sikh

men began to wear their turbans again (Singh 2005). Initially, as Brah (1996) states, there was no formal ban on the wearing of the turban; therefore Sikh men felt no direct sense of discrimination about wearing it. However, a formal ban was placed in certain occupations and this resulted in the issue becoming 'political' and many Sikhs began to demonstrate for their rights to wear turbans in the workplace (Brah 1996; Singh 2005). The right to wear religious symbols when they have been denied provokes emotive responses (Renteln 2004). This has particularly been the case with Sikhs who have in the past fought hard for the right to wear the turban; and in Britain, the right for Sikhs to wear a turban does have support through formal legislation (Singh 2005). As Singh (2005: 158-9) points out the '... turban is synonymous with Sikhs and because of this association it has become the premier symbol of communal identity and it's honour, whereas an inability to wear it is a sign of collective dishonour'. Analysed through the lens of masculinity, the *pagh* is specifically symbolic of male honour (Kalra 2005). A rejection of this could be viewed as dishonourable and young Sikh men who do cut their hair and reject the turban are likely to be constructed as 'giving in to western culture' (Verma 2006: 198) and particular notions of modernity and hegemonic masculinity. Indeed, the maintenance of the turban can also be seen as representing a *rejection* of modernity; even though the lived experiences of Sikh men points to a far more complex negotiation of both. Yet, this representation has a long history gaining more currency in recent times (Kalra 2005; Puar 2008). In the current context, the boundaries between particular Islamic variations of turban adornment and Sikh variations have become more confused in certain populist interpretations. As Kalra (2005:77) discusses, these perceptual shifts have resulted in members of the Sikh diaspora, particularly in America, overtly

seeking to differentiate themselves from Muslims and presenting themselves as more integrated and patriotic<sup>10</sup>. This process again renders the representation of the turban as a threat to the nation, although now this is constructed without Sikhism. Clearly then, the turban represents more than male honour but can also signify a ‘terrorist masculinity’ within the postcolonial context and to those outside of the Sikh diaspora.

Nonetheless, amongst the Sikh diaspora, the turban is accepted as an integral part of the Khalsa identity as it has played a significant part in differentiating Sikhs as a distinct ethnic and religious group (Singh 2005). For some participants in this research, the choice to emphasise and mark Sikh distinction was the reason for keeping uncut hair and the turban:

[Dalbir] I kept it *innit*, because like if I was walking down the street, then people would know I’m a Sikh *innit*. That’s why I put it on.

For Dalbir, the turban is the visible marker of difference whilst for Kulbir, this is also about the maintenance of a particular religious identity and tradition,

When you’re walking down the street, you’re the guy with a turban, a Sikh...I think it’s important to keep the heritage going. I saw a guy in the gym today, he was like “have you ever thought about cutting your hair” I said “yeah a couple of times, I’ve thought about cutting it”, he said “why don’t you?” I said “cos I’m proud, I’m a Sikh”.

The turban and maintenance of uncut hair in such a visible way facilitates a marked sense of pride, and for Govinda, a sense of being part of the wider Sikh collective:

My *pagh* (turban), it’s true you don’t have to be Amritdhari to wear a *pagh*, but we’ve been told to wear a *pagh* it’s supposed to

represent the crown... I think it's just because we've been told to wear it. It's like, you know our uncut hair, it keeps it tidy... It represents unity... it is a part of an identity, so you can look in the distance and say "he's a Sikh".

Here, the turban is a symbol of respect and male honour (Kalra 2005) and conveys religious distinction whilst representing a continuation of the tradition as intended by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699 through the creation of the Khalsa (Singh 1999). Yet it is also significant that not all of the participants that kept uncut hair were Khalsa Sikhs, rather some also trimmed their beards (as discussed later). However, as Jasjit Singh (2010) notes, this may also be because less significance is given to facial hair when compared with head hair in terms of religious meaning. The increasing attention towards male grooming, male fashion and aesthetic, is another influence shaping discourses around hegemonic 'normative' masculinities within popular culture in the West (Ricciardelli, Chow and Whit 2010), and in many ways represents a challenge to Khalsa discourses surrounding Sikh male identities.

At the same time, several of the Khalsa Sikhs involved in this research did not even mention the turban as being an aspect of their distinction or as significant to their Sikhism. However, there was an overall consensus that it was the idea of *looking like a Sikh* (which can be more accurately described as a Khalsa Sikh) that was deemed most significant, rather than being initiated. For some, the turban and uncut hair was also a part of a process of self-discovery and rite of passage. This suggests that being a Sikh man is in part performed through the appropriation of various markers of distinction; and of particular significance is the turban and uncut hair. The turban in this context is an important marker of respect and of an 'authentic' Sikh masculinity, and it has also become symbolic of the respect that participants had for the Sikh

faith (see also Singh, 2005 and Singh and Tatla 2006). Indeed, it is the respectability gained from having uncut hair and keeping a turban within the Sikh collective that can also lead to an element of subtle coercion within some families to maintain these practices (see J. Singh 2010; Verma 2006). However, many of those interviewed in this research did not wear turbans, but clearly described themselves as being Sikh. Therefore, the turban whilst being seen as representative of being a Khalsa Sikh, is not necessarily central to being a Sikh, and thus not a necessary part of belonging. This indicates that whilst there are dominant ideas regarding what constitutes the ideal Sikh masculinity; in reality second and third generation Sikh men construct and perform their masculinities in relation to the Sikh faith in multiple ways; evident in part through their negotiation of these recognised symbols of Sikhism.

Respect for Sikhism is an important element of this performance of belonging and adorning and/or respecting the turban is a clear aspect of this process. Therefore religious identification is not crucial, but having respect for the markers of the religion is. Indeed the turban remains important for *Mona*/non Khalsa Sikhs because it represents something more than just a form of male religious dress:

[Amrit] I've seen some Sikh people out, who have got turbans on... the way I see it, if you wear a turban, you should follow the guidelines of it... But I see them, and sometimes with a cigarette in their hands or a drink, and I think truthfully if you want to do that, this is how I personally see it, if want to do that you shouldn't wear the turban, full stop...the older generation, like our parents and all that. Like my uncles they got the turban, they don't smoke but they do drink on the odd occasion. But I don't think smoking's the right thing definitely. Not while wearing a turban... when I see Singh's who smoke and drink and what not, they are not keeping that respect up. They are degrading it to a

certain aspect. I'm not saying that it is OK for us, but it doesn't look as bad on us than it does on them, because we haven't got a turban...they should put that extra effort in on the mission, *Amrit shakyah* (Khalsa initiated) really.

Here wearing a turban brings with it a strict moral obligation, as he suggests that wearing a turban should be symbolised following the *Rahit* and becoming an initiated Khalsa Sikh in order to reflect a commitment to the Sikh faith and virtuous living. For Amrit, Sikh men who wear turbans are in a key position to demarcate the ideal moral conduct for the wider Sikh community. Here individual behaviour requires extra surveillance and scrutiny even by non-initiated *Mona* Sikhs. Interestingly though, J. Singh (2010) observes that *mona* Sikhs, may not automatically be accepted as Sikhs by those who maintain such an overt Sikh identity. Amrit's comments also emphasise the transmission of values from both community and family and are located as being part of the wider Khalsa discourse, but in a contemporary British setting. This further indicates how the contextual articulation of the Khalsa discourse leads to the moral surveillance of those who wear the visual symbols of Sikhism. A moral responsibility is also placed on the turban by those who adopt it, and those who do not. Those Sikhs who wore turbans were aware of this surveillance. For example, one participant explained that because he wore a turban and kept uncut hair, his peers to saw him as some sort of father figure 'I become a reminder of their fathers... I'm a reminder of their folks, a traditional shadow that's hanging over them', which reflects some resonance with the idea that turban wearing Sikhs represent tradition and a rejection of modernity (see Kalra 2005 and Puar 2008),

This further suggests that Khalsa discourse operates as a truth to inform the construction and performance of Sikh masculinities within the postcolonial

diasporic context. The formation of such ‘truth’ also has the purpose of surveillance, as through this, discourses of ‘normality’ are prescribed. Foucault (1984 and 1990) identifies the means by which panoptic forms of self-surveillance and surveillance operate as a means of social control, especially the control of the body. Therefore, particular discourses indicate to individuals what their appropriate behaviour should be for their particular social position, through processes of normalisation (Butler 1990; Foucault 1984). The issue of morality and responsibility will be revisited later, yet this point further illustrates the emotional value placed on the image of the Sikh and the investment given to this particular marker of Sikh identity.

What is shared throughout these narratives is that a turban bearer, the Sikh, is always rendered male. From Amrit’s discussion around turban wearing Sikhs smoking, to Haminder being seen as a father figure, it is the male body that is seen as both symbolic and representative of Sikh identities. Whilst wider discussions around the maintenance of culture and *izzat*, are often focused around women and women’s bodies (see Gillespie 1995) , discussion around the authentic Sikh identity revolves around men and appropriate/respectable masculine behaviours. The hegemony that Khalsa masculinities hold is then not easily transferable to women’s bodies or femininities.

### *The use of symbols*

Religious symbols such as the turban can be emphasised to demarcate boundaries and mark distinction (Enloe 1996 [1980]). Such symbols which in this case represent cultural, ethnic and religious specific wear are used to

highlight group belonging and masculinity. Developing from Beynon's (2002) work, whereby cultural commodities are related to the attainment of certain forms of masculine lifestyle (i.e. Loaded men's magazine), Sikh men clearly have their own religious group symbols to display their particular identities and masculinities. Symbols such as the turban, *kirpan* (sword) and *kesh* (uncut hair) have historically been associated with Sikhs. Such symbols continue to be extremely significant for young Sikhs in the British context; both *Amritdhari* and *Mona* Sikhs and they act as means of displaying ethnic and religious association (Gillespie 1995). For example, the *Khanda* (that has derived its name from the double edged sword in the centre), as a symbol, is often employed as means of asserting Sikh ethnicity, belonging and group membership. The use of the *Khanda* as a visual symbol of 'being' Sikh can also become commoditised, for example taking the form of miniature car flags, on gold chains or earrings, symbolised through tattoos, or even evident in garden fencing. Such usage also allows for an understanding of how ethnicity and collective belonging is performed through the use of symbols and through engaging with activities that are recognized markers of Sikhism. This is evident in the following narratives in which participants describe the use of various Sikh symbols to mark their Sikh ethnicity and Sikh masculinity (where the emphasis shifts from the Amritdahri sword to the less visible *kara*)

[Harminder] In British society, the first thing you notice about me is the sword. That intimidates a lot of people, people get scared.

[Balwant] oh yeah I wear a *Kara*, that shows who you are straight away. You wear a *Kara* and that's it really. That's the main differentiating point, you wear a *Kara*...

[Dalbir] Yeah I wear a *Kara*...I wear a *pagh* (turban) and that, so they'll know I am a Sikh.

The participants all describe the different ways in which they show their Sikh distinction and Sikh masculine identity through the use and appropriation of 'Sikh' symbols. In this context, and for these young British born Sikh men, Sikh symbols such as the turban, having uncut hair, wearing the Sikh bracelet (*Kara*) and wearing the sword (*Kirpan*), all operate as a means of demarcating boundaries of religion and ethnicity. Therefore, symbols that were used three hundred years ago to distinguish Sikh men [and women] are still utilised in contemporary times.

Contemporary Sikhs, both Khalsa and non-Khalsa, display these symbols readily. However these symbols are not always worn in unison and many may obviously negotiate the Khalsa discourse; for example the *Kara* may be the only Sikh marker worn which on the one hand marks Sikh distinction, whilst at the same time, does not over emphasise this distinction and therefore enables young men to retain what they view as a not too distinct non-British masculine identity. The *Kara* allows belonging, but does not represent a rejection of modernity, in the same way as a turban (Kalra 2005). However, despite these negotiations, the selective use of symbols remain representative markers of being a Sikh and an active means of asserting group belonging for young men. There are various intersecting discourses that inform their identification to Sikhism and the Khalsa discourse is one negotiated aspect of this.

The Khalsa discourse influences who and what is considered 'real' and 'authentic' Sikhism (see also Oberoi 1997 and Mandair 2009). This can also

be seen to influence the judgments made by other Sikhs on the inappropriate use of symbols through moral surveillance. Amarjit for example, talked strongly about his objection to the use of the historical warrior Sikh identity to display contemporary versions of male bravado:

...when they say “*Khanda* this, we’re warriors” and that, what people have got to realise is that gurus were in a time when there was a big struggle in India... when I was at college, yeah people did wear *Khanda* and stuff like that, say that they were *Shere* [lions], and yeah it’s a false pretence, because how can you say this that and the other when you don’t really know why, why was it there for in the first place? Like Guru Gobind Singh says the idea of Sikhs should be a saint and soldier, to fight for justice, people back in days [last few years], I don’t know if they still do it, they used to think they were superior, “yeah we’re warriors”.

Here, the display of macho behaviour by Sikh men is discussed in relation to the Sikh martial tradition, and a reflection of the continuing negotiation of colonial discourses regarding Sikh masculine identities. For Amarjit, the Sikh military tradition and aspects of Sikh religious forms are appropriated in order to gain status. He also talked about being influenced by this.

Well before it was about *Khanda*, when I used to be a ‘*Khanda* kid’, about Sikh this or Sikh that ...Before that people used always wear *Khanda*, I used to see people with just the *Khanda*. ...And now I’ve grown up, matured...I’ve been able to understand the true concepts of Sikhism, and realised what these symbols really do mean.

Amarjit talks of being a ‘*Khanda* kid’, that is somebody who uses such Sikh symbols like the *Khanda* to promote a hyper-masculine ethnic identity in his youth. Other Sikh men who participated in this research, also objected to the use of the *Khanda* as well as the *Kara*, particularly in terms of its size, to project male bravado. Such religious symbols were also used by other young

men to challenge constructions of effeminate Asian masculinities. In these narratives, like that of Amarjit's, the participants assert that young Sikh men's use of such symbols shows a lack of awareness of their 'real' nature and therefore constitutes a misunderstanding of Sikhism. Within this framework, Sikhism is not allowed to be personalised, private, particular, and subjective but rather becomes something that is fixed, public and objective, carrying clear guidelines for the appropriate ways of belonging. The use of such symbols is clearly informed through a Khalsa discourse which is positioned to hold an authentic position on what constitutes the correct and appropriate usage. This again informs discourses of who is a 'proper' and 'authentic' Sikh man, what he wears, what he looks like, what he does and why.

### **Stylised facial hair**

This critique was also expanded in relation to turban wearing Sikh men trimming or shaving their beards as evident in the following narratives:

[Amarjit] I've good friends that have got *Kesh*. But you see nowadays people that have *Kesh*, they have *patka* (head scarf), and a grade two *darre* (beard)...It kind of defies the concept of having long hair, untouched hair! So if I was going to become a true Singh, a true Khalsa follower, I would grow my hair and I would grow my long beard.

[Amrit] ...how they look at it is, that they're wearing a turban and girls aren't gonna want to know them. It's a fashion statement; it could be seen as a fashion statement.

Both Amrit and Amarjit ridicule and question beard trimming by young Sikhs. Incidentally they are both themselves *Mona* Sikhs, yet they feel that they are in position to critique such actions that do not stay fixed to the Khalsa discursive construction of Sikh identity. Amarjit's comments in particular indicate that such a practice is viewed as problematic, as it blurs the Khalsa ideal of having uncut hair. Another participant, who trims his beard, also spoke about how he felt discriminated against by the older generation because of this. However, this criticism is also apparent from Sikhs of his generation, who are also then active in policing what they consider to be the appropriate or inappropriate use of symbols and markers of the Sikh faith in the construction of masculinity. Again, these judgments are informed by a Khalsa discourse, which projects a fixed notion of the Sikh image. This is also clearly linked to masculinity and desirability; with the influence of male grooming, fashion and an ideal male body shaping hegemonic masculinities (see for example Ricciardelli, Chow and Whit 2010). The desire to be seen as attractive (within a heterosexual postcolonial context) alongside the desire to 'fit in' are viewed as part of the reason why symbols are appropriated and beards trimmed. Issues of attractiveness link in with desirability and wanting to be a desirable male, which involves fitting in more closely with the hegemonic male image. However being a Sikh man has its own capital and status especially within the Sikh diaspora. Hair in this context acts as a means of under-emphasising processes of othering. This is because alternative status and respect is given within the Sikh collective for maintaining uncut hair, resulting in specific and localized patterns of masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, also see Archer 2001 .

## A 'proper' Sikh

One of the most illustrative ways in which the Khalsa discourse emerged was when asking young Sikh men who they viewed as an 'authentic' or ideal Sikh male. Here, the Khalsa Sikh male becomes the reference point for 'idealness':

[Manjit] oh yeah I'm proud of my religion, and everything, I'm proud of what I am. How can I tell you (pause), it's different? Like the people that are practising it, they are like what I think are like *proper* Sikhs, they in *proper* religion and everything. Like they do everything by the *Guru Granth Sahib*. But me, I just like my life at the end of the day. I do what I just have to do. But I still respect the religion and everything, and respect the people who respect the religion and everything.

Similarly, for Charanjib and Balwant, a 'proper' Sikh is one who represents the Khalsa tradition,

[Charanjib] Yeah, I believe a *true* Sikh should not be drinking, shouldn't be smoking, and shouldn't have sexual intercourse before marriage.....a *proper* Sikh is someone, I think has done the five K's, had the blessing and goes to the temple regular. Then I think you've got the in-between, which I'd say is the western Sikhs, who actually have a drink, the odd few smokes. Basically adapted to the western ways.

[Balwant] Sikhism I've noticed is quite a strict religion in a sense. If you're a proper Sikh it's quite a strict way of life. You know you've got to follow everything. Like a true Sikh, probably wouldn't even go out, or drink, or anything like that....a good Sikh to me would be someone who wears a turban, you know is proper religious, doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, doesn't eat meat, you know and follows everything Sikhism symbolises. You know they are the personification of true Sikhism. Whereas I see myself as, not a partial Sikh, but I'm not ready to go all the way.

There remains a clear idea of what constitutes an ideal, ‘authentic’ Sikh man, informed by the Khalsa episteme. Consequently, the narratives reflect an engagement with Tat Khalsa discourses that mark the primacy of the Amritdhari Sikh as the ideal Sikh; yet at the same time, their own Sikh male identities suggest other possible ways of being Sikh men in postcolonial contexts. Deviations from the ideal Sikh male identity are identified by certain participants to distinguish between themselves and ‘authentic’ Sikhs. For example, Charanjib suggests that activities such as smoking and sex before marriage, which deviate from the Khalsa ideal, are seen primarily as a western occurrence, engaged in by the ‘in-between’ Sikh men. Therefore, at the same time it is also partly acceptable for them to engage in these activities, not only because they are not initiated Sikhs men, but also because they do not see themselves as representing the image of the ‘authentic’ and ideal Sikh. Therefore, within the British context, these young men are able to actively negotiate the Khalsa discourse in relation to the ways in which they perform their own male identities.

## **Conclusion**

The presence of a Khalsa discourse continues to inform British Sikh young men’s ideas of what constitutes an ideal and ‘authentic’ Sikh, whilst at the same time informing the performance of various Sikh masculinities. This is an aspect of the wider collective space of ‘being Sikh’ that is influenced by a range of discourses, not necessarily religious, but also those of gender, nationality, sexuality and so on. Young Sikh men spoke with pride about their distinctive identities, and are proud of being recognised as Sikh men through displaying, appropriating and performing their own interpretation of the Sikh Khalsa masculine identity. However it is also evident that when a

Sikh man adopts a Khalsa identity, they are also monitored by others within the collective. The image which represents 'the Khalsa' is constructed as an ideal and 'authentic' Sikh masculinity and as such needs to be morally upheld and respected. In the contemporary context, young Sikh men may make modifications and hybridisations of this image (such as trimming beards), which may also be objected to because they blur the position of this ideal. In doing so, the Khalsa discourse establishes ideal types of masculinity and masculine behaviour and appropriate types of identification. Therefore some young Sikh men are also critical of the misuse and appropriation of symbols, such as the *Khanda*. When young British Sikh men are asked what and who is an ideal Sikh, they again revert to the Khalsa Sikh male representation as the most ideal and 'authentic' Sikh identity. This does not only inform the identities of Khalsa Sikh men, but continues to play a part in shaping how non-Khalsa Sikh men, who belong to the wider Sikh collective, construct their identities and behaviour. For those Sikh men that have not adopted the Khalsa identity, in particular the wearing of the turban, there is less sense of restriction as evident in certain narratives. The performance of British Sikh masculinities in localised spaces is dynamic, informed by multiple intersecting discourses and materialities including race, gender, sexuality and faith. British Sikh men negotiate their Sikh masculinity in relation to dominant and hegemonic masculinities to construct specific Sikh masculinities in the postcolonial context.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The sample size would be considered relatively small, although there was no intention of drawing a representative picture of the whole Sikh population in Britain. Rather, qualitative research was undertaken specifically in order to gain rich and detailed information and in order to develop an understanding of meanings and perceptions.

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2 In the British context, ‘Asian’ is a term more readily applied to people who originate from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

3 1988 saw the publication of Salman Rushdie’s controversial book ‘The Satanic Verses’. It was seen as blasphemous by many Muslims and led to widespread demonstrations and civil disturbances in Britain and abroad. During December 2004, civil disturbances took place in the city of Birmingham in response to the play ‘Behzti’, (meaning dishonour) by Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti. This production, written by a Sikh woman, explored issues of sexuality, sexual violence and women’s position within the Sikh community. Despite the playwright’s assertion of not wanting to offend Sikhism, influential members of the Sikh community (mainly Sikh men) that stood as ‘representatives’ of the Sikh community branded the play blasphemous and an outrage. Following the disturbances, a wide scale debate about freedom of speech and artistic freedom *vis a vis* protection for religious beliefs ensued. The disturbances led to parallels being drawn with the Muslim Rushdie affair.

<sup>4</sup> Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 832) assert that hegemonic masculinities was ‘...not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honoured way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men’.

<sup>5</sup> In terms of applying the notion of hegemonic masculinities to minority men, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have considered the need to reformulate and even reject certain aspects of the original concept of hegemonic masculinities, particularly the idea that a singular framework of gender hierarchy could be applicable to all forms of masculinity and femininities; rather highlighting the need to consider a complex and contextual nature of power and domination through using a more ‘...holistic understanding of gender hierarchy’ (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 848).

6 The SGPC is an organisation based in Amritsar, which is responsible for activities such as administration and monitoring the types of rituals practised across Sikh temples within the Punjab (Barrier, 1999).

7 The *Rahit Namas* are a number of texts that were written after the death of Guru Gobind Singh from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century, demarcating appropriate behaviour for Sikhs (McLeod, 2000b).

<sup>8</sup> The dominance of this Khalsa episteme over other discursive constructions of Sikh identity has been attributed to the growth in the Tat Khalsa, a branch of the Singh Sabha movement in the nineteenth century, even though it does have earlier roots. Mandair (2005) also highlights the gendered nature of this discourse, suggesting a theme of ‘secret misogyny’ within the Singh Sabha tradition, despite evidence of strong literary narratives advocating gender equality and female empowerment in the same historical period.

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<sup>9</sup> It can be argued that the Sikh reformists have also played an important role in what Stuart Hall (1996) has called the reinvention of traditions, by highlighting certain practices, rituals, and narratives of group history and religious texts, whilst at the same time under-emphasising others, especially those that blurred boundaries. The practices which were over-emphasised and reconceptualised, related particularly to those of Khalsa Sikhs.

<sup>10</sup> For example by wearing t-shirts bearing the logo “Don’t Freak, I’m Sikh” in the British context (Nagarajah 2005) and awareness campaigns and turban disrobing in America (Puar 2008). Sikhs, particularly those that wear turbans, have increasingly suffered racial violence post September 11th. This has led to a heightened awareness of difference related to looking and being ‘Asian’, with awareness that wearing a turban significantly increases the likelihood of discrimination and violence (Puar 2008; Kalra 2005; Chanda and Ford 2010).