Crows and Cages: 
A Sikh Woman’s Reflections of the Sikh Community in Canada 

Sonia Kaur Aujla-Bhullar 
University of Calgary 
skaujla@gmail.com

Abstract

This article adopts a subjective and reflective voice to convey my emotional response (in Boler’s, 1999 terms) to the passing of a recent Bill in Quebec. The article explores the question: How does one reconcile a Sikh identity that is worthy, respected and admirable in Quebec, and by extension in Canada, in light of Quebec’s Bill 21? Further, through the lens of a racialized minority, that of a Sikh woman calling Canada home, and from the perspective of my family who have lived in Canada for several generations, I contest the recent legislation in Quebec’s Bill 21, for having erected a very strong, man-made cage that effectively bars anyone with a Sikh identity from working in the civil service.

Keywords: Identity, Sikh, Religion, Quebec’s Bill 21, Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom

…the name kaur runs in my blood
it was in me before the word itself existed
it is my identity and my liberation. (Kaur, 2014, p. 184)

Introduction

Rupi Kaur’s poem, strikes at core understandings regarding how a Sikh woman is seen by dominant others. The poem speaks to the individual and collective identity of Sikh women, including myself. The name Kaur1 is part of many Sikh women’s names, as either a middle or last name from the time of birth and embodies meanings of strength and courage. The poem explores how we work with and create a strong, dynamic sisterhood; how with compassion, we assist anyone who needs help; and finally, how we find ourselves in a world that can be simultaneously giving, yet, intolerant and unjust. I have been a Sikh my entire life. I am a wife, mother, daughter, sister, granddaughter, educator and an emerging academic. I am a critical thinker and have been influenced by critical race feminist thought and discourse. I believe that the Sikh turban can be seen as a crown that is worn proudly, as a visible representation and symbol of our faith, history, and piety. I know that the choice to wear a turban within the Sikh cultural and religious community, carries great honour and respect. Instead, due to the responses of dominant others, I have felt often, that these crowns (our turbans), are in essence, cages for us, both historically and presently in Canada. Accordingly, I acknowledge that it is neither safe,

1 The translation of Kaur to English is often referred to as “princess” or “crown prince” as a symbol of equality.
comfortable, nor a simple matter, to convey in this article the entangled complexities regarding Canada’s history, in terms of the lived experiences (past and present) of Sikh people.

This article is written with passion and is designed to reverberate with a strong sense of unease that I am not yet comfortable expressing in an academic article. However, I am brave. In understanding and representing my emotions as a “site of political resistance” (Boler, 1999, p. 108), these reflections regarding my journey to reconcile real concerns that our sense of community and sense of belonging in Canada are seriously troubled and undermined by the far-reaching implications of Quebec’s Bill 21.²

My identity, being a Punjabi-Sikh woman, stands in direct conflict with a recent provincial law. In Quebec, the law states that is unlawful to wear religious symbols, such as turbans, while working in any capacity with the provincial government. I am strongly against the law and Quebec’s version of secularism.³ Megan Boler’s (1999) work concerning community and examining our emotions as sites of power, or lack thereof, indicates aptly that: “Three features of modern life recognizably made community virtually impossible: identity politics, power relations, and fear” (p. 139). In the context of Boler’s assertions, the current situation results in our identity politics being played out in the Quebec civil service, which has become the site of power relations. It is where our brown bodies are highly visible, and seen as taking up spaces and the response is oppression by the provincial civil service.

This article is presented in the following manner. Firstly, I introduce key principles of Sikh identity and history, specifically, in terms of its advent and inherent symbolism. This is critical for the non-Sikh reader to understand the purpose of wearing the turban, and to recognize the challenges faced by Sikhs throughout Canada’s history. Secondly, I explore the specifics of Bill 21. Thirdly, I explicitly discuss my personal challenges understanding my emotions and hopes for a more just Canadian society. Each section ends with a reflective question as the means to dig deeper into the complex layers of discourse concerning identity and community.

The question I ask here is: How does our identity play a role in forming a just and equitable community?

The Sikh Religion: Key Principles and Symbolism

Few places in the world, indeed, outside India, know about the religion and spirituality of Sikhism that is rooted in a rich tapestry of poetry as well as the continuing struggles for justice. In mainstream Canada, such explanatory narratives are neither frequently, nor widely spoken of; thus, we are not understood even in superficial ways. In this section, I acknowledge that it is impossible, in such a short article, to fully present the layers and complexities of the Sikh faith. Instead, I will modestly carve out a brief introduction to the Sikh religion in the hope of creating a better understanding by non-Sikh persons of the visible identity markers (i.e., the turban) and core principles of Sikhism.

² Bill 21 was passed in June 2019 by the provincial government of Quebec. It bans all forms of visible religious symbols, worn in Quebec’s public sector service. My article focuses only on the Sikh turban.

³ Secularism refers to the “indifference to, or rejection or exclusion of, religion and religious considerations” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In Canada, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) solidified this notion of secularization.
The turban is a symbol of the principle concepts adhered to by Sikhs across all genders. For example, the first recorded ceremony of Amrit (meaning baptism) and the formulation of a Sikh identity in India, occurred in 1699; this history was told to me through countless stories in my family and many books (Barrier, 1998; Singh, 2003). At that time in India, oppression of the Sikhs included severe political and religious persecution by the governing power. Since that time, Sikhs “… were enjoined to succor the helpless and fight the oppressor, to have faith in the One, and to consider all human beings equal irrespective of caste and religion” (Singh, 1993, pp. 119-120). By enacting Amrit, a Sikh person adheres to the five K’s of the visible identity markers that embody the spiritual religious principles of the Sikh faith. The 5 K’s are: kes (uncut hair), kanga (comb to keep the hair tidy), kacheri (shorts worn to represent chastity), kara (steel bracelet worn to remember to do right), and kirpan (ceremonial dagger to symbolize upholding justice). The kes- requires the turban to keep the hair tidy and clean. Through these embodied measures, there is centred hope to live in an equal and just society. The key principle of an honest and just service is maintained through beliefs and actions to achieve society’s collective well-being. The Sikh turban, therefore, holds a sacred place of faith and symbolism for its wearer- and is not separate from the principles or tenants of the Sikh faith. It is an honour to wear the turban. For many, the turban is a symbol of seva (meaning selfless service) and is associated with discipline, strength and working for the larger community. In this article, the reader will come to understand more about Sikhs’ lives through a few narratives of our lived experiences.

**Sikh Identities in Canada: Historical Accounts**

Within the discourse relating to Canadian identity and citizenship, the Sikh presence and identity as a minoritized, racialized group has a long history. Systemic barriers have exposed Sikhs to structural racism and societal discrimination. In 1914, for example, exclusionary immigration laws prohibited the Sikh, Hindu and Muslim passengers of the vessel, Komagatu Maru, from disembarking from their ship at the port of Vancouver. They eventually had to return to India. In 2008, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper publicly apologized for this historical event of racial discrimination and the colonial legacy. For many, it was an apology representing “the Canadian nation coming to terms with its racist past” (Kaur, 2012).

The reconciliation between the Canadian government, in the form of the public apologies to minoritized populations, extends to other groups wronged by racist and exclusionary policies. Including, but not limited to, the Japanese interned in camps during World War II and the First Nations children who were forced into residential schools - an educational system designed to exert control over and eliminate the culture and way of life of Canada’s Indigenous populations.

In spite of the barriers they faced while being colonial subjects, Sikhs volunteered to fight as British subjects in both World Wars I and II. It cannot be denied that wearing their turbans, the Sikh soldiers fought valiantly in both campaigns. Ironically, during the wars, concerns regarding their religious identity (and wearing turbans) was not at odds with public service. In the 1990’s, Baltej Singh, after a contentious public debate, became the first turbaned

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4 1988 - Apology made by the Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney for Japanese Internment camps.
5 2008 - Apology made by Prime Minister Stephen Harper for the forced assimilation of Indigenous populations.
6 The records of Sikh troops that fought under the British Empire, in both World Wars I and II, have been documented by military historians. More recently the Sikh soldiers were recognized in an exhibition at the Calgary Military Museum (White, 2019).
officer of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Such examples demonstrate that legislation and public sentiment built in and around negative discrimination against Sikhs has a longstanding history in Canada.

September 11, 2001, changed our world in many ways. Unfortunately, terrorism has become associated with specific racialized, minority groups. For Sikhs, it became days, months and years of being associated with terrorism, with turbans and brown skin - a time when bigotry and hate were amplified (Banks, 2015). The violence enacted against Sikh turbaned men has been documented, but is still not widely known by the mainstream public: “many today are unaware of how Sikh men have been vilified because of their skin color and turbans” (Arora, 2013, p. 116). This violence is exemplified in one of the deadliest mass shootings in the USA, at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin on August 12th, 2012, leaving five dead and others with chronic injuries and psychological trauma (Yaccino, Schwirtz & Santora, 2012). I, alongside hundreds of others, participated in candlelight vigils across Canada, to stand in solidarity against the senseless tragedy provoked by sentiments of hate towards Sikhs.

In 2017, in the dominant, Francophone community of Quebec in Canada, we witnessed our own home-grown tragedy when we learned of the shooting of six Muslims in the mosque in Quebec City. This tragic event, like so many similar incidents across the world, did not occur in isolation. Many remember 2019, in Christchurch, New Zealand, where there was the mass shooting of Muslims in two mosques during Friday prayers. It was possibly, the worst terrorist attack in New Zealand’s recent history with a death toll of 51. Currents of xenophobia, racism, discrimination, and blatant ignorance regarding those of different religions or origins have percolated and spread across Canada, the USA and the world.

More subtle examples of discrimination here in Canada, include the 2013 Quebec Soccer Federation policy, which deemed it unsafe for youth to wear turbans on Quebec’s soccer fields (Remiorz, 2013). This prohibition had some politicians speak out against the soccer policy alongside the Canadian Soccer Association (CSA) and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). They understood the absurdity of the argument, framed as concerns for “safety.” However, the argument for the policy prevailed, amidst the condemnation by political leaders, at the time. This is one clear example of the heated debate that has occurred in Quebec discourse around religion, identity and the public sphere (Riga, 2019). A paradox exists. When turbaned Sikh soldiers fought in the two World wars, our history does not relate that their turbans resulted in expressions of concerns about their safety.

Similarly, the rhetoric around women in the Muslim community, in Canada, who wear the hijab is often fraught with accusations of oppression and aims at attempting to ‘save’ the women because they are deemed incapable of making their own choices. Historically, colonial violence has been steeped in the governing of women’s bodies (Thobani, 2007). Colonial violence and ignorance continue in the current climate, where “veiled women threaten a national imagery” (Jiwani, 2010, p. 76). The idea of agency inherent in a Sikh’s or Muslim’s identity is lost on the governing bodies. Furthermore, the power to oppress freedom of thought and expression of minority populations is considered to be necessary and vital for the ‘public good.’ In reality, in Sikhism, wearing the turban represents an honourable commitment to one’s faith that should not limit one’s participation in civil society. Such public service is deemed worthy and necessary for all Canadians.
In the past Canada, including Quebec, systematically attempted to eradicate the Indigenous populations’ cultures in residential schools. Legislation condemned belief systems, languages, and a way of life not perceived as being easily assimilated into the larger society. Through laws that banned Indigenous ceremonies, language, and culture, we see a history which is still adhered to in present forms of colonization. The long-term effects of colonization are felt painfully today. Being born to immigrant parents in Canada, requires an acknowledgement that my identity is also complicit with the existing status quo. This means that, unintentionally, I support a system created deliberately to enact racism through the Federal government’s policies and regulatory bodies. I do not write this lightly. I, too, share writer Maya Angelou’s perceptions of clipped wings and tied feet as a racialized minority woman who has benefited from the system that has caged the First Nations people. Sunera Thobani (2007) explains the inherent dilemmas in the multiculturalism policy and act:

As racially excluded immigrants sought to expand the institution of citizenship to accommodate their own demands for inclusion, they left largely unchallenged the role of this institution in the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples. The extension of citizenship rights to these racialized immigrants thus resulted in their qualified integration into the political community, but at the cost of fostering their complicity in the colonial domination of Aboriginal peoples (Sunera Thobani, 2007, p. 76).

The question I ask here is: Does our history lend itself to a comprehensive understanding of defining a “Canadian” identity that is considered essential for building a just and inclusive community?

Present-Day Realities: Being “Othered”

Fast forward to 2019, to Bill 21, which was ratified in Quebec after months of voices opposing the unjust law (Feith, 2019). The argument presented time and again, in the continuous attack on one’s attire, is that wearing different attire is a threat to safety and the representation of the ideal employee in the public service. This time the argument has shifted, ‘safety’ is replaced with a desire for secularism and neutrality of the public services. If we understand public services to mean an extension of a safe, healthy, functioning community, then “neutrality” could be understood as the objective services rendered to everyone within the community.

Bill 21 targets all forms of religious visibility, such as the kippah (head covering) worn in Judaism, the hijab and the turban. The exception are those less visible or easily concealed symbols, including a Christian cross on a necklace under the individual’s clothing. However, Sikh men wearing turbans, working in such roles as police officers, teachers, or judges are seen to be highly visible in the public sector. To be visible seems to confront the ideology behind Bill 21, which is the neutralizing of religion, ironically, except for the wearing of a Christian cross. An argument that renders racialized minorities as the “Other” (Said, 1979) is continuing a history of the oppression of rights and freedoms.

We do not understand the context of our past carried forward to the present, until conditions deteriorate. In response, some of us become uncomfortable, some are apathetic, others angry and still others decide to take action. Perhaps, some Quebecois people, as demonstrated with the passing of Bill 21, were uncomfortable with the major changes in the province’s demography and the increasing presence of racialized immigrants. Perhaps, they were
uncomfortable with a new reality that identity politics is fluid, and further that one’s identity is not engraved in stone. Unfortunately, in Canada, white supremacy and racism are embedded in the fabric of our nation-building (Bannerji, 2000) and continue to impact the lives of people of colour. A denial of racism is further exacerbated through the Constitution’s not-withstanding clause. Accordingly, Quebec is able to nullify the provisions of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982). Representation of minority communities in public spaces makes some persons visible. However, with Quebec’s Bill 21, we have rendered entire groups of people, indeed, whole communities, invisible.

There is a real possibility that future generations of religious minority and racialized children who aspire to be teachers, civil servants, judges, police officers and social workers cannot do so. Or do so by rejecting the visible tenants of their faith, of their identity. I think that perhaps, I have embodied the educator, “who endeavors to rattle complacent cages, who attempts to ‘wrest us anew,’ from the threat of conformism,” but then, “undoubtedly faces the treacherous ghosts of other’s fears and terrors, which in turn evoke one’s own demons” (Boler, 1999, p. 175). The discussion below explores further aspects of Boler’s (1999) argument.

I ask the question: Is the Charter perhaps, caged by the bars of an ideology of secularism, xenophobia, and fears of the other?

Personal Experiences

The power relations associated with governance and law have major impacts in our connections and interactions with one another in the larger community. Racism is structural and systemic as well as individual. It is demonstrated in Sikhs present-day lived experiences of racism and traceable throughout Canada’s history.

Some see the presence of others, who look or sound different from them, with fearful eyes. I apply “fear in its myriad forms” (Boler, 1999, p. 140), to describe the tangible experiences that often occur in public spaces such as educational spaces. The emotional literacy required for me to speak and share my anger and hurt over Bill 21, as a teacher, has been replaced with my performative element of nonchalance. Albeit, I acknowledge here that I do not wear a turban, which affords me a privilege not afforded to Sikh women who wear a turban. To act like it does not bother me - allows me to protect myself from the inattention and/or supportive attention this Bill has received outside of the communities impacted directly. This is my coping mechanism. It is a way to protect myself amidst the increasing accounts of racism (explicit and implicit) expressed towards minority, racialized groups, including Sikhs. One example of a racist incident experienced by my own family occurred recently. When we were participating in the International Women’s Day, March of 2016, in downtown Calgary, a European-Canadian man (a bystander), standing in the crowd, shouted and confronted us with the words: “another terrorist in the making!” The words were directed at my innocent, little son, who was only 6 years old, at the time. To the perpetrator’s public performance of bigotry and hate, I reacted by removing my son, right away. This was an attempt to remove and detach...
ourselves from the violence of his words. However, it left me shaken, angry, and determined to protect my children from another such incident.

In this instance, my emotional vulnerability was hidden deliberately, by a performance of being dismissive and expectant of ongoing discrimination. (I have heard and seen many an example of discrimination and racism). More recently, my performance was challenged when faced by the emotional literacies of my middle-school students in a Calgary public school. When teaching and learning about Canadian Confederation,8 the Charter of Rights and Freedoms9 (1982), and Canadian residential schools,10 the students demonstrated a strong empathy that contrasted with my wariness to display pain. Whenever discussions of human rights have a significant role in classes, the current event of Bill 21 sharpens discussion and allows personal revelations because the policy makes all the more apparent my visible identity and relates closely to the identities of the students in my class who were wearing a turban or hijab. In class, I embodied a present-day tension for minorities as a Canadian-Sikh woman. My students recognized the law as being a way to remove me potentially as their teacher, had we been living in Quebec, Canada. Thankfully, living in Alberta, our class navigated without fear, displaying emotions of disbelief and frustration together. We were a strong classroom community in which such a negative discriminatory Bill, could hopefully, never be enacted.

The emotional literacy and understanding required from me in this scenario increased my emotional capacity to grapple with controversial issues and this growth became a site of resistance and empowerment. By deepening deliberately, my understanding of my own emotions (the anger, denial, frustration), and during the process of receiving copious amounts of empathy from my students, we developed a stronger, highly engaged learning community (Boler, 1999, hooks, 2003). I no longer felt the need to perform nonchalance. Recognizing emotional literacy as empowering, I concentrated on placing before the students, my own anger and fear as a means to delve deeper into understanding the implications of the Quebec legislation. Bill 21 is legislation that holds the power to remove bodies, like mine, from provincial and municipal public spaces in which we serve the community as teachers, health care workers, police officers. Writing this article is another important site of empowerment, by means of exploring my emotions, both in terms of demonstrating resistance to Bill 21 and summarizing my growth and enhanced understanding through learning from my students. From a community of my students, I am empowered.

Maya Angelou’s poignant poem, “I know why the caged bird sings,” laments the minority reality of being rendered unseen but still heard. In teaching, my voice reverberates and resonates with Maya Angelou’s and Rupi Kaur’s poems. As importantly, this article makes explicit, my own resistance, as a Sikh woman, to Quebec’s Bill 21.

Since the passing of the Bill 21 legislation in Quebec, how can the Charter of Rights and Freedoms be regarded as a site of resistance or empowerment?

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8 The Canadian Confederation was established in 1867. The first European settlements took place in the 1600’s and changed the landscape for centuries to come (Confederation 1867, 2018).
9 The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms was legislated in 1982, under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, to provide protection for the unique and distinct identity of Canada. For example, Canada is a nation of bilingualism (French & English), equality rights, and freedom of conscience and religion.
10 See “Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada”, 2015.
Closing Thoughts: Feeling Hope

This land, ‘my home and native land’, is celebrated for the opportunity to create a larger accepting, national community through the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) and the ongoing attempts to reconcile historical wrongs suffered by racialized minorities. Although we know of oppression, both historically and at present, the desires to grow and reach one’s full potential, feel safe and free are all shared in the human spirit. We may all be in cages when we choose to remain apathetic. Yet many of us, despite being encaged, continue to sing songs of freedom and evoke an understanding of our emotions as sites of resistance to racial discrimination. Megan Boler (1999) cautions, “self-reflection, like passive empathy, runs the risk of reducing historical complexities to an overly tidy package that ignores our mutual responsibility to one another” (p. 177). We cannot accept complacency. My emotional literacy has helped me to work through the tensions of the arguments and questions presented in this article - a responsibility I will continue to embrace. Throughout it all, I remember that my name is Kaur. Therefore, I hope to continue the legacy of Sikhs that encourages us to hold up our crowns (our turbans), as signs to stand tall, to challenge injustice, and to uplift our voices in singing songs of freedom.

In ending, I ask:

How can we work towards co-creating and sustaining a Canada that could be more just for racialized minorities and Indigenous persons?

Is it possible to open a conversation, alongside Bill 21, inviting empathy from and for others, to create a community of belonging, acceptance and security in Canada?\(^{11}\)

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\(^{11}\) June 2020 - the world is witnessing systemic racial injustice in the murder of George Floyd by state police officers, and protests have erupted across North America, including Canada, calling for justice and the end of systemic racism against Blacks. The current premier of Quebec, Francois Legault, acknowledged these events whilst denying any form of systemic discrimination in Quebec, "We have this discussion very often. I think that there is discrimination in Quebec, but there is not systemic discrimination," he said. "There’s no system of discrimination, and it’s a very, very small minority of people doing this discrimination" (Olivier, 2020).
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