

FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF SOCIO-RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

This paper is about a snapshot in time - I have spent the last year (2011) interviewing young women of the Sikh diaspora who attend my university on their impressions, experiences and aspirations about Sikhi and its response to them primarily as young Sikh women. I have also been exploring views that a few blogs have been representing and what the online Sikhi world portrays about current Sikh feminist views. What I have found has not been startling but it has been eye opening, giving me much to think about. Socio religious discourse at the Gurdwara in a small community in rural British Columbia (BC) and its response or lack thereof to young Sikh women who live in the community, is the subject of my research and the topic of this paper.

DISCUSSION Gurdwaras Affairs

To place the institution, it is important at the outset to disclose the political Diaspora nature of the Gurdwara in the religious-political battle of *langar* seating arrangements in Canada - commonly referred to as the "tables/chairs/mats issue (*kursian, mezan tey tappar*)" that ensued in the 90's in BC, sparked by Canadian and homeland politics and modern terror warfare. This Gurdwara was in the eye of the storm, leaving us today with the monikers of moderates and fundamentalists that tragically and sadly differentiate the now differentiated houses of the Guru in the local area.

As sacred ground in a foreign land, most Sikh Gurdwaras outside of India, look to the Sharomini Prabandhak Gurdwara Committee (SGPC) of Punjab, India and in particular to the Akal Takht for religious rehit maryada. Edicts proclaimed by a body of pseudo elected officials (almost always male), are to be obeyed without popular discourse or input in most instances by anyone in the Sikh faith. Interpretation of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib has been by and large appropriated only from one side, which has been the male view (Singh, 2005 [10], Jakobsh, 2003, 2000). I suggest along with other scholars (Singh, 2005 [10],

Jacobsh, 2003), that Sikh women's agency has been ignored, displaced, dislocated and disavowed from the religio-aesthetic matrix in the Gurdwara. Many Sikh women in this study confirm this view.

Within the Gurdwara that is the subject of my study, much religious discourse ensues; the most obvious and socio-religious are *katha, kirtan* and *bolarey*. Sikh youth, women and men's camps have gained favour in the last few decades where teaching, learning, discussions and other forms of meditation and yoga occur, sometimes in the Gurdwara and sometimes outside its boundaries. There is another kind of discourse that occurs behind closed doors in the inner sanctums of the organizing committees world- wide where very few women have ever voluntarily ventured or been invited. As Baldwin said in her book *What The Body Remembers*: "Men only see women from the corners of their eyes". Women in the inner sanctums of Gurdwara committees are seen by the male gatekeepers only as peripherally important, mostly relegated to work in the *langar* hall alongside other men, for whom all domains are open (Singh, 2003 [9]). Online through the world wide web of journals, a plethora of posts, groups, blogs, and social media some feminist discourse occurs. Academic work, conferences and

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symposia provide other venues for discourse on religion. Popular Diaspora media in Canada (print, radio and TV) still provides only limited avenues for Sikh feminist discourse and discovery.

Religious, Social and Political Role

However, there is another discourse of which little in terms of research is available: The discourse of women's needs within the religio-political, socio-spatial and philosophical sphere and influence of the Gurdwara. I start off by asking the question: Can this discourse occur in a truly safe and un-confrontational manner in the Gurdwara or are we not there yet as the blog *Langar Hall* alludes to.

On June 14, 2011, Nirmal Singh Nilvi responded to a Sikh Chic article: (Sikh Theology: The Talking Stick Colloquium # 53) "Theology requires a vast unencumbered space, no ideological shackles, a willingness to cross intellectual limits and the environment where the mind is beyond challenges or repercussions. The aim is to dig deep, beyond the fear of a collapsing wall; plumb noble/ dark corners and develop an accurate image with its ugliest and operating details. In the development of Sikhi, we are still experimenting with the concepts. Indulgence with theology is beyond the practical realm. We have the urge; understand its need but opaque on the challenges of the undertaking. In other words, not ready".

Today the question is: Is the space being created and if it is where is it? As Sikhs we can easily attest to the fact that there is still a very distinct and conscious disconnect and divide between the normative and operative beliefs of the Sikh faith as it responds to women or feminine philosophy as relevant to the Gurdwara (Jacobsh, 2003). Sikh women in this study feel and can articulate with ease: the widely held and espoused belief of an egalitarian Sikh faith but they say that they find little in its practice that they can see, touch or respond to. For example, "Being told that a woman can be a *Granthi* is not tantamount to seeing and believing" as one respondent said.

In connection to this quote when blogging about the need for mentors for Sikh women, a blogger on *Langar Hall* asks: "how much better would be female Granthis as mentors in our community? I know personally, many members of the Sangat look to the Granthis at the Gurdwara for personal guidance and assistance. Can we even have female Granthis? Does the lifestyle – often alone, often traveling, with little respect and meager wages – conducive to the community's social constructions of women's work? What are the major shifts that would have to change? Could existing institutions in Punjab meet this challenge or will this really begin by being a

Diaspora phenomenon."

This really begs the question about where this challenge might be accepted – which Diaspora imagination can be fired up? How does the institution of Gurdwara in the Diaspora capture the debate? Cynthia Mahmood (2000) in her ethnographic study exploring gender equality with North American Sikh Women wrote: "Sikh women are often told they are not allowed to participate in certain aspects of religious life, although there may be no scriptural precedence for the exclusion" (p 42).

Podium Dominated by Males

Dr Pashaura Singh (2011 [11]) in response to a blog makes an important observation about the Gurdwara: "The pulpit (*which I say represents the katha*) represents the confessional approach followed by religious preachers who instruct and nurture the understanding and religious participation of their communities. The podium, (*which I say represents the bolarey*) on the other hand, represents the approach to understanding various religious traditions as cross-cultural phenomena of human life by following historical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, textual, philosophical, ethical, and comparative methods." (Sikh chic June 7, 2011). But, both the pulpit and the podium are almost all the purview of the Sikh male.

Katha, *kirtan*, *bolarey* are well-established precincts of the Gurdwara. Women interviewed in this study overwhelmingly do not see their questions, their ideas, their inquiry reflected in the *katha* or *bolarey* from the stage of the Gurdwara, leaving them underwhelmed by the experiences. It was a rare occasion that a woman spoke or performed *kirtan*. Their view is that when men speak in the Gurdwara, it is a hyper-masculine patriarchal message. On one occasion (commemorating the 10th death anniversary of a mother) the *dhad sangi's* unabashedly sang songs about the mother (some of it quite poignant) – but waxed eloquent about how no woman was complete until she became a mother to a son. As the women in this study asked: When did Sikh women allow men to take the pulpit and represent women's desires without ever having consulted them? As Cynthia Mahmood says "a key impetus for feminist Sikhs is that no longer is the woman the "other", she must not be spoken for" (Mahmood, 2000, p. 112).

A *Langar Hall* blog participant talks of how women are silenced and not given the freedom to express their views: "Perhaps, underlying the silencing is a perception that these conversations are attacks on individual men who have simply inherited a culture. But these conversations aren't about any individuals- they're about the framework of power in which we communicate, think, and behave. Until we recognize that framework,

and until we move past it, women's voices will remain unheard." – Simran Kaur (*Langar Hall*, June 13, 2011)

Status of Women

What makes it okay within the Gurdwara for women to hear men relate women's lives without critical analysis of their own deeply embedded patriarchal values? Who decided and when did they decide that not giving birth to a son was somehow not fulfilling a destiny of motherhood or womanhood? Guru Nanak's famous prose in the *asa di var* also speaks to the exalted position of women who give birth of kings, queens are negligible.

Jacobsh (2003) explains that Sikh reformers in the Singh Sabha Movement used innovative responses to elevate the status of women in direct opposition to Hindu degradation of females. Where is the innovation today from Sikhism in this fast changing social, cultural and economic environment? Jacobsh (2003) also speaks to the need to understand and respond to the "complex interplay between religion and social change" (p. 18).

Gender of Divine

Does a monotheistic religion such as Sikhism have to be androcentric? Since the divine in Sikhi does not take a human form (neither male nor female) can we establish a feminine subjectivity, can we project the divine according to our gender as men have always done according to theirs? Surely we can, but the institution of the Gurdwara is not ready for this conversation. In writing about the feminist philosophy of religion, Grace Jantzen, (1999) says, "At present, men construct not only the symbolic of the divine, but also that of women's roles and relationships to the divine: women are those who are called to be the suffering servants of humanity in the reproduction of the world, and are seen as saintly if they accept that position with humility and modesty....But this forcing of women into the roles constructed for us by men is in the end a loss for both sexes" (p. 15). "Addressing the divine through the feminine voice allowed for the maintenance of and understanding of the primary masculine identity of God" (Jacobsh, 2003, p 27)

There is the often quoted verse in the AGGS where Nanak's message about womanhood (mostly focused on the procreative part of woman) seems to be used over and over again to encapsulate Sikhi's view of gender equality. But the message of the verse has missed this next generation of Sikh women by a wide margin. The verse: *We are conceived in the woman's womb and we grow in it. We are engaged to women and we wed them.....* This common reference focuses on the functions related to motherhood/wifeness, partners for the sake of procreation or to fulfill the needs of men, while staying largely silent on any female agency. Canadian born Sikh women of this study find this view

limiting and egregious to their own emancipated desires and aspirations as Sikh women. (Mahmood, 2003, Jacobsh, 2003).

Position of Sikh Women During Sikh Gurus' Period

The online Sikh Philosophy's website slogan proclaims: why call her weak when kings are born of her? *So kyoon munda akhiye jin jamey rajaan?* Where is the justice in using this part of the verse to define us? Where in the Gurbani do we so easily remember and hear of Sikhi's claims to modernity in relation to women? And how do women relate to seva based on hukamnama's from the Akal Takht (fateh.sikhnet)?

When the outward form of Sikhism was prescribed by Guru Gobind Singh with the *punj kakkar*, women were excluded from being initiated into the Khalsa Panth, ritually and symbolically and "the transformation from masculine to hyper-masculine ethos was now complete" (Jacobsh, 2003, p. 44). Nikky Guninder singh (2005 [10]) asks: how might we think about the initiation of Sikhs into the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh so that it is even more effective in a positive way to both men and women? (p.xvi). In referencing Guru Gobind Singh, she uses the word: Birthed the Khalsa (p. xv) – a singularly feminine term to describe the conception of the form and identity of Sikhism into the future. Further, Singh (2005 [10]) relates to Guru Gobind's maternal side as the Mother of the Khalsa.

However the event "recorded, recognized and remembered by men has made them victims of hyper-masculine attitudes and practices" (p. xvii). Singh (2005 [10]) claims that Sikh men and women see the formation of the Khalsa as the defining moment in Sikh identity. The women in my study did not however see that moment as defining their identity as Sikh women – how could they – they are not present in the narrative in any form other than as giving the sugar for the *amrit* (and even that small contribution is contested). Although clearly understanding the order of the Khalsa from that day forward (and its male manifestation), their identity which is shaped by a fluid dynamic multiplicity and creativity – as Mahmood (2000) points out: "I am Canadian/I am Punjabi/ I am an English speaker/ I speak Punjabi/I listen to Latin music/I am a Sikh" (p. 109) – their identity they argue is shaped by more pragmatic and practical Sikh mothers who want to spare them the barbs so nicely historically preserved and reserved for women by telling them of strong Sikh women like Mai Bhago first warrior heroine of Punjab who proved there is no difference between Singh and Kaur (Gill, 1999, p. xxiii) or Mata Gujri the first Sikh female martyr. The very first time in the 16th century that the wife of a Guru – Mata Khivi wife of Guru Angad participated in

langar by not practicing purdah by doing service in the community kitchen and preparing women to work alongside the men in the restructuring of society. She is the only wife of a Guru to be mentioned in the SGGs:

Balwand Khiwi nek jan, jis bouhti chhao patrali

Langar daulat vandeaya, ras amrit kheer ghiali,

Balwand says that Khivi, the Guru's wife, is a noble woman, who gives soothing, leafy shade to all (www.srigranth.org).

“The dignity of females in *Gurbani*, its practical demonstration was initiated at Khadur Sahib. The Mata thus paved the way for complete independence (*puran azadi*) for the Sikh women” (Chawla, 1999, p. 31). Even Guru Amar Das cleaned utensils and carried water to show male and female solidarity in service.

Mata Mansa Devi wife of Guru Amar Das was instrumental in drawing attention to the plight of Indian widows who had to shave their heads and leave society, living in isolation and penury and the issue of sati and inspired him to give instructions that no women should come to kirtan darbar with their face veiled (Gill, 1999). For the first time women were allowed to be involved in *kar seva* of *Baoli Sahib*. But how many of us can speak of these feminine marvels with ease and comfort of knowledge? And how do we today take these messages and apply them to Sikhism? (Meminger, 2011).

CONCLUSIONS

I close with a quote from Langar Hall blogger, Adi Shakti Kaur, (June 1, 2011), “As I delved further into *Sikhi*, I saw an opening for my feminine identity. The *Gurus*, starting with *Guru Nanak*, not only placed value in my sex and gendered identity, but honored us with our ever present *Kaur* title. The cultural, economic, political, and social backdrop is still patriarchy, no matter how you present the egalitarian and feminist interpretations inherent in Sikh philosophy, men were privileged, men were hyper visible and that tradition continues today in the majority of Sikh institutions (including the *Gurdwaras*) and communities. Now that I am far removed from my childhood naïve absorption of the Sikh spaces around me, absorbing the patriarchy of my spiritual space, how do I carve out the egalitarian and feminist standpoints as a grown woman, as a mother to my daughter, so *Kaurs* can begin to chip away at the institutionalized patriarchal vantage position given to the masculine?”

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