

Article

Interrogating Gender in Sikh Tradition and Practice

Satwinder Kaur Bains

South Asian Studies Institute, University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, BC V2S 7M8, Canada;
Satwinder.Bains@ufv.ca

Received: 16 October 2019; Accepted: 25 December 2019; Published: 8 January 2020



Abstract: In contemporary Sikh society, what we consider religious is constantly being challenged, but for Sikhs, what remain constant are Sikhi's sacred texts—they continue to be the paramount teacher and guide. Within this consistency, I ask the question: how can Sikh feminist ideas of representation and identity find expression in response to our understanding/practice of our faith, our institutions, and of the everyday Sikh symbols? This paper critically examines the gendered nature of the Guru Granth, practices within the gurdwaras, and focuses on a part of the *Rahit Maryada* (Code of Conduct) as an area of exploration in the understanding of the everyday ascribed five symbols of Sikhi (*punj kakar*) through a feminist lens. I undertake this in order to gain a gendered appreciation of how the scriptures, religious institutions, and the articles of faith resonate with the feminine.

Keywords: Sikhs; gender; Siri Guru Granth; *Rahit Maryada*; *punj kakar*; gurdwara; feminist thought

1. Introduction

As a canonical text for Sikhs and the faith's sacred scripture, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib (Guru Granth) informs my spiritual practice in a very personal manner. As an initial reference for the reader, the Guru Granth is also known as the Adi Granth, "the adjective *Adi*, or first has been appended to distinguish this Granth from the second sacred scripture of the Sikhs, the Dasam Granth, which contains the works attributed to the tenth (dasam) Guru, Gobind Singh" (Singh 2000, p. 1). While acknowledging its premier position "as a supertextual source of authority within the Sikh Panth" (Singh 2000, p. 266) and that personal knowledge of the Gurmukhi language is required in order to engage with the original form of the Granth, for this paper, I have also relied on English translations of various texts to fully understand and appreciate the form and meaning of the *Gurshabad* (the Word) and the Sikh code. As a feminist, my contextual study of religious text interpretations is laden with critical questions that are not encouraged in formal institutional structures of the faith; nevertheless, many questions rise from within me. As a young religion, Sikhism (est. 1469) is only recently deconstructing the long-forged and existing power relations within third-wave feminist activism and beyond into fourth-wave feminism, including social, technological, textual, and dialogical aspects. The central question of this paper is the following: what are the issues that Sikh feminists need to explore in order to further develop a Sikh feminist hermeneutic? I take a largely emic view of Sikh tradition even as I critically analyze Sikh texts and history.

Although not yet fully theorized, Sikh feminism's critical goal has been to de-center the notion of normatively androcentric hermeneutics and to (re)raise the textual and practical meaning that surveys Sikh thought and understanding. (Singh 2014a) suggests, "There is a lack of feminist hermeneutics. Consequently, the existential correlation between the sacred text and daily life has yet to be made in the Sikh world. Whereas Sikh scripture has been radically open, the community has been reticent to acknowledge and implement its innovative ideas" (p. 618). The time presents itself to challenge old and new interpretations as a first step—a critique of the religious interpretations in light of misogyny, feminism examines the status quo with new understandings of the text. (Singh 2000) poses

many questions on the ability of any Sikh to understand the canon's oral and written exegesis based on the following estimate, "all interpretive activity is subject to particular cultural predispositions, the historical situation of the interpreter, inevitable change in the modes of attention and the nature of interaction between the past and the present" (p. 240). He further suggests that "in the case of literary interpretation one approaches the text without preconceived intention in order to explore the many possibilities of its meaning and confronts the world in front of the text" (p. 260). I suggest that this immediate, personal, and contemporary approach combats traditional interpretations that have neglected the feminine.

Keeping this in mind, this paper investigates and undertakes a literary interpretation of how Sikh texts, codes, and practices may be understood and interpreted through a feminist lens placed on historical texts, various interpretations, contemporary views, and personal sense-making (via spiritual learning and lived realities). The feminist lens allows me to analyze how women are represented and portrayed in comparison to men in Sikh texts. Feminist political, cultural, and economic movements have worked to bring about equal rights and legal protection for women through the three waves of feminist history, growing the positionality of feminist thought. Positioning an analysis of Sikhi's sacred texts and codes of conduct through third-wave feminism seeks to challenge the binary opposition and subsequent interpretations/transliterations present in the texts.

While medieval India was the stage for Nanak's reform movement, I turn our minds to the rise of postmodernism's third-wave feminism, which "embraces multivocality over synthesis and action over theoretical justification" (Snyder 2008, p. 175). Third-wave feminism collapses both the category of "women" by foregrounding personal intersectional narratives of lived experiences and the judgmental policing of boundaries of feminist politics. We are aware that the politics of coalition have dogged feminism since its early days of self-identification to the third wave that attempts to break down the rigid structures of feminist ideology. In a similar manner, Nanak was a reformer attempting to break down centuries-old, rigid codes of faith ideologies, practice, and culture in India in the late 15th and early 16th century. His construction of the thirty-eight stanzas of the Japji Sahib are what Rabindranath Tagore called an anthem for the world. Just as, today, feminism is something different to every individual, so did Nanak provide the means to understand Sikhi through a very personal lens and made it available for a personal relationship and interpretation. He suggested that it is "not about hearing voices from God, but it is about changing the nature of the human mind and anyone can achieve direct experience and spiritual perfection at any time" (Mandair 2013, p. 31). The Guru Granth is the only text penned by a faith's teachers, as well as philosophers from other religions. While no modifications can be made to the text, unique to Sikhi is the personal interpretation and will of application of the *Gurshabad*. Nanak's critique of inherent privilege and illuminating the vast caste and gender divides in India led to a philosophy of Sikh equality of all

At this juncture in the twenty-first century, I suggest that global Sikhs may want to recognize how contemporary Sikh feminists see themselves not just as interlocutors but as vital meaning makers of the faith, its various interpretations and through its inherent impact on their lives. In the past, "the educated elite among the Sikhs, by virtue of their proficiency in the language of their erstwhile conquerors, took advantage of their position, claiming full authority to translate, elucidate and define new parameters, particularly for those who were closest and most subordinate to them, their womenfolk" (Jakobsh 2003, pp. 201–2). However, today, this has changed, and we are in the midst of a largely quiet Sikh feminist revolution that seeks to challenge traditionally-accepted androcentric textual understandings. At the same time, I am humbled (and cautioned) in my analysis by (Singh 2000)'s suggestion that "it is the text that illuminates the interpreter like radiance, not the interpreter who illuminates the text" (p. 260). This illumination is not without its dark corners, and I attempt to bring the issues of Sikh praxis together.

In this paper, my investigation leads to the text in the *Rahit Maryda* (Sikh code of conduct) that codifies a *Khalsa* Sikh's personal duty and responsibility to the five *kakars* (*punj kakars*). These are the five articles of faith through which I suggest the ethical *Khalsa* (a collective of spiritual and worldly Sikhs

that are pure of thought and action) is imbued with gender neutral/supportive personal and spiritual agency on an everyday basis. Further and more broadly, I start at the beginning of our introduction to the Sikh scriptures. Emancipatory feminism allows for an understanding that the all-encapsulating first words in the Guru Granth *Ikk Oankar* have universal appeal and can be reconnoitered, and different interpretations of parts of the Guru Granth can be critically surveyed (Beasley 2004). My interpretation is directly affected by the daily representation of a contemporary female reality that is embodied in Sikhi for me. This reality is informed by my feminine consciousness as a global Sikh living in a diaspora and through taking part in and observing practices at the Sikh religious institutions—projecting forward as it were into an anticipated world.

The genesis of Sikh feminist thought can be attributed to the founder of the faith, Guru Nanak Dev ji (born 1469), who revealed a new inclusive ontology and theology of difference whereby his understanding of the creator's formless quality allowed for deliverance from caste discrimination, gender bias, or hierarchy and was a move away from the worship of idols (Grewal 1969; Kaur 1990; Jakobsh 2003; Singh 2000, 2005, 2014a). Nanak's third way (Nanak *Panth* or path of Nanak that nine other Gurus followed) teachings follow *nirgun bhakti*, defining a Sikh's devotional goal to become one with the One (*Ikk Oan Kar*), omnipotent, omnipresent, fearless, and loving—without form (*nirankar*), and without attributes (*nirgun*) (Mandair 2010; Grewal 2009; Takhar 2005; Shackle and Singh 2005). Critically important is the fact that Nanak does not evoke the contradistinction of the formless One who has neither male nor female attributes yet is completely subsumed within manifested attributes and is complete and whole. (Singh 2011) states,

“It is critical that we do not put Guru Nanak's truly unique configuration of *Ikk Oan Kar* into any pre-existing molds. The standard translation ‘There is One God’ does not quite express the vastness and plenitude or the intimacy bursting forth in the original. Instead of an opening into limitless possibilities as envisioned by the founder Sikh Guru, scholars and translators have selected, structures [sic] and shaped *Ikk Oan Kar* into a male god”.

(p. 68)

She further states that “[a]s the inclusive numeral shatters the dominance of male imagery, it creates a space for the Divine to be experienced in other new and important ways” (p. 607). As the opening words (*Ikk Oan Kar*) of the Guru Granth in the *Mul Mantar*, (Singh 2000) suggests “the numeral (‘IK’) at the beginning of the *Mul Mantar* represents the unity of the ultimate reality, a concept which Guru Nanak interprets in monotheistic terms” (p. 85). While affirming the single supreme essence (“supreme being”), (Singh 2000) departs from the idea of one and unity and corroborates with (McLeod 1968) transliteration with the following male-default androcentric colonized interpretation from the Guru Granth's verse on page 350: “My Master is the one. He is the one, brother and he alone exists” (p. 85). The transliteration from the original Gurmukhi text is as follows: *Sahib Mera Eko Hai. Eko Hai Bhai Eko Hai*. In Gurmukhi colloquial terms, *sahib* is a prefix/honourific given to a male of significant stature and status, but I suggest that, today, it can be accorded gender-free teacher (guru) designation *here*, rather than the word Master (male); and the word *Bhai* colloquially in this context can generally be calling upon a person (not only a man) and does not have to be the (male) brother—but rather those in the collective *sangat*. In the online SriGranth.org translation, the interpreters put in the superfluous word Lord and also add Master—“My Lord and Master is One” (SriGranth.org, p. 350) and further interpret the stanza: “He is the One and Only; O Siblings of Destiny, He is the One alone” (p. 350)—and here how the interpretation of *Bhai* signifying ‘siblings of destiny’ is not fully understood. (Jakobsh 2014) is right in suggesting that the honourific *Sahib* has masculine utility, but I suggest that in terms of the Guru Granth's inclusive views in this regard, *Sahib* can also be a guide/teacher for the learner and can be inculcated as such. In analyzing the androcentric colonized mentality of the translations of the Guru Granth, (Singh 2014b) suggests that “[w]hereas the Divine is the transcendent, metaphysical One, it is invariably translated into a Western monotheistic ‘God’ and given a male identity” (p. 619).

While global Sikhs in the diaspora have long been attuned to their colonial history (British Raj), they mostly rely on available translated texts for religious knowledge if the mother language has become lost (Punjabi in this instance); however, many exegetes have their academic study rooted in Western texts and through that training have been influenced by western religio-philosophical concepts. Singh (2007) suggests that in her analysis of the various translations, “English words imbued with Jewish and Christian meaning have come to dictate Sikh ideals. Key theological concepts from western philosophical tradition—alien to Sikh worldview—bury scriptural translations and obstruct real affinity between Punjabi and English” (p. 37). She further suggests that the master–subject relationship of the British Empire continues to have credence in the diaspora, “younger generations of Sikhs in Canada, England and America are not familiar with the original verse. Sadly, it is in *his master’s* voice that many Sikhs relate with their sacred books” (p. 37).

Key concepts such as *Ikk Oankar* are misconstrued or narrowly construed in translation, signifying a male God (commonly understood to mean ‘there is one God’)—because it closely follows *Satnam* (commonly understood to mean ‘His name is truth’). (Singh 2007) clarifies the two differences, “There is One Being, Truth by Name” versus the versions of eastern and Western intellectuals, “There is one God, Eternal Truth is His name” (p. 38). She clarifies thus:

“‘There is One God’ is a monotheistic conception, which does not quite invite the multiplicity and poly-imagination of Nanak’s numeral One. A specific male ‘he’, with pronounced male pronouns, horribly distorts Nanak’s original language of plenitude and destroys the elemental modality of ‘Ikk Oan Kar’. The dynamic processes set in motion at the very outset of Sikh scripture are immediately aborted in the English translation”.

(p. 38)

Does the interpretation of the *Gurshabad* receive social justice when female subjectivities are ignored or are superimposed by patriarchal hermeneutics? For example, if repeatedly exegetists (e.g., Gurcharan Singh Talib, Gopal Singh, Pritam Singh Chahil) of the Guru Granth transcreate that the way to union with the Divine is through the feminine, is the quest then to see how the male adherent finds his feminine side in order to complete the union? Jakobsh (1999) suggests, “addressing the Divine through the feminine voice leads one to conclude that there is a concerted effort to maintain the masculine identity of God, the female overcome with love for the Bridegroom, her Love, can thus only be male” (p. 31). The online SriGranth.org (, p. 38) interprets a verse in the Guru Granth in this vein:

She who knows her husband Lord to be always with her, enjoys his constant presence—

jini piru sange janiai piru rave sada haduri

O woman, you must walk in harmony with the Guru’s will

Mundhe tu chalu gur kai bhai

Night and day, you shall enjoy your husband, and you shall intuitively merge into the True One

an din raevh pir apna sehje sach sama e

Attuned to the Shabad, the happy soul-brides are adorned with the True Word of the Shabad

Sabad rai a sohagani sachari sabad sigar

Within their own home, they obtain the Lord as their Husband, with love for the Guru

Har var pa in ghar apni gur kau het pi ar

Upon her beautiful and cozy bed, she enjoys the Love of her Lord. She is overflowing with the treasure of devotion

Sej suhavi har rang ravai bhagat bhare bhandar

Does the Sikh male see himself represented in devotion as a female, or is that negated to a (subsumed/secondary) female position metaphorically? (Singh 2005) suggests that “it is imperative that a one-sided memory of Sikh sacred verse and its male application be rectified” (p. 141), but what of the exegesis of a hyper-sexualized female representation as the devotee to a male Lord? It is true, as she posits, that “[i]n the literature of the Gurus, female images serve as vital reminders of the Transcendent One, and they are greatly valued for cultivating spirituality; but the minds of the Sikh community lack the ability to store this rich symbolic data” (Singh 2005, p. 141). The question that arises is whether the Guru Granth’s exegesis provides the full benefit to all adherents of the faith, regardless of genders?

2. Results

Gurus, Sikhs, and the Text

Nine gurus followed Guru Nanak, the first Guru, and each one built on the previous Guru’s work, all of which were enshrined in the Adi Granth as devotional poetic scriptures for Sikhs (Shackle and Singh 2005; Singh 2005, 2007, 2014b; Grewal 2009). After the ten Gurus, the Guru Granth replaced the living Guru as prescribed by the Tenth—Guru Gobind Singh in Sikh consciousness (Singh 2004). As the living Word (*Gurshabad*), (Singh 2011) explains it thus:

“The Sri Guru Granth is the physical body that bonds the Sikhs metaphysically with the Divine One, historically with their ten Gurus, and socially with their community. By attributing the Granth as the person of the historical Gurus, the Tenth intended to allow his Sikhs to imagine unprecedented ways of being in the world. His semantic innovation shatters the tyrannical division between body and mind, temporal and eternal, language and reality; it opens up a space for Sikh men and women to experience the sacred and the sensuous in their daily lives”.

(p. 58)

This experience of the sacred for average Sikhs is foremost assigned within places of worship, at the Sikh gurdwaras (house of the Guru) or in their own homes where the Sri Guru Granth is ceremoniously housed and obeisance is offered to it on a daily basis through devotional worship (Singh 2000). Singh (2014b) states that the position of the Granth as the guru has become “the ultimate authority within the Sikh tradition, for a wide range of personal and public conduct” (p. 134). However, a new area of research might be the philosophy of diaspora-born young Sikhs (or Sikhs generally perhaps) who regard the gurdwaras or religious institutions as unimportant on a day to day basis and find their spirituality in other multiple ways.

In keeping with the Guru’s tenets, Sikh Gurdwaras are built on the philosophy of an egalitarian space (all that enter are equal) where the *Gurshabad* is invoked from within the Granth (the supreme and everlasting teacher) for learner-centered spiritual guidance, religious instruction, and social direction for all humankind and especially Sikhs (the learner). Considering the religion’s particularly theorized commitment to an egalitarian social and religious order (Singh 2014a, 1988; Takhar 2005), it is interesting to note that the institutional leadership has mostly been traditionally patriarchal-bound and male (Singh 1993, 2014a). While the religion is purposely devoid of a priestly class (Singh 2014b), one might assume that men and women would have equal access to the affairs of organized institutionalized religion—but these are almost all managed by men, with women being relegated to “female” tasks of food preparation and general cleaning. In direct contrast to the theory of equal access to faith, worship, ritual, and practice, “by and large Sikh women’s agency has been ignored, displaced, dislocated and disavowed from the religio-aesthetic matrix in the gurdwara” (Bains 2012).

Furthermore, the formal exegetical task for the Guru Granth has been undertaken (thus far) only by males (Sikh and non-Sikh) who have produced, in all nature of things, particularly patriarchal viewpoints. For example, feminist Sikh scholar (Singh 2011) points out that the interpreters expound all Sikhs to relate to a soul,

“In spite of the fact that the original verse (in the Sri Guru Granth) does not contain any reference to the soul, it is lavishly present in English translations. Its usage dichotomizes the fullness of the Guru’s experience and vision, and sends misogynistic and geophobic messages to readers. New gender-inclusive, female-sensitive translations are urgently needed”.

(p. 118)

Translations, transliterations, and transcreations by female scholars demand a full justification of the spiritual experiences promised within the Guru Granth for all Sikhs. As Singh (2010) suggests,

“The Gurus regarded woman as physically, psychologically and spiritually more refined, adopting a female voice and tone to express their love for the Divine ... In both praxis and poetry, the Sikh Gurus created a window of opportunity for women, an opening through which women could achieve liberty, equality and sorority”.

(pp. 213–14)

However, Sikh women continue to have limited or no access to feminist thought or measure in relation to the translated text or in the hierarchical, patriarchy-bound practice of the faith within religious institutions. While a few feminist organizations have attempted to create female-centred space, in the day-to-day practice of Sikhi, women must actively seek out their sustenance; it is not embedded in everyday life. Reasons for lack of female agency in the halls of Sikh religious institutions are still to be fully researched. While all Sikhs are encouraged to be baptized as *Khalsa* (the pure ones), (Jakobsh 2014) points out that “early texts, for the most part, focus on the male *Khalsa* identity and are either silent about women’s inclusion into the order or are highly contradictory” (p. 127).

As global Sikhs living in a diaspora, this limited focus is sharply felt by Sikh feminists, like myself, who are searching for meaning in the texts that inform our practice. Exclusion and contradiction of female access and agency create difficult pathways in realizing inclusive Sikh thought. Global Sikhs have created a plethora of Sikh organizations that address topics such as gender, environment, philanthropy, international aid, racism, discrimination, business networks, feminism, service, research, etc. These organizations have provided platforms for further discovery. However, one must be tech-savvy and literate to engage within the organizations and find the one (or more) that meets a personal fulfillment target.

Sikh Feminist Identity

Ideally, a Sikh would be able to self-define the act of knowing by situating oneself within the history of personal experiences with one’s faith. However, challenges of gender, power, and privilege place Sikh women outside the realm of shared knowledge and experiences because of the hegemony of androcentric ideology in the practices of the Sikh faith and interpretations of the Sikh scriptures. For example, women are still not welcome to take an active part in the *prakash* (raising and installation of the scriptures in the early morning) of the Guru Granth at most gurdwaras in India. They are not allowed to serve as the *Punj Pyare* (five beloveds who may be called upon for leadership) or carry any of the paraphernalia surrounding the scriptures. With the exception of the 3HO Sikhs (converts to Sikhi who live and practice the faith outside India), and who follow their own egalitarian interpretation of the faith in their gurdwaras abroad (Elsberg 2003), narratives abound of women worshippers being pushed away and verbally-chastised foreven getting too close to the Holy Scriptures, let alone being allowed to lend a shoulder to the *palki* (palanquin that carries the Guru Granth) at the time of the Guru Granth’s *prakash* (morning rising) or *sukhasan* (night repose). The 1994 English-translated Sikh *Rahit Maryada* that is posted for public consumption on the Shromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) Amritsar’s website states, “When the Guru Granth has to be taken from one place to another, the *Ardas* should be performed. He/she who carries the Guru Granth on his/her head should walk barefoot, but when wearing of shoes is a necessity, no superstitions need be entertained” (Chapter iv, (g)). However, my observations of the daily practices at the Golden Temple in Amritsar show a visually

and aggressively male presence with the *prakash* of the Guru Granth, and a woman's close association is further forbidden by male worshipers as well, men who are not even gurdwara workers actually performing the service. Additionally, Sikh women have not been allowed to perform hymns in the inner sanctum of the Golden Temple or other major gurdwaras in India. In the *Times of India* (27 July 2019) Balvinder Kaur Saundh, Chair of the Sikh Women Alliance, UK, is quoted as follows: "I have been saying for the last 20 years that Guru Nanak and our religion gave us equality. It is the men who have interpreted it to control our religious scriptures" ([Times of India 2017](#)). She also suggests that women should be allowed to shoulder the palanquin at the early morning *prakash* without interference. The Guru Granth itself does not prescribe a code of conduct for Sikhs (to do with rituals or practices), as it is a devotional text—this code is contained in the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* (Code of Conduct), the rules of conduct to be followed by all Sikhs.

By applying a critical feminist lens to the issues of inclusion, a more nuanced, gendered critique provides a medium to question theories and knowledge by examining that which is within the center. Feminist theorist ([Irigaray 1999](#)) states "the ability to enter into relation with one (man or woman) who is other than oneself in the respect of difference(s) is, according to me, what permits the constitution of a proper human subjectivity" (p. xi). This subjectivity must uncover and transform the constructions of subjectivity by de-constructing the patriarchal discourse that has up to now underwritten the interpretive texts and practices for Sikhs. Women are faced with texts that have male-dominant interests, along with the realization that these interpretations are historically and politically-charged. Regardless, there is also an acknowledged realization that ways of knowing that are constructed from hierarchically-favoured forms of knowledge repeatedly perpetuate dominant views. Critical thought does not argue that "all referents for meaning and representation have disappeared: rather, it seeks to make them problematic, and in doing so re-inscribes and rewrites the boundaries for establishing the condition for the production and meaning and subjectivity" ([Giroux 1991](#), p. 227).

[Greene \(1993\)](#) famously questioned how women can work to name their existence if there is so much falsehood around them? In view of this, Sikh feminists work to deliberately create interpretative spaces that introduce, incorporate, and inform the (mis)represented texts and question the false assumptions and assertions of gendered othering ([Singh 2011](#)). Deconstructing the politics of power and difference in order to achieve the full potential for those that are relegated to the margins must be undertaken so as to share in the power/knowledge of what Michel Foucault calls truth/untruth ([Foucault 1998](#)). New knowledge and truth concomitantly induce effects of power that constitute new objects of inquiry. Judith Butler suggests the following: "If identities were no longer fixed as the premises of a political syllogism, and politics no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects, a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old" ([Butler 1990](#), p. 149). It is exactly this promise of a new configuration that motivates the need for inclusion of Sikh feminist thought and practice in both the practices of the faith and its current interpretations.

Five centuries ago, the gurus started theologizing the Guru Granth, for which "there has been no disclosure of feminist possibilities because it has only been the male elites who have served as intermediaries. Their one-sided, androcentric approach has dominated interpretations and commentaries" ([Singh 2011](#), p. 117). Such is the exegesis of the text—Sikh feminist thought has not been debated, argued, or developed in a robust manner in the darbar hall, in discourse, or in text, although in recent times, there is a considerable amount of academic work developing in the field ([Singh 1995, 2005, 2011; Jakobsh 2003, 2010](#)). While there is acknowledgement that the entire Guru Granth is derived from a male pen, ([Singh 1995](#)) suggests that "the feminine voice speaks for all humanity, Sikh scripture opens out the definition of 'man'. The Sikh view is that a separation between male and female denies the wholeness of human nature" (p. 4). A feminist translation of the text has the promise of knowledge production that hitherto has not been fully explored. However, it is not for the sake of translation by feminists (or others) that we re-signify this work but, rather, for the

purpose of giving new meanings to a familiar Sikh scripture with feminist modes of inquiry for all Sikhs. Feminist writer (Butler 2004) suggests the following:

[T]he point is not to assimilate foreign or unfamiliar notions of gender or humanness into our own as if it is simply a matter of incorporation of alienness into an established lexicon. Cultural translation is also a process of yielding our most fundamental categories, that is, seeing how and why they break up, require resignification when they encounter the limits of an available episteme: What is unknown or not yet known.

(p. 39)

This discursive practice of resignification will produce an ongoing, deeper engagement with the faith for Sikh women and others who adhere to the faith or want to understand it.

3. Discussion

The contemporary need is to critically examine how we see ourselves as Sikh women and the effect on us from those around us who inform our thoughts, our ideas, and our beliefs (like our families, our community, the Sri Guru Granth, etc.)—our proud tradition as *sevadarnis*, as keepers of the faith, as women who share our past and our traditions with our children, families, and the next generation while valuing what the older generations of women have given us as their legacy. Upholding this interrogation of Sikh women's identity through a reinterpretation of narrative agency as (Bhabha 1994) suggests, finds room “in between disavowal and designation” (p. 50). (Singh 2010) suggests that at no time in the history of Sikhism were women barred from active participation in society: “women spoke, saw, and acted and they were heard, seen and followed. They were active subjects in all spheres of the evolving Sikh tradition” (p. 213). While evidence to the contrary or support is thinly developed, in upholding a desire for equality, it is abundantly clear that it is not enough to function through representation that is constructed by the “other”. In the contemporary world, Sikh women may choose not to rely on theologians, scholars, or exegetes and may want to create their own personal relationship with Sikhi, the text, its practice, and its *Rahit* without a mediator. While the first words of the Sri Guru Granth—*Ikk Oan Kar* have universal appeal, textual interpretation can be explored on an individual level. *Ikk Oan Kar* (One, manifest as Word) is believed to represent the unified primal cosmic essence of existence (*urja*), consciousness (*surti*), and bliss (*anand*)—one with everything and connecting the One with the infinite. The verses of the Guru Granth allow for a personal interpretation, not as a method but, rather, as an orientation of one's own self toward *gurbani* (devotional poetry of the Gurus). The verses repeatedly call the subject to be open to a personal experience of a union with the One in spiritual love. Sikh studies scholars agree that Sikhism as a religion categorically espoused that “[n]either social mores nor gender were to bar humanity from attaining liberation from the cycle of rebirth (*jiwan mukti*), according to the Sikh Gurus. Whether rich or poor, high or low caste, male or female, the divine light (*jot*) resided within” (Jakobsh 2014, p. 594).

In contemporary Sikh society, the gender neutral, spiritually and ethically significant *punj kakars* (commonly referred to as the five Ks) provide both Sikh women and men with the pre-requisite of spiritual form and order. However, in practice, it was not always thus: in the eighteenth century, *Chaupa Singh Rahitnama* (code of conduct) prohibited women from exercising a full and wholesome right to practice their faith (McLeod 1997; Jakobsh 2003). However, in varying degrees from the late nineteenth century onwards, different perspectives came to bear (McLeod 2008; Grewal 2009; Dhavan 2010), and women have slowly taken back some of what had not been realized, as we witness with Sikh women in the diaspora and their prescription to the Dastar (turban/*pagh*) as an identity marker (Singh 2005). While the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee's posted *Rahit* (1994) states that a Sikh woman may or may not tie a turban, there has also been a modern secularization of symbols in the faith, where the turban is a clothing accoutrement to many Sikh men without the accompanying significance to the *punj kakars* and initiation (Virinder 2006). For women, however, the *dastaar* has taken on significance as a symbol of their commitment to the “exterior markers becom[ing] the dominant

signifiers of Sikh identity” (Jakobsh 2014, p. 595). (Virinder 2006) further suggests that while the turban may have represented “the marking of a male space in which honour and status come to be symbolized through the turban . . . women who wear the *pagh* use their position to undermine much of the patriarchal heritage associated with the symbol” (p. 82). (Jakobsh 2014), however, states that “gender differentiation however remains clearly in place with regard to normative codes” and “a highly gendered, normative *Khalsa* identity thus remains strongly in place” (p. 596). At this current time, I would suggest that both views represent a contemporary evolution of gender identities and representation of faith.

As external markers of the faith, pioneering Western Sikh feminist and scripture scholar (Singh 2005) suggests that “they (the 5 Ks) are concerned with forming an ethical citizen situated within an active, social, political and religious world” (p. 98). Sikh feminists undertaking interpretations of the *punj kakars* with a goal to emancipate Sikhs from a narrow androcentric view that is so prevalent in the faith is much needed. (Singh 2005, 2014b) has provided this first feminist interpretation. New frameworks that address difference and diversity of understandings codify the need to firmly accommodate gendered viewpoints into the philosophy, form, and function of Sikhism. One such form is the Sikh’s personal articles of faith that likely play a role in the formation of their personal identity—the *punj kakars*—*kacchahira*, *kangha*, *kes*, *kirpan* and *kara*. It is these articles that I turn my mind to in order to understand upholding the code of the Sikhs with precise feminist hermeneutics.

I find this undertaking critically important, because, as (Singh 2005) poignantly suggests,

“The five Ks have come to dictate who is to soldier, and who is to submit, who is to demand and who is to give, who feels superior and who feels inferior, who expresses anger and who suffers in silences, who inherits the father’s land or business and who so left out, who is a credit and who is a debit, and ultimately who is rejoiced over in birth and who is aborted”.

(p. 101)

Nikky-Guninder Singh takes a deep and enriching dive into her interpretation of the accoutrements of the *Khalsa* in her book *The Birth of the Khalsa* (Singh 2005) precisely because “the range and subtlety of male interpretations are bewildering” (p. 101) to a feminist scholar questioning “if symbols that are intrinsically paradoxical and multivalent can be masculine why can’t they be feminine as well?” (p. 102). It is the potential of gender inclusivity that appears to lie at the heart of Guru Gobind’s philosophy of eradicating gender-based discrimination and bias that informs the *Rahit*.

I start my personal analysis and interpretation with five *kakars* that have intimacy with the body and its associated discipline for the *Khalsa* and in our personal relationships with the symbols. It cannot be argued that there is a critical impact and effect of the five symbols on the female (or male) individual. Developing a Sikh female hermeneutic is vitally important as my proposed interpretations provide dialogical interaction between the symbols and the self, seen as necessary in our socio-religious construction as Sikhs.

The *kacchahira*, (also known as *kacha*) or simple, loose, cotton shorts/undergarment (up the knees), is a practical garment. It is indicative and representative of a Sikh woman and man’s consistent maintenance of a modest, virtuous, and moral character within the world, along with a spiritual and personal commitment to conjugal/partner fidelity, and it conflates the physical differences in human sexuality with one’s duty to uphold that equality of commitment. Because the scriptures consistently integrate the physical and the temporal, the *kacchahira* affirms the ontological unity of mind (*man*) and body (*tan*) and disavows any duality. It is my suggestion that as a marker of the vow of a *Khalsa*, the *kacchahira* is the crucial symbol representing the breaking down of any divisions and barriers that contribute to gender politics. Prescribed in the exact manner to both women and men, its wearing indicates that a Sikh has a holistic understanding of the spiritual self as a natural sexual being. This article of faith demands strict adherence to the commitment to one partner throughout one’s life—without taking away personal agency to be a practicing Sikh. This same adherence forbids male/patriarchal/misogynist dominance over a life partner and binds life partners in mutually ethical

respect. (Singh 2005) suggests that “[t]he wearer of the guru’s *kacherra* recognizes each body as the home of the Divine (*harimandir*), and not a battleground for domestic violence, economic deprivation, forced sterilization, forced pregnancy, female feticides or honour killing” (p. 132).

The *kanga* or wooden comb is used in the morning and evening to groom a *Khalsa*’s uncut hair (*keshas*) as bidden in Guru Gobind Singh’s *Rahit Nama* (Virinder 2006). Twice-daily (*dono vaqt*) grooming using the *kanga* involves undertaking personally enduring reflection (*dhiraj*), silent meditation (*birti*), and focused prayer and introspection (*simran*). Grooming signifies a personal commitment to self (body) and society for purity of thought, personal hygiene, and spiritual discipline driven by a just mind. The *kanga* supports physical cleanliness and continuous rigor for a moral mind and gives timely order to the body and mind. Even before the *Khalsa* were enjoined to do so in 1699 by the Tenth Guru, women and men were already involved in the tradition (Jat custom) and rigor of character in relation to *kes* by maintaining uncut hair (McLeod 2008). The feminist ideal of personal physical discipline and spiritual rigour is perfectly in tune with the same immutable truth. Daily grooming of the uncut hair by using the *kanga* is symbolic of the removal or working toward a resolution of relationship entanglements and personal struggles.

The *Khalsa*’s uncut hair on the body—*Kes*—represents the natural and physically harmonious commitment to see the body as the home of the divine, with a goal to simultaneously attain spiritual maturity along with the process of hair growth as a young adult. The *kes* (hair) on the head is protected by the wearing of a *keski* (small turban), which guards the *Dasam Dwaar* (the Tenth Gate), a spiritual opening at the top of the head. The *keski* is further covered by a full *dastar* (turban/*pagh*), and these two conjoined articles of Sikh faith are significant, because they are the most visible and identify an independent-minded Sikh adherent who is committed to being moral, just, disciplined, and socially responsible. All Sikhs initiated into the *Khalsa Panth* keep their hair uncut, covering it with a *keski*. From a feminine re-understanding, as bearers of visual difference, *kes* and *keski* are sacred as a submission to the gender-neutral will of the divine. The turban declares sovereignty as a powerful identification of the *Khalsa*—and thus a Sikh embodies personal dedication to moral character, self-respect, courage, social justice, and piety.

The *kirpan* (small sword) is worn by the *Khalsa* on the left hip sheathed in a *gaatra* (over-the-shoulder holster). The *kirpan* claims to represent an egalitarian commitment for all Sikhs toward social justice, fighting oppression, defense of the weak, conquering narcissism, and maintaining personal dignity and personal power at all times with an unconquerable spirit (*chardi kala*). The word *kirpan* finds its origins in the word *kirpa*, meaning compassion, and *an*, meaning grace as exemplified in the idea of every Sikh being *sant/sipahi* (saint/soldier)—a tradition/responsibility that is accorded to all genders. The *kirpan* urges Sikh women and men to commit to courage that will allow her/him to defend anyone against oppression of any kind—be it by thought, action, or deed. This courage is justly codified both as internal (personal character and behaviour) and in various appropriate external responses. The *kirpan* demands that a Sikh’s personal knowledge of the self recognizes the duality of subject and object. According to Guru Nanak, the sword is to be understood as a means to “tear away with the duality of subject and object, and connect us back with our essential Self” (Singh 2005, p. 117). The sword moves beyond its literal meaning to defend to be a symbol of knowledge and a woman who utilizes the sword [of knowledge] in such a manner is described as follows in the Sri Guru Granth, p. 1022: “By taking up the sword of knowledge, she fights against her mind and merges with herself” (Singh 2005, p. 117).

The *kara* (iron bangle worn on the wrist) is a symbol of dedication to one’s faith and an acknowledgement of the circle of life in its simplest form of acceptance of the divine will. The *kara* is a representation of something that is intrinsically feminine (bangle, accessory) and has become traditionally bound to the 5 Ks. The *kara* is a universally connecting article of faith for all Sikhs, signifying a pledge of high moral thinking, humility, claim to identification, personal restraint, and gentility while acknowledging unity with an eternal and infinite spiritual universe, with the circle representing the impermanency of life in the life/death cycle. The *kara* also importantly elicits a commitment by the wearer toward honest and ethical duty, to perform noble acts in mind and in

deed. The adornment that is reiterated in the *Rahit Maryada* is the steel bangle codified through the *Khalsa*. The origin of the steel *kara* is found through the female body and her connection with the divine in the representation of an egalitarian code of conduct *and* belonging for all Sikhs. It demands that Sikhs of all genders be held to a high standard (of truthful living) and consciousness activation. Its impact as a singularly traditional female accessory in the five articles draws out the complimentary and cooperative nature of male and female binaries.

Although embodying symbols such as the *punj kakar*, having a personal relationship with the text of the Sri Guru Granth, seeking guidance through the Sikh *Rahit*, etc. liberate Sikhs from domination—these acts are not enough to guarantee freedom from the domination of patriarchal thought and practice. Emancipatory feminist thought establishes new patterns of behaviour, attitudes, and religious understanding to ensure that relations of power are shared between and amongst genders. The clarion call to Sikh feminist thought has been attuned to by scholars, historians, and translators to produce much-needed perspectives and interpretations (Jakobsh 2014; Singh 2014a). (Singh 2000) correctly states:

“The Adi Granth as a scriptural text has inexhaustible hermeneutic potential. In oral as well as written exegesis, each generation of Sikh interpreters has drawn its meaning from differing perspectives. In fact, plurality of interpretations has remained part and parcel of the Sikh approach to the Adi Granth throughout history. Each encounter with the text of the Adi Granth provides a fresh experience of unfolding a divine mystery”.

(p. 287)

The Guru Granth provides the learner with a limitless pool of egalitarian emphasis that today faces an urgent need to reach the spirit and mind of the female adherents of the faith. (Singh 2005) continues

“The symbols worn by the *Khalsa* are not weapons of war to spark violence in the public or domestic spheres. Nor are they tools that cut and divide us from the human family. Nor are they hand-me-downs from fathers and brothers. Our female understanding of the hair, the comb, the bracelet, the underwear, and the sword intimates and activates each wearer’s consciousness of the Infinite and knowledge of our common humanity”.

(p. 178)

4. Materials and Methods

I rely on the Guru Granth and the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* as two original sources of both religious instruction and religious conduct respectively for all Sikhs. While there are many translations of the Guru Granth, as a Sikh, I can take full liberty to understand the text without any interpreters. The Tenth Guru—Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708) “hailed the book as the Guru precisely to reiterate a personal and direct relationship between the individual and the text. It is imperative then that men and women access their scriptural Guru on their own” (Singh 2014a, p. 620). It is true that for many Sikhs, the Guru Granth gives “a sacred focus upon which to reflect and in the process discover the meaning of life as Sikhs. It [provides] a framework for the shaping of the Panth and [is] a decisive factor in shaping a distinctive Sikh identity” (Singh 2000, p. 281). As part of the *Panth* or collective and as a feminist, my personal and public identity is informed by how the sacred text speaks to my need to relate to the authority of the *Gurshabad* and the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* to my daily practice. As (Jakobsh 2003) suggests, “Analysis of the discursive structures in the formation of ritual identities from a gender perspective allows for a more complex understanding of the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion” (p. 235). The *punj kakar*’s everyday use, meaning, affect, materiality, corporality, and feminist hermeneutics are all relevant to our discourse in contemporary times.

5. Conclusions

Both the Guru Granth and the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* as extant historical sources allow for contemporary assertions that help us evolve our understanding of and responses to the text and practice. Because the

Rahit prescribes conduct based on the teachings of the Guru Granth, Bhai Gurdas di Vaars, and the Banda Bahadur's *hukam-namas*, it directs its instructions to Khalsa Sikhs—those initiated into the *Khalsa Panth* (Fenech 2014). However, because the Guru Granth is accessible to every individual Sikh, they are roused to accept the Guru Granth after the invocation of the *Ardaas* by singing the *Dohra* written by Guru Gobind Singh as the metaphysical embodiment of all the Gurus (*guur Khalsa maneeyeh, pargat guru ki deh*), and those who wish to meet the Divine, must search for it in the Word (*Jo sikh moh milbe chahey, khoj eneh men le*):

Dohra

Guru Khalsa maneeyeh, pargat guru ki deh

The Guru pure one is to be believed, as the visible body of the Gurus

Jo sikh moh milbe chahey, khoj eneh men le

Any Sikh that seeks to meet the divine, must delve into the shabad.

This *dohra* is recorded in the Bhai Prahlad Singh Rahitnama and is attributed to Guru Gobind Singh (<https://archive.org/details/RehatnamaBhaiPrahlaadSingh/page/n1>). It is in the Word (*Gurshabad*) that meanings are interpreted and assigned by the individual or by the collective or by those who undertake to translate the texts. Critically important then in this hermeneutic process is the need and opportunity to create and engage in more gender expansive and inclusive discursive spaces, interpretations, and application. Different hermeneutics can help to provide heightened and more nuanced understandings of the role of women and men in organized religion, in the fulsome practice of Sikhi, in the exegesis of sacred texts, etc. Understanding the literary form of the text is an important task for all Sikhs, because the Guru Granth plays such a central role in the lives of all Sikhs. For Sikhi, most commonly, Guru Nanak's *locus classicus*—"Bhand Jamiye, Bhand Nimiye" (as part of a larger text in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib at page. 473)—translates into: "from women we are born, from a woman a man is conceived" and provides the basis for a gendered egalitarian understanding, and it is most often used to declare our theoretical acceptance of this principle. We all agree that it is the starting point when we search for the idea of gender equality within the faith; however, it is not the end of the discussion—it is just the start of a hermeneutic opening in our contemporary world.

At the very end, should Nanak's clear text hold for all of us a finite interpretation that requires no further exegesis on the question of equality? Moreover, can we forgive the interpreter's bias on all other parts of the text, knowing full well that it is close to impossible to set aside any bias in the pursuit of creating meaning of a sacred text? Furthermore, how culpable is the reader who "chooses between equally valid possibilities based on personal reference. It is the reader who develops criteria for what is universal and what is culturally specific, what is translatable and what is transcultural" (Johnston 1986, p. 35).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: I declare no conflict of interest as author of this article.

References

- Bains, Satwinder. 2012. Feminist Critique of Socio-Religious Discourse. *Understanding Sikhism* 14: 27–30.
- Beasley, Chris. 2004. *Gender and Sexuality: Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers*. London: Sage.
- Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 2004. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Dhavan, Purnima. 2010. Tracing Gender in the Texts and Practices of the Early Khalsa. In *Sikhism and Women: History, Texts, and Experience*. Edited by Doris R. Jakobsh. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Elsberg, Constance Waeber. 2003. *Graceful Women: Gender and Identity in an American Sikh Community*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

- Fenech, Louis E. 2014. The Khalsa and the Rahit. In *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Edited by Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1998. *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*. London: Penguin.
- Giroux, Henry. 1991. Postmodernism as Border Pedagogy: Redefining the Boundaries of Race and Ethnicity. In *Postmodernism, Feminism and Cultural Politics*. Edited by Henry A. Giroux. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Greene, Maxine. 1993. Diversity and Inclusion: Towards a Curriculum for Human Beings. *Teachers College Records* 95: 211–21.
- Grewal, Jagtar Singh. 1969. *Guru Nanak in History*. Chandigarh: Panjab University.
- Grewal, Jagtar Singh. 2009. *The Sikhs: Ideology, Institutions and Identity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Irigaray, Luce. 1999. *Thinking the Difference—For a Peaceful Revolution*. Translated by Karin Montin. New York: Routledge.
- Jakobsh, Doris R. 1999. Relocating Gender in Sikh History: Transformation, Meaning and Identity. Ph.D. thesis, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada, December.
- Jakobsh, Doris R. 2003. *Relocating Gender in Sikh History: Transformation, Meaning and Identity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Jakobsh, Doris R. 2010. *Sikhism and Women*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Jakobsh, Doris R. 2014. Gender in Sikh Traditions. In *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Edited by Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnston, Robert. 1986. Biblical Authority and Interpretation: The Test Case of Women's Role in Church and the Home. In *Women, Authority and the Bible*. Edited by Mickleson Alvera. Downers Grove: Intervarsity.
- Virinder, S. Kalra. 2006. Locating the Sikh Pagh. *Sikh Formations* 1: 75–92. [CrossRef]
- Kaur, Upinder Jit. 1990. *Sikh Religion and Economic Development*. New Delhi: National Book Organization.
- Mandair, Arvind. 2010. Sikhism. In *World Religions for Healthcare Professionals*. Edited by Sarojjakool Siroj, Carr Mark and Nam Julius. New York: Routledge.
- Mandair, Arvind. 2013. *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- McLeod, Hugh. 1968. *Guru Nanak and the Sikh religion*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- McLeod, Hugh. 1997. *Sikhism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- McLeod, Hew. 2008. The Five Ks of the Khalsa Sikhs. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 128: 325–31.
- Rahit, Maryada. 1994. Available online: <http://new.sgpc.net/sikh-rehat-maryada-in-english/> (accessed on 8 September 2019).
- Shackle, Christopher, and Mandair Arvind Pal Singh. 2005. *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*. New York: Routledge.
- Singh, Gurcharan. 1988. Women Lib in Sikh Scriptures and Sociology. *The Sikh Review* 36: 38–43.
- Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur. 1993. *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur. 1995. *The Name of My Beloved—Verses of the Sikh Gurus*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Singh, Pashaura S. 2000. *The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon, Meaning and Authority*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Singh, Nikky-Guninder Singh. 2004. The body of the Gurus: Sikh Scriptures from a Contemporary Feminist Perspective. *Religious Studies and Theology* 23: 2. [CrossRef]
- Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur. 2005. *The Birth of the Khalsa: A Feminist Re-Memory of Sikh Identity*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur. 2007. Translating Sikh Scripture into English. *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory* 3: 33–49. [CrossRef]
- Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur. 2010. Why Did I Not Light the Fire? In *Sikhism and Women*. Edited by Doris R. Jakobsh. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur. 2011. *Sikhism: An Introduction*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur. 2014a. A feminist interpretation of Sikh Scripture. In *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Edited by Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Singh, Pashaura S. 2014b. The Guru Granth Sahib. In *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Edited by Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Snyder, Claire. 2008. What is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34: 175–96. [CrossRef]

SriGranth.org. Available online: <http://www.srigranth.org/servlet/gurbani.gurbani?Action=Page&Param=1> (accessed on 29 August 2019).

Takhar, Opinderjit Kaur. 2005. *Sikh Identity*. Hants: Ashgate.

Times of India. 2017. Why Women Not Allowed to Perform in Golden Temple Sanctum Sanctorum. Available online: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/amritsar/why-are-women-not-allowed-to-perform-kirtan-in-sanctum-sanctorum-of-golden-temple/articleshow/59778529.cms> (accessed on 26 August 2019).



© 2020 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).