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'SIKHING' A HUSBAND: BRIDAL IMAGERY AND GENDER IN SIKH SCRIPTURE

by

RANDI LYNN CLARY

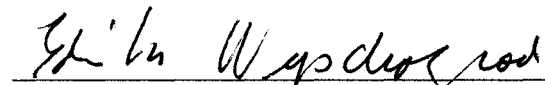
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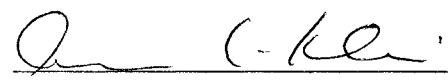
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## ABSTRACT

### 'Sikhing' A Husband: Bridal Imagery and Gender in Sikh Scripture

by

Randi Lynn Clary

Bridal imagery is found in many religions, following the pattern of the soul, gendered female, longing for the male divine Beloved. Rich examples of this imagery are found in the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh scripture. Even though Sikhism is generally labeled as belonging to the *nirguna* school of devotional religion, the scriptures are full of passages describing a male Divine who enjoys his soul-bride, showing Sikhism's close connection to the *saguna* strand of devotion. Because all the poets canonized were men, any deviation from the pattern of a male devotee longing for a male Divine was rejected from the canon, as the case of Mirabai's inclusion and subsequent exclusion from the Sikh canon shows. I critique Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh's theory that bridal imagery is empowering to women, and apply John Stratton Hawley's theory about the reasons for the fixed genders of longing in *bhakti* poetry to Sikh bridal imagery.

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"All are brides of the Husband Lord; all decorate  
themselves for Him."<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Bridal imagery is common to many religious traditions, following the pattern of the soul, understood as female, longing for the male divine Beloved. In Hindu *bhakti* poetry, this longing is called *viraha*, which John Stratton Hawley explains, "can mean both the physical fact of separation between lovers and the various emotions that accompany it."<sup>2</sup> Rich elaborate examples of this kind of imagery are found in the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy scripture of the Sikhs, which consists of poems from six of the ten Gurus as well as poems from Hindu *bhaktas* and Sufis. The non-Sikh poets included in Sikh scripture are called "Bhagats" (Punjabi for the Sanskrit

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<sup>1</sup> Khalsa Consensus translation of the Guru Granth Sahib by Sant Singh Khalsa, which first appeared on a CD ROM in 1995, now on [www.sikhnet.com](http://www.sikhnet.com) and [www.srigranth.org](http://www.srigranth.org) websites, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> John Stratton Hawley, "Krishna and the Gender of Longing," in Joseph Runzo and Nancy M. Martin, eds., *Love, Sex and Gender in the World Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), p. 242.

*bhakta*, poets of the *bhakti*, "devotion," movement).<sup>3</sup>

Even though Sikhism is generally labeled as belonging to the *nirguna* ("without attributes") school of devotional religion, the scriptures are full of passages describing a male Divine who enjoys his soul-bride. The male Gurus almost never speak directly to the male Divine as men, but instead use the female bridal figure as a mediator.<sup>4</sup>

The reasons for this symbolic cross-dressing are complicated and have been addressed in a Hindu *bhakti* context by John Stratton Hawley and in a Sikh context by Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh. The implications of this gendering of the devotee and the Divine are far-reaching, as this construct reveals much about Punjabi culture. The future of the faith will certainly be affected by changing views of earthly marriage, and as patriarchy breaks down in devotees' lives, it may alienate them from their scriptures, as the traditional patriarchal model will no longer speak to their lives.

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<sup>3</sup> Pashaura Singh, "Scriptural Adaptation in the *Adi Granth*," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64:02, p. 337.

<sup>4</sup> This view that all devotees are brides of the Divine is reminiscent of the Bengali saying "except for Arjuna and Krsna, everyone has nipples," which Jeffrey Kripal aptly summarizes, "we are all women in relation to the divine." Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism & Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 153.



### **Sikhism: History and Beliefs**

A general sketch of Sikh history is necessary at this point. Although there are more than twenty million Sikhs worldwide, Sikhism is one of the most misunderstood religions of the world.<sup>5</sup> The faith can be traced back to Guru Nanak, who lived in the Northwest Indian province of the Punjab from 1469-1539 CE. There are many hagiographies of his life and teachings, called *janam-sakhis*, 'birth evidences,' the earliest of which is dated 1658 CE.<sup>6</sup> He is said to have had both Hindu and Muslim followers, and the stories all point to his spiritual authority, with signs of divine protection throughout them. His religious revelation came while he was bathing in a river, disappeared for three days, reappeared, and said the phrase "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim."<sup>7</sup> This became the basis for major Sikh beliefs about the unity of humanity. One of his other major religious contributions is the practice of *nam simran*, "meditating on the divine Name."<sup>8</sup> His guruship was passed on to nine successors, Guru Angad, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, Guru

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<sup>5</sup> According to [www.adherents.com](http://www.adherents.com), there may be as many as 23 million Sikhs worldwide, with eighty percent living in Punjab, India.

<sup>6</sup> Hew McLeod, *Sikhism* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

Arjan, Guru Hargobind, Guru Hari Rai, Guru Hari Krishan, Guru Tegh Bahadur, and Guru Gobind Singh.<sup>9</sup>

The fifth Guru, Guru Arjan, played an important role in Sikh history by compiling the poems of the first four Gurus, along with his own extensive writings, and those of other Sant poets to form what would become the canonical Sikh scriptures. This collection was called the *Adi Granth*, or 'Original book,' and was completed in 1604. Poems of Guru Tegh Bahadur were added to this collection in the seventeenth century.<sup>10</sup> Guru Arjan is remembered as the first Sikh martyr by being tortured and executed by Mughal authorities by the order of Emperor Jahangir for refusing to convert to Islam. His son, Guru Hargobind, began introducing the more militant aspects of Sikhism by taking up the symbol of the two swords, known as *miri* and *piri*, temporal and spiritual authority.<sup>11</sup>

Guru Tegh Bahadur incited the next major turn for Sikhism when he was also executed by the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb in 1675. Because of this execution, and because so few Sikhs stood up to claim his father's body, his son, Guru Gobind Singh, introduced more military

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. xvi.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. xx.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

aspects into Sikhism by forming the Khalsa, the 'Pure.' He gave them a distinct uniform so that they could not disappear into crowds of Hindus, but "...all should bear obvious symbols such that a single Sikh would stand out in a crowd of thousands."<sup>12</sup> These symbols, called the "5 Ks," are *kes*, uncut hair; *kangha*, comb; *kara*, steel bracelet; *kirpan*, dagger; *kachh*, undershorts. Men were instructed to take the name 'Singh,' which means lion, and women were given the name 'Kaur,' which means princess.

Guru Gobind Singh is believed to have passed the guruship on to both the *panth*, the community of believers, and the *granth*, the book which Guru Arjan had compiled, henceforth known as the Guru Granth Sahib, which is treated as if it were an actual human guru by the community.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

## The Guru Granth Sahib's Structure

The Guru Granth Sahib was pronounced to be the final and eternal Guru by the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh in 1708. It consists of 1430 pages and contains 5894 *Shabads*, or hymns, which are set to 31 different *Raagas*, or musical measures. Its earliest works are by Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the first Guru. Each successive Guru signed his works as Nanak, since the spirit belonging to Guru Nanak is believed to have passed through each one of the Gurus and now resides in the text itself. Therefore, each passage is marked *mehla*, which Gopal Singh says is "mispronounced as *Mohalla*," and which literally means the "Lord's Bride," along with the number of its author's place in the line of Gurus. So, Guru Nanak's hymns are marked Mehla 1, Guru Angad's works are marked Mehla 2, and so on.<sup>13</sup> In his glossary, Singh explains further about another version of the word, *Mahalla*, arguing that

According to Sikh theological tradition, it is a corruption of the Sanskrit word 'Mehla' meaning a woman signifying the human soul as Lord's bride. But, according to Kapur Singh 'it is an Indo-Arabic word derived from 'Haulatu', (*Pl. Mahallatu'n*) meaning one on whom the Spirit of God has descended...' "<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Gopal Singh, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib [English Version]* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., Inc., 1962), p. 12, footnote 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Glossary, p. v.

This word is related to *mahal*, which means "bridal chamber; God's abode" and *mehala*, meaning "the (Lord's) palace; also the bride."<sup>15</sup> The fact that the Gurus signed their works as brides of the Divine has tremendous importance for how to view their works, and sets the stage for this study of their use of bridal and gendered imagery. Other sources do not explain the meaning of this word, but describe it simply as a marker for which Guru is writing. However, Singh's argument that the word is related to brides makes sense, as both the Gurus and the Bhagats in the Guru Granth Sahib use bridal imagery in their works.

### **The Guru Granth Sahib's English Translations**

While most of the West believes that the Guru Granth Sahib contains many languages, W.H. McLeod, one of the leading Sikh scholars, refutes this, explaining,

...the Adi Granth presents an interesting variety, one that predictably covers a range of linguistic usage, but which nevertheless sustains a sufficient degree of uniformity to justify what has been called the Sacred Language of the Sikhs, or SLS for short...In reality the pattern is quite simple. With a

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

knowledge of Punjabi and Hindi one can easily proceed to a grasp of Sant Bhasha or the Language of the Sants."<sup>16</sup>

The text is written in a script specific to Punjab called Gurmukhi, literally translated as "from the Guru's mouth."<sup>17</sup> The English translations used for this paper come from three translations of the Guru Granth Sahib: one by a German linguist named Dr. Ernest Trumpp in 1877, one by Dr. Gopal Singh, a former member of Indian Parliament, in 1962, and the most recent and most popular one by Sant Singh Khalsa, which first appeared on a CD ROM in 1995. This translation can now be found on [www.sikhnet.com](http://www.sikhnet.com) and [www.srigranth.org](http://www.srigranth.org) websites and is also known as the "Khalsa Consensus Translation."

Trumpp's version has the most archaic and least clear language, which is to be expected considering the time it was written. Gopal Singh argues that Trumpp "was too casual to have studied the GURU-GRANTH seriously, and so he not only mistranslated the portions of the Granth which he attempted but also dismissed its study as of

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<sup>16</sup> McLeod, p. 174. He cites Christopher Shackle, *An Introduction to the Sacred language of the Sikhs* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1983).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. xiii.

little importance to a student of religion."<sup>18</sup> This criticism of his text is common, as many even in his own time felt that his translation was unsatisfactory.

### **Differences Among Translations**

Comparing these three translations is helpful to this study of gendered imagery contained within them, as the differences in language reveal the changing perspectives and intentions of the translators. In the passages examined for this paper, the two later translators are careful about the language they choose, as both are Sikhs, whereas Trumpp was not. As such, Singh and Khalsa seem to be aware that they must stay within the accepted language and metaphors of the Sikh faith. For this reason, they almost always use the bridal image as a mediator between the Gurus speaking in the passages and the Divine they are speaking to. It is rare for the male devotee to intimately relate directly to the Divine, he must use the bridal voice to speak erotically to the Divine. Moreover, the Khalsa Consensus translation is much more gender inclusive than the previous two translations, using gender-neutral language

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<sup>18</sup> Gopal Singh, p. XX.

whenever speaking about devotees whose gender is not relevant to the bridal imagery theme. This gender-neutral translation reflects more accurately the spirit of the original text, whose primary images of *manmukh* and *gurmukh*, the ego-following person and the Guru-following person, are not gendered, but are understood to include all of humanity.

### **Sikhism and Islam**

This gendering of the soul as female and longing for the male Divine is also a major theme in the mystical tradition of Islam, Sufism. While the poets included in the Guru Granth Sahib often use Islamic imagery, early Sikhism's connection to Islamic mysticism is weaker than its connection to Hindu *bhakti*. About this issue, Hew McLeod argues

The teachings of Nanak cannot reasonably be regarded as a syncretism of Hindu teachings and Islam as so many popular books have suggested. Some of the Sants embodied a limited amount of Islam in their hymns, but the burden of their teachings was weighted heavily towards concepts found in Hindu ideals. This is not to deny that Muslim culture exercised an influence on the development of the



Sikh community. It does, however, deny that Islam significantly influenced Guru Nanak.<sup>19</sup>

Speaking specifically about the possibility of Sufism's influence on Guru Nanak and the Sants, McLeod argues

It is true that many features of Nanak's thought have evident Sufi parallels, but these features can be more immediately traced to Bhakti or Nath sources. Nanak certainly chooses Muslim terminology in a few of his hymns, but only because the hymns are evidently addressed to a Muslim audience. The actual content remains that of the Sants.<sup>20</sup>

McLeod's rejection of connections between Sufism and Sikhism seems too complete and dismissive. These connections certainly need to be further explored, but this study cannot include an extensive exploration of Sikhism's connection to Sufism. However, a few examples of the Guru Granth Sahib's use of Islamic terminology will be helpful in order to get a feel for possible connections. Guru Nanak writes:

O Baba, the Lord Allah is Inaccessible and Infinite.  
Sacred is His Name, and Sacred is His Place. He is  
the True Cherisher.

The extent of Your Command cannot be seen; no one  
knows how to write it.

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<sup>19</sup> McLeod, p. xxvii.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

Even if a hundred poets met together, they could not  
describe even a tiny bit of it.

No one has found Your Value; they all merely write  
what they have heard again and again.

The Pirs, the Prophets, the spiritual teachers, the  
faithful, the innocents and the martyrs,  
The Shaikhs, the mystics, the Qazis, the Mullahs and  
the Dervishes at His Door

-they are blessed all the more as they continue  
reading their prayers in praise to Him.<sup>21</sup>

McLeod includes a passage showing how "[t]he Islamic  
loanwords which appear in the works of Guru Nanak (as  
elsewhere in the Adi Granth) are normally used to express  
such themes as the 'true' and the 'false' Muslim:"<sup>22</sup>

Make mercy your mosque and devotion your prayer mat,  
Righteousness your Qur'an;  
Meekness your circumcising, goodness your fasting,  
for thus the true Muslim expresses his faith.  
Make good works your Ka'bah, take truth as your *pir*,  
compassion your creed and your prayer.  
Let service to God be the beads which you tell and  
God will exalt you to glory.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Khalsa Consensus translation, p. 53.

<sup>22</sup> McLeod, p. 96.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., He is translating pp. 140-41 of the Guru Granth Sahib.

### **The Bride in Indian Ishmaeli Islamic Movements**

One more example of a possible connection between Sikhism and Islam is given by Dominique-Sila Khan in her article "The Coming of Nikalank Avatar: A Messianic Theme in Some Sectarian Traditions of North-Western India." She explores how some Medieval Ismaili Messianic groups in India transformed the figure Kalki, the tenth avatar of Vishnu in the Epics and Puranas, into Nikalank Avatar. Their version of the avatar will restore justice and marry Visav Kunvari, understood to be a representation of the community. Their main group is called Nizarpanth, and break-off groups are the Bisnoi, Jasnathi, and Ai panths. While the groups are largest in Rajasthan, there are also adherents in Punjab, and "are believed to have flourished in the fifteenth century" according to Khan.<sup>24</sup> She argues that these groups' Muslim beliefs were absorbed into a greater Hindu context, which explains their deeply buried nature.<sup>25</sup>

She connects these groups to Sikhism by citing two examples of Sikhs claiming to be this avatar: one in 1824 who claimed he was Kalki, and another in 1959 who claimed

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<sup>24</sup> Dominique-Sila Khan, "The Coming of Nikalank Avatar: A Messianic Theme in Some Sectarian Traditions of North-Western India" *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 25:5, October 1997, p. 401.

to be Niskalank Avatar.<sup>26</sup> She gives a summary of her findings and questions about other connections when she says

...how can one account for the numerous similarities which can be observed between certain concepts and terms found in Sikhism and Isma[i]lism? From the ritual called *pahul* (*paval*) to the tithe referred to as *dasbandh* (*desondh*), from the reference to *sacha badshah* and *dasva padshah* (both names of the Ismaili Imam, the latter as compared to Vishnu's tenth incarnation) to the sacred nature of the double-edged sword used by Gobind Singh for the new form of baptism (*khande ki pahul*) which, according to an oral tradition, was none other than Zul Fiqr, Imam Ali's double-edged sword, many details could be quoted to support the view that Ismailism has had an influence on the Sikh religion through the ages.<sup>27</sup>

The most obvious connection of these Ismaili groups to the present study of gender and bridal imagery in Sikhism is their use of the bridal symbol, with the bride portrayed as representing the whole community waiting for the Lord/Master as Bridegroom. Khan summarizes that Nikalank Avatar's

main task will be to fight against the Danavas (a category of Hindu demons) and in particular against

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 405.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 422.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 423.

the fiercest one, Kalinga (Kalingo) who is said to be the personification of Kali Yuga and its evils...Then the Lord will wed Visav Kunvari (Sanskrit *visva kumari*) litt. The Virgin Universe or the Virgin Earth, viewed as a symbol of the converted community.<sup>28</sup>

She further elaborates on the bridal imagery when she says that in one text, the wedding

acquires a highly symbolic nature. It is a cosmic wedding where the divine manifestation is the bridegroom and the bride is none but the Virgin Earth herself, that is to say the Ismaili community ideally extended to the whole world.<sup>29</sup>

The community-as-bride imagery echoes the Sikh scripture's imagery of 'sister soul-brides' sharing the one Divine Husband-Lord, and shows one possible connection between Sikhism and Islam.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 413.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 414.

<sup>30</sup> An interesting connection, which is not relevant to this study, is that both Kalki as the tenth avatar of Vishnu in the Kalki Purana, and the Nizarpanthi version of him, Nikalank, carry a sword and ride a white horse, as told by Khan, pp. 411 and 416. Portraits of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru, always show him with a sword, and if he is on a horse, as he often is, the horse is always white.

### Bridegroom Metaphor in a Comparative Context-

"For the greatest of all loves is passionate; the greatest of all loves is erotic love."<sup>31</sup>

Joseph Runzo's article "Eros and Meaning in Life and Religion" aims to "...assess not only the place of erotic love within Western monotheism but also the wider place of erotic love in the world religions."<sup>32</sup> In showing that *eros* is a part of divine love and the highest human love, Runzo addresses possible objections to this argument, which rest on a dualistic worldview in which there is a Transcendent separate from the material world of the body and especially the sexual. One of the possible objections is that "surely the carnal/corporeal elements usually associated with erotic love will inevitably misdirect one away from the pure spirit of the Transcendent."<sup>33</sup> This objection is one that can be directed at the present study of the erotic elements in the Guru Granth Sahib as well. I follow Runzo's first answer to this problem, "Genuine love is expansive; it is integrated with the whole of one's love - in genuine love

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<sup>31</sup> Joseph Runzo, "Eros and Meaning in Life and Religion" in Joseph Runzo and Nancy M. Martin, eds., *The Meaning of Life in the World Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), p. 194.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

one loves others through one's love for the beloved."<sup>34</sup>

He gives as another answer to this problem "...the astonishing idea - found in some form in all the world religions - that humans reflect the image of the divine."<sup>35</sup>

Both the idea of loving God and humanity through loving the beloved and the possibility that humans are representations of the divine fit well with Sikh theology's emphasis on serving others in order to serve God because all of humanity is part of God. The failure to realize this unity is caused by *haumai*, self-centeredness, and as long as the *man*, which can be "...understood as a complex comprising heart, mind and spirit," is controlled by this selfishness, the person is doomed to suffer rebirths until achieving reaching the mystical state of *sach khand*, "or the Realm of Truth, mystical union in the eternal bliss of total serenity."<sup>36</sup> Therefore, many Sikh religious practices are designed to break down the barrier between the self and others in order to realize this Oneness. This can be seen as translating into a rejection of all dualism and an incorporation of the material and bodily, as Nikky-

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

Guninder Kaur Singh argues is manifested in the bridal symbol, which will be explored later.

### ***Nirguna and Saguna Schools***

Some discussion of the categories of devotional worship will help locate Sikhism in the vast world of South Asian devotional worship. Sikhism is generally understood to be part of the *nirguna* strain of devotional worship, configuring the Divine as being "without qualities," as opposed to the *saguna* school, which views the Divine as "with qualities." In their introduction to *Songs of the Saints*, Mark Juergensmeyer and John Stratton Hawley lay out the definitions of the terms *bhakti*, *sant*, *nirguna*, and *saguna*. They describe how the terms *bhakta* and *sant* were both used in medieval times to describe all six poets included in their book: Ravidas, Kabir, Nanak, Surdas, Mirabai, and Tulsidas. Later, the term *sant* came to designate poets who worship God "without attributes" (*nirguna*), and applies to the first three poets listed. Likewise, the latter three poets were labeled *bhaktas*,

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<sup>36</sup> McLeod, pp. 98, 100.



because they worship God "with attributes" (*saguna*).<sup>37</sup>

Also important is that these six poets

all inherited a single, massive *bhakti* movement that had been gathering force in other parts of India for a millenium...Its members, though part of no overarching formal organization, were united in their commitment to the value of personal experience in religion.<sup>38</sup>

This statement makes it clear that there are connections between these poets that cannot be denied, even though there are debates about who influenced whom, which I do not wish to enter into. It is enough to use this discussion of their common themes as background information for this present study of bridal imagery in the Sikh canon, which includes some of these poets' works.

### **Longing in *Bhakti***

Since we have established that Sikh thought is more connected to *Sant* and *bhakti* thought than it is to Islamic thought, further background on longing in Hindu

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<sup>37</sup> John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 4

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

*bhakti* is necessary in order to properly set the stage for a discussion on longing and gender in Sikh scripture. Nancy M. Martin gives a concise history of the *bhakti* movement in India in her article "Love and Longing in Devotional Hinduism," describing how it arose in South India in the sixth to ninth centuries. She says about this shift in focus from impersonal ritual to personal devotion, "[a]t its center was an intimate relationship of love between devotee and deity, articulated in the language and idioms of classical Tamil lyrics of love and war."<sup>39</sup> This new expression of devotion was open to all, regardless of birth or caste, and made its way up to north India by the fifteenth century. Like Juergensmeyer and Hawley, Martin emphasizes that Guru Nanak and Kabir are part of the *nirgun* school, worshipping a formless Divine, which we shall see does not tell the full story. Martin argues that *bhakti* lies within in all these forms of worship, and at the heart of *bhakti* lies the erotic:

Though 'devotion' may be used as a shorthand translation of this term, *bhakti* implies a multifaceted relationship with the Divine that

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<sup>39</sup> Nancy M. Martin, "Love and Longing in Devotional Hinduism," in Joseph Runzo and Nancy M. Martin, eds., *The Meaning of Life in the World Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), pp. 203-204.

involves much more than simple adoration, bringing the lover of God into contact with the Divine through an array of different types of love relationships and through every form of touch, employing metaphors of sight, sound, taste, smell, and the most intimate of all touching, the sexual...The religious movements that are the vessels for such love are characterized by a shift away from ritual performance mediated by a priest to a personal relationship between the individual and the divine, sometimes facilitated by a guru whose love affair with God is advanced to the point that he or she has become transparent to the Divine and a channel of grace.<sup>40</sup>

This vivid description of *bhakti* paves the way for our discussion of longing and love in Sikh scripture, as all of these characteristics are present in the poems included in the Sikh canon. Martin could be speaking of the Sikh Gurus when she talks of gurus whose love for God serves as both model for devotion and mediator to the Divine, as so many poems in the Sikh canon talk about finding God "with the Guru's grace" (*gurprasad*).

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

*Bhakti* poems are marked by extreme longing and suffering because of separation from the Divine, which devotees are always trying to overcome by attaining union with the Divine. Martin explains this longing by saying,

From a devotional point of view, we are fundamentally lovers of God, and our life is a journey of ever-deepening love, marked also by intensified longing. Separation between self and God is absolutely essential for love and relationality to be possible, but it leaves us pining for complete union.<sup>41</sup>

An important aspect of *bhakti* is that it is gendered, almost always with the voice of a woman who is longing for a male God. In the cases where the poets are men, as in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, this construct is decidedly homoerotic. Martin touches on this aspect, which is key to my argument about similar themes in Sikh scripture when she says,

The saints' songs, expressions of their intimate encounters with God, evoke this multifaceted love (albeit based of particular constructions of the feminine and of romantic love). Nammalvar speaks often in the voice of a woman, as the feminine soul approaches God manifest in male form.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

She does not seem to find the gender constructs at play in *bhakti* important enough to address, but they are key to understanding the worldviews represented in *bhakti* poems in general, and in Sikh scripture specifically.

### **Rajkumari Shanker: Gender in *Bhakti* and Sikhism**

Rajkumari Shanker's article "Women in Sikhism" sheds further light on the intersection of Hindu *bhakti* and Sikhism, incorporating an important discussion of gender in both movements. Shanker cites Harjot Oberoi's argument that the lines between Hindu and early Sikh worldviews are blurred, and she argues, "[c]onsequently, the fortunes of Sikh women have been inextricably associated with that of Hindu women."<sup>43</sup> In her section about Hindu women, she cites Katherine Young's work on Hindu women. One quote is especially relevant to this study of bridal imagery in Sikhism, "[t]he Hindu woman was to focus on her husband, he was to be her 'god'...the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Rajkumari Shanker, "Women in Sikhism" in Arvind Sharma, ed., *Women in Indian Religions* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 109.

apotheosis of the husband...was no simple exaggeration of androcentrism, but part of Hinduism."<sup>44</sup>

Shanker's conclusion, like mine, is that in Sikh scripture, the kind of gender equality so often promised by Sikh apologetics is not delivered. She argues instead that "[p]assages indicating women's subservient status are not wanting. Although the language of the Adi Granth is considered to be allegorical, it no doubt reflects social reality."<sup>45</sup> She extends this argument by addressing the attributes that ideal women, especially wives, are traditionally supposed to possess: "[w]hereas subservience, obedience, docility and dedication by women were cherished and rewarded, such attributes by men are not," and goes on to quote the Guru Granth Sahib to show this:

Men obedient to their womenfolk  
Are impure, filthy, stupid,  
Men lustful, impure, their womenfolk counsel  
follow.<sup>46</sup>

Instead of an equal relationship between husband and wife, passages like "[o] woman, the false ones are being

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 111-112. Shanker is quoting from Katherine K. Young, "Hinduism," in Arvind Sharma, ed., *Women in World Religions* (Albany, N.Y.: Suny Press, 1987).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

cheated by falsehood. God is your Husband; He is Handsome and True. He is obtained by reflecting upon the Guru" reinforce the older Hindu idea that just as God is imagined as a woman's husband, her earthly husband is God.<sup>47</sup>

Even though Sikhism encourages family life and living in the world, rather than ascetic renunciation, some ascetic residue remains: "[t]he imminent seductive powers of the feminine suggest that men perceived women as potential threats to their spiritual welfare. The evil power[s] of sexuality were associated with women and household life."<sup>48</sup>

### **The Sikh Faith as *Nirguna***

As we have seen, most scholars place Sikhism in the *nirguna* school of thought. The Guru Granth Sahib begins with the symbol/phrase "Ek Onkar" translated as "There is One Being" or "God is One." This is understood to mean that the Divine is transcendent and formless, and the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 120. She is quoting p. 304 of the Guru Granth Sahib.

<sup>47</sup> Khalsa Consensus Translation, p. 53.

<sup>48</sup> Shanker, p. 129.

rest of Mool Mantra, or "root" mantra, at the beginning of the text points to the same conclusion:

There is one Supreme Being, the Eternal Reality, the Creator, without fear and devoid of enmity, immortal, never incarnated, self-existent, known by grace through the Guru.

The Eternal One, from the beginning, through all time, present now, the Everlasting Reality.<sup>49</sup>

As Hew McLeod states, the symbol/phrase "Ek Onkar" is not the term actually used to designate the divine. Guru Nanak used the phrase Akal Purakh for the Divine, which McLeod translates as "'the Person beyond Time' or 'the Eternal One.'" McLeod goes on to connect this with the intellectual milieu of Guru Nanak's time by stating, "[a]s we should expect from the Sant background of Nanak's thought, Akal Purakh is understood as *Nirankar*, 'the One without Form,' and repeated emphasis is laid on the ineffable quality of Akal Purakh's being." The message is clear: the Divine cannot be understood as having human characteristics such as being susceptible to birth and death, and certainly not as having gender.

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<sup>49</sup> McLeod's translation in *Sikhism*, p. 271.



## Sikhism as *Saguna*: The Divine as Gendered Male in the Guru Granth Sahib

If Sikhism is to be defined as *nirguna*, then what is one to make of the many works in the scriptures that describe the Divine as being a "Husband Lord" who "ravishes and enjoys His bride"? This passage in the Guru Granth Sahib goes on to say that "[t]he happy soul-bride is pleasing to You, Lord; by Your Grace, You adorn her."<sup>50</sup> Clearly, this is a gendered God able to feel sensual pleasure. As the most prominent scholar whose work centers around gender issues in Sikhism, Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh explains this discrepancy by arguing that "...all forms (*saguna*) are informed by the Formless (*nirguna*). Infinite and formless, the Ultimate Being is inherent within all forms and yet remains transcendent."<sup>51</sup> Addressing bridal imagery specifically, she argues that this theme of the Gurus' speaking as women/brides "expresses the longing for union with the Ultimate Reality," and that the "separation between male and female denies the wholeness of human nature."<sup>52</sup> She explains how this gendering of God does not undermine the

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<sup>50</sup> Khalsa Consensus translation, p. 54.

<sup>51</sup> Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *The Name of My Beloved* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp. 3-4.

*nirguna* view of God as described in the Mool Mantra by arguing that

The explicit male and female imagery in the Guru Granth does not contradict the formless nature of the Ultimate One. Rather, it suggests a vast inclusiveness. The Ultimate Reality is above all and includes all. Whatever human beings can experience in their world is a part of the Metaphysical One.<sup>53</sup>

Many questions remain, though, that she does not address. Even if *nirguna* Ultimate Reality can be manifested in *saguna* forms, why is it always the woman who suffers out of love for the male Beloved? Surely human men experience longing for human female lovers, so why is their longing not voiced in Sikh scripture? Why does it seem so awkward to imagine a passage in the Guru Granth Sahib with the genders switched to portray a man tormented because his female Lover is absent? There are many reasons for this gendering of the longing one as female and the longed-for one as male that this study attempts to examine.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

## Guru Nanak and Gender

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh strives to elevate Guru Nanak to a feminist, based on practices he put in place in the early Sikh community. One of the Sikh practices she uses to show the fundamental gender equality in Sikhism is that of *langar*, shared communal meals at gurdwaras, which rejected Hindu purity laws regarding castes. According to Singh, Guru Nanak wanted as much to raise the position of women as he rejected caste barriers, and this was reflected in his community's *langar*, which helped "in affirming a new and dynamic sense of 'familyhood.'" <sup>20</sup> She argues that women and men shared equal cooking and serving duties as early as Guru Nanak's time when she writes, "...in this first 'Sikh' society taking shape at Kartarpur, both men and women took equal part in essential tasks: both drew water from the well, both reaped and ground corn, both cooked food in the kitchen, and both cleaned dishes." <sup>32</sup> While this is true now in gurdwaras around the world, Doris R. Jakobsh counters this argument that it reflects gender equality by arguing that

What she does not develop is the fact that *both* men and women fulfilling their duties of service is something that is carried out only within the public sphere of the gurdwara. But it is in the home, the hidden areas of life that women and only women are required to do 'feminine tasks.'<sup>54</sup>

Another way that Nikky Singh attempts to elevate Guru Nanak to feminist status is by examining his quote "...[i]t is through woman that order is maintained. Then why call her inferior from whom all great ones are born?..."<sup>55</sup> Her translation of this oft-quoted saying of Guru Nanak differs from the more common translation that kings, not simply 'great ones' are born of women, pointing to the importance of women's bearing sons. She purposely made it gender-neutral in order to show Guru Nanak's inclusiveness of women. Even with this gender-neutral phrasing, the point is still that women are valuable primarily because of their child-bearing ability.

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<sup>54</sup> Doris R. Jakobsh, "Gender Issues in Sikh Studies: Hermeneutics of Affirmation or Hermeneutics of Suspicion?" in Pashaura Singh and N. Gerald Barrier, eds., *The Transmission of Sikh Heritage in the Diaspora* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1996), p. 50.

### **Bridal Imagery in the *Shabad Hazare***

In Nikky Singh's introduction to her translation of *Shabad Hazare*, or "Thousand Words," part of the prayers recited in the morning, which are taken from different sections of the Guru Granth Sahib, she describes how the Gurus "identify with the female and use her acts of dressing and putting on perfume for her lover to fully develop the nuance of intimacy and passion in the human relationship with the Divine."<sup>56</sup> Her translations are more explicit than most translations of the Guru Granth Sahib's bridal imagery. Whereas most translations use euphemisms for the Beloved's union with the bride, she translates a passage in *Shabad Hazare* as "[n]anak says, if a woman pleases the Husband then the Beloved makes love to her."<sup>57</sup> Her more explicit translations are probably more accurate to the mood of the passages, but given her tendency to manipulate translations, as we have seen above, it is not clear. Nevertheless, this passage and others from *Shabad Hazare* reinforce this theme of the husband as God, and vice versa.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>56</sup> Nikky Singh, *The Name of My Beloved*, p. 65.

### **Spiritual Marriage Privileged over Earthly Marriage?**

Some of the passages imply that this soul-bride's marriage to the Divine is privileged over actual human marriages. One of Guru Nanak's works says that "[t]hat bride, who is absorbed into the True Guru, shall never become a widow. Her Husband Lord is Beautiful; His Body is forever fresh and new. The True One does not die, and shall not go."<sup>58</sup> These statements have many implications. First, they show that the Divine is immortal and beyond human limitations like death, as Guru Nanak says at the beginning of the Guru Granth Sahib in his Mool Mantra. Second, they show that human relationships are imperfect because of human limitations like death, therefore, the Divine is the only appropriate object for attachment.

Another example of the scriptures' message to choose one's partner carefully is one written by Guru Nanak, which says, "[i]f I surrender my body like a bride, the Enjoyer will enjoy me. Do not make love with one who is just a passing show. The Gurmukh is ravished like the pure and happy bride on the Bed of God, her Husband."<sup>59</sup> The passage is ambiguous as to whom would be considered "a passing show." Would it be a mortal husband who is

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>58</sup> Khalsa Consensus translation, p. 54.

susceptible to death or is the passage referring to false idolatry to any deity other than the One True Reality?

A non-bridal passage shows that false worship is what is being condemned in the passage above, even though it is conveyed in economical terms:

The Gurmukhs purchase the Genuine Article. The True Merchandise is purchased with the True Capital. Those who purchase this True Merchandise through the Perfect Guru are blessed.  
O Nanak, one who stocks this True Merchandise shall recognize and realize the Genuine Article.<sup>60</sup>

The True Merchandise is the Divine, bought with devotion, just as the Enjoyer is the Divine in the first passage, who must be approached with true devotion as well.

This privileging of spiritual marriage over earthly marriage goes against the common view of traditional Sikh values as being anti-renunciation and pro-family, but exposes the ascetic residue buried in Sikhism.

### **Longing, the Seasons, and the *Barah Maha***

An interesting thread that runs through Hindu *bhakti* is the connection of longing to specific seasons in the Indian climate. John Stratton Hawley describes how

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

viraha is connected to the rainy season because the weather makes travel difficult, thereby preventing separated lovers from uniting. This theme runs throughout both Sikh and Hindu poems about longing.

Another important way that longing is connected to seasons is that in the Guru Granth Sahib there is a section called *Barah Maha* that contains twelve passages describing the longing of a woman during each of the twelve months and the corresponding seasonal changes going on around her. These passages are sung in Sikh worship services during the months they are centered around. In the introductory passage to her translation of this text, Nikky Singh argues that the passages' descriptions of the seasons' changes are a "metaphor for the phases of the spiritual journey."<sup>61</sup> The early passages of the *Barah Maha* contain bridal images similar to those we see in the rest of the Guru Granth Sahib, such as "[o]nly she who pleases her Lover is embraced, and she alone is the true bride. She makes her body with its nine doors the lofty palace, her own house enshrines the Beloved."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Nikky Singh, *The Name of My Beloved*, p. 151.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 153.



The passages corresponding to months describe the natural surroundings of the bride. In the spring months, the world is alive with animals and plants, but in contrast to the life around her, the bride feels she is in a "deathly state."<sup>63</sup> The earth suffers under the heat of the summer months along with the bride, but the earth is released from its suffering with the coming of the monsoon, while the bride suffers more during this time. As in the *bhakti* poems Hawley describes, the bride's Lover is "far away in foreign lands."<sup>64</sup> The animals around her are making their own love calls, and the world comes to life again. The frost comes, her longing continues, then the month of pilgrimage comes. In true Sikh fashion, physical pilgrimage is rejected in favor of "divine contemplation," as the bride says, "[l]isten, my beautiful Groom, if I were to acquire Your virtues and please You—that would be my bath."<sup>65</sup> In the final month, the bride finally achieves union with her Lover because through contemplation, her "ego and greed are cast out," and she has achieved spiritual liberation.<sup>66</sup> The final statement describes the reward of her devotion, "Nanak

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

says, night and day the woman enjoys her Beloved; she is the eternally true bride of her divine Groom."<sup>67</sup> This work fits perfectly with the *viraha* theme we have been discussing; the woman suffers because of the absence of a male God, and her suffering is relieved by that same male God.

### **The Color Red in Bridal Imagery**

Throughout the Guru Granth Sahib, the color red, or more specifically crimson, is used to denote the color of longing and of the Divine. This has culturally specific significance, as South Asian wedding attire is traditionally red, which has long-standing associations with fertility. The connection of red to fertility and marriage can also be seen in Hindu (though not Sikh) wives' wearing of red powder, called *sindhur*, in the part of their hair. Therefore, use of crimson in the scriptures signals that the passage is using bridal imagery. In a footnote referring to the passage "[b]y true devotion the heart has become red, it is coloured by a natural process," Ernest Trumpp explains that the act

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

of becoming red is to be "Filled with love."<sup>68</sup> The passage continues, "[t]his colour is obtained by that disciple on whom he (Hari) bestows mercy and favour."<sup>69</sup> Another use of the color red is shown in the passage, "[h]ow have you enjoyed your Dear Beloved?...Crimson, crimson, crimson - this is the color of the soul-bride who is imbued with the Love of her Beloved."<sup>70</sup> Gopal Singh's translation says, "[o], how didst thou Enjoy thy Spouse?...Thou art Red and Aglow and Agog, and Beauteous art thou."<sup>71</sup> Although present in both translations, the erotic imagery is clearer in Singh's translation. The bride is flushed, radiant, and glowing after an erotic encounter with her husband, as "enjoyed" is clearly a euphemism for sexual intercourse.

In another passage, the color red is associated with Truth. The Khalsa consensus translation is careful to keep the passage gender neutral, "[a]s metal merges with metal, those who chant the Praises of the Lord are absorbed into the Praiseworthy Lord. Like the poppies, they are dyed in the deep crimson color of

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<sup>68</sup> Ernest Trumpp, *The Adi Granth* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, first published in 1877, third edition 1978), p. 53.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Khalsa Consensus translation, p. 739.

<sup>71</sup> Gopal Singh's translation, p. 707.

Truthfulness."<sup>72</sup> However, Gopal Singh's translation describes a man's devotion to God: "[a]s the metal mergeth in its kind, so doth the man of prayer in His God. He is deep-dyed in Red, the colour of Truth."<sup>73</sup> Even though the red color is associated with the bridal figure, her place is now skipped over in Singh's translation. This is one of the few times that the male devotee relates directly to the Divine as a man, not as a female bride.

Another passage connects the red color with erotic language:

Night and day, I have fun with my Beloved.  
 My clothes are dyed the deep crimson color of the  
     poppy.  
 All the ornaments and garlands around my neck adorn  
     me.<sup>74</sup>

#### **Ananda as Orgasm: Patrick Olivelle's Argument**

The word translated in the above passage as "fun" is the Punjabi word "anand," which has a much deeper meaning, and is usually translated as "bliss," which brings it closer to its erotic connotations. This is a

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<sup>72</sup> Khalsa Consensus translation, p. 18.

<sup>73</sup> Gopal Singh's translation, p. 22.

<sup>74</sup> Khalsa Consensus translation, p. 372.

highly charged word in Indian thought, as Patrick Olivelle explores in his article "Orgasmic Rapture and Divine Ecstasy: The Semantic History of *Ananda*." He begins by saying

*Ananda* is one of the most common terms in the religious vocabulary of the Brahmanical/Hindu traditions both in Sanskrit and in the vernaculars, both in the monistically inclined traditions, such as Advaita Vedanta, and in the *bhakti* traditions. The term points to the intense feeling of joy that devotees experience in their loving devotion and service of god, and mystics, in their meditative trance or *samadhi*.<sup>75</sup>

He also explores the possibility, as presented by J. A. B. van Buitenen's article "*Ananda*, or All Desires Fulfilled," that in its earliest use, *ananda* represents not simply bliss, but a place where bliss occurs, and argues that "[a]lthough the implication of a locus is correct and is evident in some of the early usages that locates *ananda* in the sexual organ or penis, in the later language the term assumes the general meaning of happiness and joy."<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Patrick Olivelle, "Orgasmic Rapture and Divine Ecstasy: The Semantic History of *Ananda*" *Journal of Indian Philosophy* vol. 25: p. 153.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 174, footnote 1.

Olivelle further explores J. A. B. van Buitenen's theories about the word's meanings, then draws his own conclusions about the word. He criticizes van Buitenen's avoidance of exploring the sexual aspects of the word:

His reluctance to assign a central role to the sexual dimension, which (and which alone) he qualifies as 'a metaphor', coupled with his fear of 'reductionism', prevented him from seeing the explicit and unambiguous connection between *ananda* as orgasmic rapture and *ananda* as the experience of *Brahman/atman*.<sup>77</sup>

Olivelle explores how in middle vedic texts, the word is used for orgasm, showing how in one passage, "Here *ananda* refers clearly and explicitly to the orgasmic thrill that makes one lose one's consciousness."<sup>78</sup> The meaning of the word shifts in the late vedic period, and he explores its use in the Brhadaranyaka, Taittiriya, and Kausitaki:

Continuing, and extending, the trend already noticed in the earlier literature, these Upanisads present *ananda* as the faculty or power of the sexual organ parallel to the sensory and motor faculties associated with other organs, e.g., seeing with the

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

eyes, hearing with the ears, and motion with the feet.<sup>79</sup>

He follows the word's meaning through the epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and reports that "...for the most part, *ananda* means ordinary joy."<sup>80</sup>

All of these connotations surrounding the word *ananda* certainly carried over into Sikh scripture and thought. One account of this term in Sikh thought explains

In Sikh theology too, *anand* is one of the attributes of the Supreme Self; so it can be the state of the individual soul as well. Guru Amar Das's composition *Anandu*, in the measure Ramkali, gives an exposition of the experience of *anand*, of the union with the immaculate Hari attained through absorption in *nam*, i.e. repetition of Divine Name. Guru Arjan attests that he has seen with his own eyes—*nain aloia* — that the Supreme Self is *anand rupu*, i.e. bliss itself is *anandamay*, full of bliss. Guru Arjan further declares that, the Supreme Being, who is the Cause of causes and is *antaryami* (the inner guide), experiences bliss—*anand karai*. Guru Amar Das prefaces his poem *Anandu* with the affirmation that the experience of *anand* comes only through meeting with the true Guru and fully imbibing his instruction. He says that the longing for

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

experiencing *anand* is inherent in men and is universal.<sup>81</sup>

Like in earlier Indian thought, *Anand* in Sikh thought is an experience of bliss which comes from union with the Divine. It is safe to say that this bliss can be considered orgasmic, following Olivelle's argument. Furthermore, the Divine himself experiences this bliss, implying that he has a material body able to feel, which puts Sikh thought closer to the *saguna* branch of devotion. The fact that the Sikh marriage ceremony is called Anand Karaj (*karaj* meaning simply 'ceremony') also ties the use of the word to its erotic connotations.

### **The Male Devotee Distracted by a Beautiful Woman**

In one of the few passages that the male is speaking as a male, the homoerotic devotion of the male poet longing for the male Divine is threatened by a heteroerotic temptation, that of a beautiful woman. Guru Nanak says, according to Gopal Singh's translation,

There is no abode else for me but Thine, O Lord!

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<sup>81</sup> As found on the [www.sikh.net](http://www.sikh.net) website's description of the Sikh marriage ceremony, <http://www.sikh.net/sikhism/AnandKaraj.htm>



...And the dancing houri, her face sparkling like the  
 shining bead, invited me with her gestures tender,  
 Would I then lose myself and forget the Lord's  
 Name?<sup>82</sup>

The same passage in Trumpp's translation says,

I have asked my own Guru and seen, that there is no  
 other place (but Hari)...  
 An enchanting woman, with jewels on her face, may  
 glitter and make shows in merriment.  
 Having seen (her) likely it is forgotten, thy name  
 does not come into (his) mind.<sup>83</sup>

The Khalsa Consensus translation's language is even more  
 specifically erotic: "...and if heavenly beauties, their  
 faces adorned with emeralds, tried to entice me with  
 sensual gestures of love, seeing these, I might go astray  
 and forget You, and Your name would not enter into my  
 mind."<sup>84</sup> Gone is the bride longing for her divine bride-  
 groom; she is replaced by a male devotee who is afraid of  
 being distracted from remembering a male God by a  
 beautiful seductress. It seems we are back in a  
 worldview centered around renunciation, with the woman as  
 temptress distracting the male ascetic from his male  
 Divine Beloved.

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<sup>82</sup> Gopal Singh's translation, p. 18.

<sup>83</sup> Ernest Trumpp's translation p. 21.

<sup>84</sup> Khalsa Consensus translation, p. 14.

### Maya as Beautiful Seductress

Maya, "illusion," has traditionally been gendered female in South Asian religions, and has acted as the ultimate distraction for devoted religious figures, mostly men, but also women. In the Guru Granth Sahib, there are many passages which describe her attempts at seduction. One such passage says,

Maya seduces in so many ways, like a beautiful  
enticing woman.  
This enticer is so incredibly beautiful and clever;  
she entices with countless suggestive gestures.  
Maya is stubborn and persistent; she seems so sweet  
to the mind, and then he does not chant the  
Naam.  
At home, in the forest, on the banks of sacred  
rivers, fasting, worshipping, on the roads and  
on the shore, she is spying.<sup>85</sup>

Other passages describe the ornaments and decorations Maya uses in her seduction. As these same ornaments are described as being useless when worn by the *manmukh* soul-bride, and beautiful and pleasing to the Husband-Lord of *gurmukh* brides, Maya's decorations are very effective in distracting holy men. As they add to her charms, she can "shake the consciousness of even the most dedicated ascetics and sages."<sup>86</sup> In one particularly descriptive

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 847.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 872.

passage, she is described as a nightmare bride, sucking life out of men.

...Abandoning the Lord's servant, she sleeps with the world.  
 Standing at the door of the holy man,  
 She says, "I have come to your sanctuary; now save me!"  
 This bride is so beautiful.  
 The bells on her ankles make soft music.  
 As long as there is the breath of life in the man, she remains attached to him.  
 But when it is no more, she quickly gets up and departs, bare-footed.  
 This bride has conquered the three worlds.  
 The eighteen Puraanas and the sacred shrines of pilgrimage love her as well.  
 She has pierced the hearts of Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu.  
 She destroyed the great emperors and kings of the world.  
 This bride has no restraint or limits.  
 She is in collusion with the five thieving passions.<sup>87</sup>

In a passage describing how "[e]ngrossed in the intoxication of sexual desire and anger, people wander through reincarnation over and over again," the cause is explained thus: "Maya has spread out her net, and in it, she has placed the bait."<sup>88</sup>

Maya is also the reason for men falling into vices involving earthly women as well. One passage tells a fallen man,

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

You are totally attached to that Enticer Maya;  
 she is enticing you.  
 You shall have to leave behind your gold, your  
 woman, and your beautiful bed; you shall  
 have to depart in an instant.  
 You are entangled in the lures of sexual  
 pleasures, and you are eating poisonous  
 drugs.<sup>89</sup>

Kabir draws upon older imagery of Maya as "the  
 noseless one," and connects her to *tantra* and what he  
 considers useless ritual. Of her he says,

The five Yogis of the Tantric ritual sit there,  
 and in their midst sits the noseless one,  
 the shameless queen.  
 The bell of the shameless queen, Maya, rings in  
 both worlds.  
 Some rare person of discriminating wisdom has  
 cut off your nose.  
 Within all dwells the noseless Maya, who kills  
 all, and destroys them..  
 Says Kabeer, she is the darling of the three  
 worlds, but the enemy of the Saints.<sup>90</sup>

Another aspect of this passage worth exploring is the  
 psychology behind Maya's nose being cut off, which can be  
 seen as a kind of castration, presumably to keep her  
 destructive libido in check.

When the poets are speaking as men, Maya's seductive  
 power is displayed in her feminine decorations, appearing  
 as a beautiful woman. What about when the soul-bride  
 speaks about being tempted by Maya? The next step would

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 821.

be to assume that Maya is described as a handsome man distracting her from her Husband-Lord, as the beautiful woman distracts male devotees from the divine. This is not the case. The bride is solely responsible for forgetting her Husband-Lord, and Maya as beautiful temptress is responsible for leading religious men astray. In both instances, the women are held responsible.

### **Kabir's Double Gender**

Kabir uses the standard bridal imagery in one of his passages, saying, "[t]he Lord is my Husband, and I am the Lord's bride."<sup>91</sup> Further down in the same passage, he reverses the genders of the husband and wife, making himself the groom in relation to his two wives called ignorance and understanding:

My first wife, ignorance, was ugly, of low social status and bad character; she was evil in my home, and in her parents' home.

My present bride, divine understanding, is beautiful, wise and well-behaved; I have taken her to my heart.

It has turned out so well, that my first wife has died.

May she, whom I have now married, live throughout the ages.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 476.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 483.

Says Kabeer, when the younger bride came, the elder  
 one lost her husband.  
 The younger bride is with me now, and the elder one  
 has taken another husband.<sup>92</sup>

This unusual reversal of the genders shows Kabir's distance from the Gurus, and his inconsistent following of the bridal imagery pattern may offer clues as to why other poems of his did not make it into the Sikh canon. This passage also conveys what a good wife is supposed to be like. Kabir's "divine understanding" wife resembles the ideal soul-bride that we have examined-beautiful and obedient.

### **The Divine as Father**

In addition to being addressed as the Beloved or Husband-Lord, the divine is also addressed as the Father. Kabir is one poet who uses this device when he is speaking in a male voice; again, perhaps this shows his distance from the gurus, but the poem does not deviate so much as to be left out of the canon. He says,

My Father is the Great Lord of the Universe.  
 How shall I go to that Father?  
 When I met the True Guru, He showed me the Way.  
 The Father of the Universe is pleasing to my mind.  
 I am Your son, and You are my Father.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 476.

### Calling out to Her Earthly Mother

A common literary device in *Sant* and *bhakti* poetry is that of the female devotee calling out to her mother telling about both her suffering and her joy. One example of the female devotee's calling out to her mother in joy begins, "I have fallen in love with the True Lord. He does not die, He does not come and go," signaling that the poet is speaking as a soul-bride. Three lines down, she says, "[w]ondrous is the Form of the Immaculate One. Through the Guru, I have met Him, O my mother."<sup>94</sup>

Also common is the bride's sharing her anguish with her mother, looking to her for advice and solace. In one passage, she cries out, "[w]ithin my mind and body, there is such a great hunger; if only someone would come and unite me with Him, O my mother!"<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

### Brothers and Sisters: Further Gender Issues

As the soul-bride calls out to her mother, so she calls out to her sisters, with a tone of camaraderie, calling them her "sister soul-brides." There are also instances when the poets call out to brothers, as well, but these have a much different tone than that of the sister passages.

One passage which shows the camaraderie of the sister soul-brides has the bride saying,

Come, O my sisters, come, O my companions,  
and let us remain under the Lord's  
control. Let's sing the Songs of  
Bliss of our Husband Lord.

Renounce your pride, O my companions,  
renounce your egotistical pride, O my  
sisters, so that you may become  
pleasing to your Beloved.

Renounce pride, emotional attachment,  
corruption and duality, and serve the  
One Immaculate Lord.<sup>96</sup>

In a passage full of commerce-related language, the speaker addresses his or her brother in the English, although the Punjabi word normally used for brother, "bhai" does not appear in the original. Because the poet speaks to his or her brother, rather than sister, the passage can probably be assumed to be spoken in a male voice. It ends with

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 847.



O my gentle brother, mediator and friend  
 - I have obtained the merchandise, and my  
     consciousness is now steady and stable.  
 I have no fear of thieves, of wind or water.  
 I have easily made my purchase, and I easily  
 take it away...  
 How rare is the Gurmukh who obtains this  
 merchandise;  
 Nanak has brought this profitable merchandise  
 home.<sup>97</sup>

Regardless of whether the poet is speaking as a male or female, the fact that he addresses his brother when the passage uses business language to describe attaining union with the divine, and addresses his sister when using romantic or erotic language to describe reaching out to the divine shows a significant difference in gender roles.

Sometimes, the word for brother, "bhai" appears in the original, but is translated as "Sibling," even going so far as "Siblings of Destiny," as in page 46 of the Khalsa Consensus translation. The reasons for this is unclear, as many of the explicitly gendered words keep their gender in the English translations.

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 372.

### **The Bride's Parents' Home vs. Her In-laws' Home**

Though the scriptures emphasize that the relationship between the soul-bride and Husband-Lord is primary, the issue of in-laws, so important in Indian culture, is addressed as well. One theme shows the bride's birth family's home as representing earthly life, with the in-laws' home as representing some kind of after-life. The bride must prepare herself at her family's home for life with her in-laws. She must keep her future husband in mind while living at home, because if she fails to prepare herself properly, she is disgraced and turned away from her in-laws' house.

One passage shows the familiar differentiation between the *manmukh* and *gurmukh* through the lens of this theme.

In this world of her parents' house, the  
     young bride did not know her Husband.  
 Through falsehood, she has been separated  
     from Him, and she cries out in misery.  
 Defrauded by demerits, she does not find the  
     Mansion of the Lord's Presence. But  
     through virtuous actions, her demerits  
     are forgiven.  
 She, who knows her Beloved in her parents'  
     house,  
 As Gurmukh, comes to understand the essence  
     of reality; she contemplates her Lord.  
 Her comings and goings cease, and she is  
     absorbed in the True Name.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

Another passage explicitly equates the bride's parents' home with the earthly realm.

In this world of her parents' home, the  
     soul-bride has been deluded by doubt.  
 Attached to duality, she later comes to  
     regret it.  
 She forfeits both this world and the next,  
     and even in her dreams, she does not  
     find peace.  
 The soul-bride who remembers her Husband  
     Lord in this world,  
 By Guru's Grace, sees Him close at hand.  
 She remains intuitively attuned to the Love  
     of her Beloved;  
 she makes the Word of His Shabad her  
     decoration.<sup>99</sup>

Another passage adds to this theme the responsibility of the bride's parents to prepare her properly for her marital state. Her family is blamed for her lack of devotion to her future husband.

One who does not remember her Husband Lord  
     in this world is being cheated by  
     duality; she shall weep bitterly in the  
     end.  
 She is from an evil family, she is ugly and  
     vile. Even in her dreams, she does not  
     meet her Husband Lord.  
 She who enshrines her Husband Lord in her  
     mind in this world  
 His Presence is revealed to her by the  
     Perfect Guru.  
 That soul-bride keeps her Husband Lord  
     clasped tightly to her heart, and  
     through the Word of the Shabad, she

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

enjoys her Husband Lord upon His  
Beautiful Bed.<sup>100</sup>

In another strange flipping of genders, Kabir addresses the soul bride as "daughter-in-law," speaking as a woman again, this time as the mother-in-law of the new bride. He starts the passage with "My daughter-in-law was first called Dhannia, the woman of wealth, but now she is called Raam-jannia, the servant of the Lord," describing the shift from *manmukh* to *gurmukh*. He goes on to make a point about the worthlessness of false outer appearances. He says,

Stay, stay, O daughter-in-law - do not cover your  
face with a veil.  
In the end, this shall not bring you even half a  
shell.  
The one before you used to veil her face;  
Do not follow in her footsteps.  
The only merit in veiling your face is  
That for a few days, people will say, "What a noble  
bride has come."  
Your veil shall be true only if  
you skip, dance and sing the Glorious Praises of the  
Lord.  
Says Kabeer, the soul-bride shall win,  
Only if she passes her life singing the Lord's  
Praises.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

### The Wife in Punjabi/Sikh Fiction

An often-cited example of equality in the Punjabi and Sikh worldview is the fiction of Bhai Vir Singh, whose novels often have women as their protagonists. His two most popular works are *Rana Surat Singh* and *Sundari*. The former is relevant to this study of gender in the Sikh worldview because it centers around a grieving widow, Rani Raj Kaur, just after her husband, a king, dies. The story is titled after her husband, not her, even though he is dead when the story begins. She is unable to do anything but weep and mourn, even though her mother tells her that she needs to perform her duties as leader.

The translator of the English version of the epic, Gurbachan Singh Talib, gives plenty of insight into the gender constructs at work in the epic, recalling the longing/suffering theme in bridal imagery poetry we have examined. He states in the introduction about Rani Raj Kaur: "[h]er grief is the idealized pinnacle of the young Indian woman's sorrow, leading to lamentation, fits of swooning and fantastic illusions of union with the

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 484.

beloved person who has been lost."<sup>102</sup> Her helplessness is confirmed by her husband's dying words, which she receives in a letter after his death. He tells her to marry another King, saying, "Dear Raj, when I am gone, take you him to be in my place. For ever from you am I parting. You a lone female in this harsh world, a protector shall need. To his care give yourself."<sup>103</sup> Also important for connecting this work to the bridal images in the Guru Granth Sahib is the presence of the queen's mother, her devoted maid, and her female spirit guide. They mirror the mother and sister/friend the soul-bride calls out to in the bridal imagery poems.

During one of her crying fits, the queen swoons and has a mystical experience in which she goes through the stages of mystical union with the Divine, as outlined in Guru Nanak's Jap Ji. In the last stage, that of *Sach Khand*, 'The Realm of Truth,' she sees her husband, whom the translator describes as

a hero to perfection-pious, noble, a crusader for his faith, deeply learned and now abiding with the Supreme Being in *Sach Khand*, the Realm Eternal beyond all contact with *Maya* or matter. Although no

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<sup>102</sup> Gurbachan Singh Talib, *Bhai Vir Singh's The Epic of Rana Surat Singh* (Chandigarh: Panjab University Press, 1986), p. 13.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

longer present physically, his spirit reigns throughout, and from its sphere above, guides his grief-stricken, youthful widow in her deep moments of grief and pessimism, when she is overwhelmed in her state of helplessness.<sup>104</sup>

In her state of grief, the queen tells her maid that once she saw her husband's true essence while he was living, she saw, "[a] veritable god, a devotee, a self all illumined," which further points to the connection between husband and Divine.<sup>105</sup> She begins being tutored by a Sikh holy man, who teaches her that fulfilling her duty as Queen and service to others will bring her peace, which it does. This story has profound implications for our examination of gender and marriage. Like all the soul-brides we have examined, she felt that she was nothing without her husband, even if she did indeed have a powerful role. The fact that her husband was at the end of her mystical journey, rather than the Divine, is also telling. This, combined with her helplessness, can only mean that husbands are to be equated with the Divine. God is the husband, and the husband is God.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

## Bridal Imagery as Empowering to Women: Nikky Singh's Argument

In *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent*, Nikky-Gurinder Kaur Singh argues that the bridal imagery in the Guru Granth (she deliberately leaves off the traditional "sahib," as it has male connotations) is empowering for women in that it gives voice to their experience and expresses a healthy vision of sexuality for women. She seeks to show that "...the symbol of the bride presents a holistic pattern of imagining and experiencing the sacred that can be a mode of empowerment."<sup>106</sup> She sees the bride as abolishing dualisms that reinforce patriarchal thinking because the bridal figure bridges the masculine and the feminine.<sup>107</sup> Another important point she makes is that while there is a connection between the Sikhs' and the Hindu *bhaktas'* use of the bridal symbol, it does not mean that the Sikh tradition is a mere "reinterpretation" of Hinduism, because one could also compare the Sikh bridal figure to the bride in the Old Testament.<sup>108</sup> It seems that it has

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>106</sup> Nikky-Gurinder Kaur Singh, *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 10.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 92.



not occurred to her that while the Hindu *bhaktas'* symbols and imagery would be part of the early Sikhs' worldview, it would have been impossible for the Old Testament's, or any other non-Indian religious system's, symbols to have influenced early Sikhs writing in 16<sup>th</sup> century Punjab.

Singh goes on to argue that not only does the bridal figure erase the duality between masculine and feminine, she "undoes the usual polarization of body and mind" because as she dresses up for her Groom's arrival, she is not just beautifying her external appearance, she is purifying her spiritual state.<sup>109</sup> Nikky Singh cites examples of the bride's decorations, a theme we have already examined, to show this mental and spiritual purification: her mascara (*anjanu*) "is to be interpreted as *jnana* (knowledge)," and "...as the eyeliner of knowledge is gently put on, the pitch-heavy darkness of ignorance disappears."<sup>110</sup> Another related duality that the bride overcomes is that of matter and spirit because the scriptures describe a framework in which "there is one light and the light is also the body," and the sensual bride represents this light, *joti*, in everyone.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 96. She is translating p. 125 of the Guru Granth.

Nikky Singh also addresses the bride's red garments, adding another dimension to the discussion of the red color, that of colorfastness. It reflects her mind's state of being "richly imbued with the love of the Divine," as established in the above discussion, so it must be permanent, and set apart from less desirable and fleeting emotions associated with the color. Nikky Singh translates a passage reflecting this distance from undesirable emotions, "It is not like that of the false garment of lust and anger."<sup>112</sup>

#### **Problems with Nikky Singh's Argument**

One problem with Nikky Singh's discussion of the bridal figure is that she overlooks key issues in the bridal theme which do not fit her argument that Sikh scripture celebrates equality between the genders. She argues that this bridal imagery frees Sikh women from the burden of being forced to have sons, as in the Hindu tradition, "[b]earing children (especially sons) is the woman's highest obligation..."<sup>113</sup> The Sikh hymn which describes the rewards that the loyal and devoted soul-

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

bride will receive as such: "...she is blessed with sons and tender-hearted. The happy soul-bride is loved by her Husband" shows that the Sikh tradition is not fully divorced from this Indian women's obligation to bear sons.<sup>114</sup>

Nikky Singh also argues that in Sikh bridal imagery, "[h]ere equality is the basis of the relationship" and "[t]he bride, simply by loving, not by fearing, or remaining in awe, or being totally dependent, senses the proximity of her Transcendent Groom."<sup>115</sup> On the contrary, the scriptures are full of passages describing how the bride must submit to her Divine Husband and approach Him with fear, as we have seen in just a few of the many examples. In passage after passage, the bride's physical, emotional, and mental suffering because of her Husband's absence is described, which can only point to her total dependence upon Him. In her section about the *Barah Mah*, the passages describing the bride's suffering during each of the twelve months, Nikky Singh vividly describes this suffering, but does not address it. She only argues that these hymns show the bride's connection with her natural surroundings and that the bride has a

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<sup>114</sup> Khalsa Consensus translation, p. 97.

<sup>115</sup> Nikky Singh, *The Feminine Principle*, p. 98.

"holistic vision 'of planetary harmony and coexistence among all peoples, all creatures, all elements, all plants...' "<sup>116</sup> How she considers a woman in a death-like state out of longing for her Husband to be in a state of harmony is never established.

Doris Jakobsh draws the same conclusion about Nikky Singh's argument, that

...there are many passages illustrative of the ambivalence surrounding the feminine gender, especially with regard to the 'wife.' On the one hand the feminine is celebrated, and on the other woman is presented contemptuously. Contrary to Singh's conclusions, female perfection is to be found in complete subjugation and self-abnegation to the male master.<sup>117</sup>

She picks up Paul Ricoeur's categories of a "hermeneutic of affirmation" and a "hermeneutic of suspicion" to explain how Singh's argument is unsatisfactory.<sup>118</sup> She suggests that Nikky Singh's argument is too one-sided because she begins by using a "hermeneutic of affirmation," rather than a "hermeneutic of suspicion," the latter of which is necessary because

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 106. She is quoting Carol Lee Sanchez's article "New World Tribal Communities" in Plaskow and Christ (eds.), *Weaving the Visions*, p. 352.

<sup>117</sup> Jakobsh, pp. 51-52.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

[o]nly upon an unveiling of the presuppositions of writers and their writings, only upon a *suspicious* reading entailing a thorough evaluation of the inherent sexist attitudes and practices within these writings, is one enabled to go beyond this suspicion to what Ricoeur terms the transformative 'power of affirmation.'<sup>119</sup>

Jakobsh's argument that "[o]ne is left with the impression that here is but another approach to traditional Sikh apologetics, though cloaked in the jargon of theological feminism" is an accurate summary of my problems with Nikky Singh's argument.<sup>120</sup>

### **Nikky Singh's Concluding Arguments**

At the end of the chapter, she attempts to defend Sikh bridal imagery against these charges that it reinforces women's dependence and lack of autonomy. She reminds the reader of the context in which the hymns were written: a period in which women were subjected to "purdah, sati, and child-marriage," and during which women's desires were not voiced.<sup>121</sup> Nikky Singh argues

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Nikky Singh, *The Feminine Principle*, p. 116.

that these hymns give voice to her experience, and she ends her argument with the plea,

To deny the bridal symbol would be to deny our heritage as women. We cannot reject these generations of brides, our mothers. In the case of the Sikh bridal symbol, we should not read too much into her apparent dependency. We must remember that she is, after all, dependent only upon the Transcendent One, and that this dependence is shared by men, women, and the entire cosmos.<sup>122</sup>

This conclusion is not satisfactory because it does not address the reasons the bride must suffer or why the genders are never flipped to allow the human groom to long for the female Divine Bride.

### **Hawley's Explanation of Why Longing Is Depicted as Female**

For an answer to this question of why the genders of the devotee and the Divine are fixed, we must turn to John Stratton Hawley's analysis of this longing for the Beloved, even though his article "Krishna and the Gender of Longing" describes the cowherder women's (*gopis*) longing for Krishna. The same construct is at work in both instances—a woman longing for her male Beloved. In the Sikh text, the soul is a bride waiting for the Divine beloved, and in the Hindu texts, the *gopis* are female

lovers, if not brides, of Krishna. Some of the Sikh passages are striking in their resemblance to *bhakti* poems voiced by the *gopis*, especially Radha's longing for Krishna. One Sikh passage, like the *bhakti* poems, is explicitly erotic:

Asleep in the darkness of the night, how shall she  
     pass her life-night without her Husband?  
 Her limbs shall burn, her body shall burn, and her  
     mind and wealth shall burn as well  
 When the Husband does not enjoy His bride, then her  
     youth passes away in vain.  
 The Husband is on the Bed, but the bride is asleep,  
     and so she does not come to know Him.<sup>123</sup>

Many of the poems to Krishna take place during the monsoon season, as do some of the Sikh hymns. Hawley's explanation of one of the reasons the monsoon season is tied to longing proves to be relevant to the study of longing and bridal imagery in a Sikh context. He explains that this is the season of disease, and this disease and the season itself are thought to belong to the Goddess. He argues that in the poems to Krishna, the Goddess is absent, and replaced by a human woman who suffers because of the absence of a male God. Poets use this theme "to project the illusion of control. Men who stand in danger of being afflicted by the all-too-present Goddess generate a world in which women are afflicted by

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

the absence of an irresistible God."<sup>124</sup> He examines psychoanalytic theories about the need for boys to separate from their mothers, especially in India, where they live with their mothers even after they marry. He concludes, "Hence the image of his mother is apt to remain at some level a threat of engulfment..." which is later transferred to the Goddess.<sup>125</sup>

### **Applications of Hawley's Theory to the Sikh Faith**

This fear of the Goddess spills over into the Sikh context. While part of the Dasam Granth, the secondary Sikh text whose authorship is debated, exalts the goddess Durga, Nikky Singh believes that one of the reasons the text's authorship by the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, is contested is because of this fear of the Goddess. She argues, "In one way or the other, these different intellectuals are unable or perhaps unwilling to recognize the relevance of this female mythological figure for the religious vision of Guru Gobind Singh."<sup>126</sup> As individual Hindu men struggle with being consumed by

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<sup>123</sup> Khalsa Consensus translation, p. 54.

<sup>124</sup> Hawley, pp. 246-247.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p 248.

<sup>126</sup> Nikky Singh, *The Feminine Principle*, p. 122.



the Mother Goddess, the Sikh tradition has struggled with being consumed by the Goddess traditions since the formation of the Khalsa, when Guru Gobind Singh assigned a distinct uniform and code of conduct to his followers to distinguish them from Hindus. About this need for a separate Sikh identity, Hew McLeod states,

Emphatically Sikhs were not Hindus, and Hindu tradition was not what Sikhs should follow. A booklet first published by Kahn Singh Nabha in 1899 summed up this message in its title: *Ham Hindu Nahin*, 'We are not Hindus.'<sup>127</sup>

Thus, while Hindu men need to separate themselves from their mothers, the Sikh tradition needs to separate itself from Hinduism, and sweeps under the rug any talk of the Goddess for this reason. This need to keep Hinduism at a distance can explain which hymns make it into the Sikh canon, as we shall see in the case of Mirabai.

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<sup>127</sup> McLeod, p. 77.

### Mirabai's Exclusion from the Guru Granth Sahib

"He's bound my heart with the powers he owns, mother -  
   he with the lotus eyes.  
 Arrows like spears: this body is pierced,  
   And mother, he's gone far away.  
 When it happened, mother, I didn't know,  
   But now it's too much to bear.  
   Talismans, spells, medicines -  
   I've tried, but the pain won't go.  
 Is there someone who can bring relief?  
   Mother, the hurt is cruel.  
   Here I am, near, and you're not far:  
   Hurry to me, to meet.  
 Mira's mountain-lifter Lord, have mercy,  
   Cool this body's fire!  
 Lotus-Eyes, with the powers you own, mother,  
   With those powers you've bound."<sup>128</sup>

If the woman's perspective is to be exalted, what about actual woman poets whose work voices the same desires as the male Gurus speaking as brides? Mirabai would be the most logical choice, as she was the most well-known woman *bhakti* poet of her time, and her popular metaphor, "colored with the color of my Lord" fits in with the rest of the bridal imagery, even though the color of her Lord, Krishna, is blue rather than the bridal red.<sup>129</sup> Indeed, as Gurinder Singh Mann discovered, one of her works was included in the Sikh canon in the

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<sup>128</sup> Mirabai, in the Kartarpur manuscript of the Guru Granth Sahib, dated 1604. In John Stratton Hawley "Krishna and the Gender of Longing," p. 241.

<sup>129</sup> Hawley and Juergensmeyer, p. 134.

early Kartarpur manuscript, which is dated 1604. Hawley explains that it was written in a different handwriting than the rest of the manuscript, so it may have been added later, up to 1642, when it was copied into another copy of the Guru Granth Sahib, but it was excluded from further copies of the scripture.<sup>130</sup> Without getting into the debate about exactly when Mirabai's poem was excluded, about which Mann and Pashaura Singh disagree, I wish to examine the reasons *why* it was excluded. The earliest mention in Western scholarship of her poem in the Guru Granth is Macauliffe's 1903 article. W.M. Callewaert, whose article explores the reasons Mirabai's poems were included in some collections and excluded in others, quotes Macauliffe's article, which says that "Guru Arjan at first inserted one of Mira Bai's hymns in his collection of the Sikh sacred writings, but subsequently drew his pen through it. It is preserved, however, in the Granth of Bhai Banno..."<sup>131</sup> Callewaert adds in a footnote that in 1925 C.S. Srinivasachari added to this quote that Guru Arjan justified removing her poem from the canon by "saying that though it was good, still

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<sup>130</sup> Hawley, p. 241.

<sup>131</sup> As quoted in W. M. Callewaert "The 'Earliest' Song of Mira (1503-1546)" *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 22, 1991, p. 202

its authoress lived and died an idolater."<sup>132</sup> How Srinivachari knew the motives of Guru Arjan is anyone's guess, but this argument raises important questions. Why was she an idolater - because she worshipped the Divine with form, rather than the formless Akal Purakh? As we have seen, many poets who ended up in the final version of the Guru Granth Sahib did this as well.

Mann concludes that not only Mira's poem, but also some of Kabir's poems "are misfits within the framework of Sikh doctrine and may have been dropped for this reason."<sup>133</sup> He expands this line of thought by arguing that because Mirabai was associated with the *nirguna sant* Ravidas,

It seems likely, then, that Mirabai was viewed as a worshiper of the 'one God' when her hymn was introduced into the Kartarpur Pothi. Mirabai's hymn, however, refers to her love for Krishna, whom she regarded as God. The obvious conflict between this notion and the Sikh belief in God's formlessness probably accounts for the subsequent deletion of the hymn.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Callewaert, p. 202. He is quoting C.S. Srinivasachari "Mira Bai, the Saint of Rajputana" in *The Indian Review*, Oct. 1925, 715-720.

<sup>133</sup> Gurinder Singh Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 85.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

Pashaura Singh gives similar reasons for her exclusion from the Sikh canon. An important feature of the debate is that the phrase which Hawley translates as "the powers he owns" in the above version of her poem, "apane gun (with his attributes) is not to be found in the Kartarpur MS, although it appears in later manuscripts of the Banno text."<sup>135</sup> This is a clue that her blatant *saguna* tendencies were problematic to editors of the Guru Granth Sahib. Pashaura Singh explains possible reasons for Mirabai's exclusion in the Sikh canon as such:

...the erotic symbolism in the compositions of the Gurus is toned down from the romantic love expressed by Mira Bai in her poetry. This may be one of the reasons why Guru Arjan excluded her hymn from the Sikh scripture. The second reason seems to be Mira Bai's emphasis on Krishna bhakti, which is contrary to the Sikh devotional approach towards the non-incarnated Akal Purakh. A third reason may be linked with Guru Arjan's editorial policy to keep the Sikh tradition removed from the Vaishnava influence.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Pashaura Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon, Meaning and Authority* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 194, footnote 58.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

There are, however, many hymns which speak lovingly of Krishna which were included in the Sikh canon. In one passage, Kabir says "[i]n Brindaaban, where Krishna grazes his cows, he entices and fascinates my mind."<sup>137</sup>. A passage by Nam Dev reads "blessed, blessed is the blanket worn by Krishna. ...O my Father, Lord of wealth, blessed are You, long-haired, dark-skinned, my darling."<sup>138</sup> Even Guru Angad and Guru Arjan speak highly of Krishna, so Mirabai's Vaishnava tendencies must not tell the full story.

One final possibility which seems too simple to be included in the debate, but must be noted, is the fact that she is the only woman whose work ever made it into the Sikh canon. Because she is a woman, she does not fit the pattern of a male posing as a female bride. Her devotion is heteroerotic, rather than homoerotic. Also worth noting is the fact that she refused to obey social norms. Even though she married, she refused to bow to her mother-in-law or the goddess that her new family worshiped because this would have compromised her devotion to Krishna, and she spent time with "the company

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<sup>137</sup> Khalsa Consensus translation, p. 338.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 988.

of the saints," who were wandering devotees.<sup>139</sup> Perhaps the editors of the Guru Granth Sahib saw her as an inappropriate role model for women, and this contributed to her exclusion from the canon.

### **Bridal Imagery's Implications for Punjabi Women**

Bridal imagery in Sikh scripture reveals much about women's position in Punjabi society. Even though Nikky Singh argues that bridal imagery elevates women by giving voice to their experience, the case is not that simple. Throughout the text, several themes recur that show that the bride is one of the only roles women can play, all of which are in relation to men: daughter, sister, wife, and mother. The works show the precarious position of a woman and her fears surrounding any interference with the role of wife, either through abandonment or death of her husband. As we have seen, if "the Husband does not enjoy His bride, then her youth passes away in vain." Taking this fear further is another passage which states, "[t]he self-willed manmukh performs religious rituals, like the unwanted bride decorating her body. Her Husband Lord does not come to her bed; day after day, she grows more and

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<sup>139</sup> Hawley and Juergensmeyer, p. 125.

more miserable."<sup>140</sup> A *manmukh* is one who follows his or her "*man*," often translated as "ego," in his or her behavior, as opposed to a *Gurmukh*, who follows the will of the Divine Guru and serves as the ideal believer. The passage goes on to describe the fate of the *Gurmukh* in contrast to the abandoned-at-the-bridal-bed *manmukh*, "[t]he *Gurmukh* is the happy and pure soul-bride forever. She keeps her Husband Lord enshrined within her heart. Her speech is sweet, and her way of life is humble. She enjoys the Bed of her Husband Lord." Further down in this passage, the message becomes clearer:

If you know that He is your Husband Lord, offer your  
body and mind to Him.

Behave like the happy and pure soul-bride.

With intuitive ease, you shall merge with the True  
Lord, and He shall bless you with true  
greatness...

Without the Shabad, she does not find her Husband  
Lord, and her life wastes away in vain <sup>141</sup>

A similar passage is just as explicit in its description of the soul-bride's destruction in the absence of her Divine Husband, "[t]he life of the discarded bride is cursed. She is deceived by the love of duality. Like a wall of sand, day and night, she crumbles, and

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<sup>140</sup> Khalsa Consensus translation, p. 31.



eventually, she breaks down altogether."<sup>142</sup> This passage shows the cultural importance of a woman's dependence upon her husband; without his affection, she withers away in misery, and her life is worthless. Gopal Singh's translation of this same passage can be construed as a warning to unfaithful women: "Accursed is the Bride who loveth other than her Lord. She is like the wall of sand that wears off night and day. Without the Word, one findeth not Peace."<sup>143</sup> This account of the bride shows her not as an abandoned, passive woman, but as an active agent in her own destruction, since she was not faithful to her "Lord."

Another way that this bridal imagery can be construed to give a message to women about staying within their proper roles is one passage which revisits the themes of the bride's duty to her in-laws and her responsibility to remember her Husband even in her parents' home before she goes to live with them. The passage says,

Hast not thou heard...That thou goest to thy In-laws  
at last, and thy Parents can keep thee not for  
ever?

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>143</sup> Gopal Singh's translation, p. 22.

If thou sleepest in thy Parent's home (unmindful of  
thy Destiny), thou hast been robbed in the  
broad daylight.  
Yea, Nanak, thou hast scattered away thy Flowers and  
gathered alone the Weeds.<sup>144</sup>

The Khalsa Consensus translation is a little different,  
as it tells the bride,

You must go to your in-laws; you cannot stay with  
your parents forever.  
O Nanak, know that she who sleeps in her parents'  
home is plundered in broad daylight.  
She has lost her bouquet of merits; gathering one of  
demerits, she departs.<sup>145</sup>

One important difference in Trumpp's translation is that  
the term "father-in-law" replaces "in-laws," while  
"father" replaces "parents." Another difference is that  
his version says that when the bride sleeps at her  
father's house, she "has lost the bundle of her virtues  
and is gone off, having bound together vices." <sup>146</sup> All  
three versions reveal the patriarchal background of the  
Sikh tradition in that the woman belongs first to her  
parents, then to her in-laws. When she steps out of her  
assigned duty at her in-laws' house, she has lost value  
and merit. It is interesting that Trumpp's translation  
is the oldest, and it is his that uses "father" instead  
of parents. His version also uses the words "virtue" and

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>145</sup> Khalsa Consensus translation, p. 23.

<sup>146</sup> Trumpp's translation, p. 35.

"vice," which both have sexual connotations, as if to say that the woman's rejection of her duty reflects her sexual license. The later translations lose some of this harshness, saying that she has lost merit instead of virtue, which is less connected to sexuality. Their use of "parents" instead of "father" also reflects an attempt to distance the tradition from patriarchy.

### **Conclusions**

What implications does this understanding of the soul as a bride who submits and serves her Divine husband have for understandings of human marriage and vice versa? As we have seen, this imagery showing the ideal wife as subservient and obedient reflects the social reality of Indian women. No matter how much Sikh apologetics claim gender equality, the ancient Hindu idea that God is the husband, and the husband is God has spilled over into the Sikh faith as well. How long will this model of a bride submitting to her husband as a spiritual goal make sense to followers as they reject this view of marriage in their own lives? These are questions that this study cannot answer, but hopefully, it has offered new ways of looking at bridal imagery and gender issues in Sikh

scripture that can be of service in answering these questions.

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