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Feminist Re-memorization as a Religious Response to Suffering

Some may question why there is so much suffering in the world if a God or gods exist. In the Sikh religion, there are many different explanations for why suffering exists and the important role that plays in life. Nikky Singh’s re-memorization of the Khalsa and the Sikh identity from a feminist perspective serves as another religious response to suffering, particularly for women and their struggles. This feminist re-memorization may serve as its own response to women’s religious suffering, while also helping Sikh women re-connect with their religion, which in turn may allow them to re-identify with the traditional Sikh responses to suffering.

To me, a religious response to suffering is a religion’s way of explaining or interpreting why suffering exists and offering ways to understand and deal with the suffering. Sikhism has several different explanations for the existence of suffering and ways to accept it as a part of life. One explanation for the existence of suffering in a Sikh’s life is related to the idea of haumai, “the sense of self-centeredness” (P. Singh 114). This self-centeredness leads to indulgences in worldly pleasures and a separation from the divine, leaving them to continue in the cycle of rebirth (sansar) (P. Singh 114). Another viewpoint on the existence of suffering is the idea of karam-sansar. While some aspects of the traditional Indian view of karam-sansar can be found within Sikhism, the explanation for the existence of suffering “undergoes a radical change” in Sikhism, where “karam is subject to the higher principle of the ‘divine order’ (Hukam)…even the suffering comes from the divine source” (P. Singh 116). This is a very important distinction to the idea of karam-sansar because it implies that all suffering because of the divine order and may help Sikhs to understand and deal with instances of suffering. Another interesting Sikh religious response to suffering is the notion of charhdi kala (high spirits) (P. Singh 122). Sikhs are taught to treat instances of suffering with optimism and understanding because they know that the divine order is the cause of their suffering (P. Singh 122). These traditional Sikh religious responses to suffering are important to understand because they show that Sikhs are taught to deal and understand suffering in their lives as a result of the divine order. It is clear that because Nikky Singh chose a feminist re-memorize the establishment of the Khalsa and the way that she views Sikhism, that these traditional Sikh responses to suffering were not working to explain the suffering of Sikh women. She felt the need to find a new way of responding to her and perhaps other women’s suffering, as opposed to just assuming that they could not change their role within their religion because it was due to the divine order, and they should accept it.

Nikky Singh begins her book with an introduction discussing the suffering and ostracism within Sikhism that women endure, a very crucial aspect in understanding the relevance that a feminist re-memorization may serve in the Sikh community. She highlights many sources of suffering for Sikh women including their deletion from the history of their religion; abortion of female fetuses; “silence, invisibility, subordination; abuse and oppression of women…[and states that] in many cases, their victimization even leads to suicides, murders, and ‘honor killings’” (N. Singh xviii, xix, xxi). The suffering that women are enduring in Sikhism has caused Singh, and likely other female Sikhs, to feel disconnected to their religion. She emphasizes the effect that the remembrance of the establishment of the Khalsa has on psyches and actions of Sikhs, noting that the traditional remembrance of the event is categorized by “hypermasculine attitudes and practices” and questions if there might be a way to think about the event so that “it can be even more effective—in a positive way for Sikh men *and* women” (N. Singh xvi, xviii). Once Singh began to re-memorize Sikh history from a feminist viewpoint, she started feeling closer to the tenth guru and was able to physically and emotionally connect with him and her religion, and believes that a feminist re-memorization would be beneficial to all Sikhs (N. Singh xx).

There are several different parts to Nikky Singh’s re-memorization of the Khalsa from a feminist perspective, including the establishment of the Khalsa as a birth, her discussion of the historic drink of the Khalsa and the re-memorization of the five Ks as feminine symbols. Her re-memorization of the establishment of the Khalsa as a birth was explained in three parts: the delivery, the nutritious drink, and bonding together (N. Singh 41, 51, 60). Going against the traditional viewpoint of the establishment of the Khalsa, Singh chose to re-imagine the events of Baisakhi 1699 with Guru Gobind Singh as a “mother in childbirth”, going through labor and giving birth to the Khalsa (N. Singh 41). She makes parallels between the traditional history and her feminist version, showing how the history could easily be compared to a woman’s experience with birth, and giving Sikh women something to connect to. She relates Guru Gobind Singh’s pregnancy and labor to the time and effort he spent cultivating the Khalsa (N. Singh 45). The sacrifice by the five beloved is viewed by Singh as the children about to be birthed: they are “totally dependent…[and] a part of the guru” (N. Singh 46). The sword used to cut the heads of the goats, dripping in blood is seen as “saturated with the creative powers of mother’s blood…the Khalsa could not be born without the maternal flow” (N. Singh 48). The birth of the Khalsa is described as “an intense and painful delivery that helped the Sikhs discovers themselves” (N. Singh 51). Viewing the establishment of the Khalsa as a birth allows Sikh women to parallel this history to a common female experience. Much like a woman giving birth, Guru Gobind Singh’s creation of the Khalsa was a long, difficult process. Even if a woman has never given birth, the process of pregnancy and birth is exclusively feminine. This re-memorization establishes the crucial role that women have in society. It portrays the guru and women in general, as strong and in this way may serve as a religious response to the oppression, silence and abuse that they have received in Sikh society.

Nikky Singh’s re-memorization of amrit as the nutritious drink is also an interesting comparison that empowers women. Singh explains the comparison stating, “Their drinking together defines their new birth and equal membership into the family of the Khalsa. Just as drinking milk from the same maternal breasts unites children to a family, so taking *amrit* from the guru’s iron bowl welds the Five Beloved into the Khalsa family forever” (N. Singh 54). In looking at this crucial event in Sikh history with Guru Gobind Singh as the mother, a woman, bringing together the family of the Khalsa, it shows the presence that women had in the ceremony. Women should also be granted access and equality within the family of the Khalsa, as Guru Gobind Singh intended. Singh’s description of the role that the guru’s wife played in the preparation of amrit is also important to note (N. Singh 52-53). This also solidifies the presence and important role that women played in the establishment of the Khalsa, showing Sikh women did have a place in Sikh history that should not be silenced or ignored.

The final part of the birth process, bonding together is another important aspect of the establishment of the Khalsa that can be seen from a feminist perspective. Singh describes how the historical event of Guru Gobind Singh receiving amrit and becoming a part of the Khalsa himself is like a “sequence of natural growth and progression where the Khalsa member leaves childhood behind and acquires the maturity and responsibility of the guru” (N. Singh 60). The new members of the Khalsa and the guru himself act as a family, with Guru Gobind Singh as the mother figure, who has a “value for and maternal closeness with his Sikhs” (N. Singh 61). Once again, viewing the members of the Khalsa as a family unit with Guru Gobind Singh as the loving mother helps to establish the important role that Sikh women have in society. Like a mother’s role in a family, the guru established a sense of closeness and compassion with his fellow Sikhs, and also a sense that all Sikhs should be treated with love, respect, and acceptance as a mother treats her children, something that clearly has been ignored in Sikh society today.

The entire re-memorization of the establishment of the Khalsa as a birth definitely seems like a religious response to suffering. Women’s degradation and removal from Sikh history caused many Sikh women to feel displaced and not important within their religion. By taking the events of the establishment of the Khalsa and looking at them through a feminist lens, re-memorizing the history to include females and feminine experiences, it allows for Sikh women to understand their history in ways that they can not only connect with, but become empowered.

Another aspect of Nikky Singh’s feminist re-memorization of the Khalsa that seeks to include and emphasize the role of femininity is her interpretation of the five Ks as feminine symbols. She goes into detail about how each of the symbols has its roots in femininity, despite commonly being “blatantly monopolized by the male gender” (N. Singh 99). She begins her discussion with kesha, or long hair, and states that while long hair has always been common for females in Indian culture, men seem to have completely ignored this fact, seemingly forgetting women have hair too (N. Singh 104-105). She goes on to further discuss the social norm of women and long hair, women’s long hair as a scriptural symbol in the Guru Granth and the artistic embellishment of women’s kesha in Guru Gobind Singh’s poetry (N. Singh 106, 108, 110). Her discussion of the second K, kanga, the comb, follows along similar lines. As long hair has historical roots to women, the comb, used to manicure long hair, also clearly has connections to women (N. Singh 113). Another one of the Ks that seems to have very concrete connections to femininity is the kara, or the bracelet. Singh states that in her re-memory, “the kara worn by men and women is but another endorsement of the scriptural expression of spirituality through women’s activities and embellishment…[since] women’s jewelry, cosmetics, and activities retain spiritual significance throughout Sikh holy text” (N. Singh 122). Even the Ks that may appear to be less feminine, such as the kirpan, or sword, are described by Singh as not completely masculine, as traditionally viewed by Sikhs. The kirpan is described in the Guru Granth, not as a “male instrument of military power…but as a reservoir of spiritual growth”, and as such it is held by both men and women (N. Singh 116). Finally, the kacha, underwear, is re-memorized by Singh as having a connection to both men and women. In looking at it through a “feminine lens”, Singh describes the kacha as a means of cultivating sexuality, enabling those “to gather our humanity rather than divide male from female” (N. Singh 128). It acts as an important symbol for male and female relationships.

Overall, Nikky Singh’s feminist re-memorization of the five Ks serves as a religious response to suffering, by once again showing that despite the fact that women are often ignored from Sikh history, they could have played a very crucial role in the establishment of the 5 Ks, strong symbols of the Sikh identity today. As Singh states in her conclusion, “Our female understanding of the hair, the comb, the bracelet, the underwear, and the sword animates and activates each wearer’s consciousness of the Infinite and knowledge of our common humanity” (N. Singh 178). In relating these symbols to women, as well as men, the equality established by Guru Gobind Singh is revived, and helps to give back some status and power to Sikh women, as was intended by the guru.

In “concentrating on the maleness of the protagonists, and the masculinity of the Khalsa institution, Sikh collective memory has ignored the female presence”, a process that has led to the suffering of many Sikh women, who may not have felt comfortable turning to their religion’s traditional responses to suffering to deal with their oppression because of this disconnect felt (N. Singh 180). To solve this problem, the elements of Nikky Singh’s feminine re-memorization offer a new way of looking at the history of Sikhism; a way to emphasize that women are important in Sikhism and helping to re-establish their role in Sikh society, as opposed to assuming that their suffering was the result of their self-centeredness, or that it was simply enacted as karam by the divine order and was to be accepted as a sort of fate. This re-memorization places value and significance back onto Sikh women and may allow them to feel more connected and secure in their faith.

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