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Comparative Religion

Section I Paper

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Refuting the Khalsa as a Response to Suffering

Shortly after Nikky Singh began answering questions during last Thursday’s in-class discussion, she wrote two words on the board and proceeded to explain their difference: sign and symbol. Lingering on the whiteboard for the duration of class, the significance of this demarcation never really left the discussion (literally or figuratively speaking). In the initial reading of N. Singh’s book, *The Birth of the Khalsa: A Feminist Re-Memory of Sikh Identity*, the reader faces a multitude of potentially problematic statements. Claims such as “it is essentially through a mother’s love and her female process that the Sikh *aqedah* took place … in every respect, Guru Gobind Singh is the mother in childbirth, delivering a new world,” (N. Singh 51), which seem to be founded in fiction and / or biased recreation, can lead readers to form an aversion to the re-memorization proposed by N. Singh. However, N. Singh’s classroom discussion and the emphasis she placed on the difference between assertions of flawless equivalence (signs) and collections of multiple, fluctuating meanings (symbols) allows for a negotiative and perhaps, more realistic, re-memorization of Sikh identity. If N. Singh’s ideas regarding the birth of the Khalsa, the parallel nature of the motives / lives of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh, and the origin of the five K’s are treated as possible re-readings, which complicate and add to preexisting understandings of Sikh symbols, her feminist re-memorization does not remove traditional, masculine readings (which would serve to enforce the male / female dichotomy) but allows different interpretations to be placed in conversation with one another. This type of negotiative redefinition is most apparent as the reader considers how the inclusion of N. Singh’s re-reading of the origin of the Khalsa transforms or complicates the meaning of the Khalsa as a religious response to suffering.

Traditionally, the impetuous of the Khalsa is viewed as a ‘masculine’ response to suffering, “Guru Gobind Singh had realized that his Sikhs were mere sparrows, weak and timorous creatures who could never be trusted to face armed injustice without taking instant flight … Steel was needed, steel in their hands and steel in the soul of Panth,” (McLeod 27). This analysis of the Khalsa might be extended, not merely to reflect of the importance of dominant male figures, but also to expose an attempted rejection of more passive (typically, feminine) constructs, “the problem could be traced to the docile beliefs and customs which they had inherited, to traditions which might be appropriate in times of peace and order but which could never withstand the assaults of violent tyranny,” (27). These readings of Guru Gobind Singh’s motivation for instituting the Khalsa have, for N. Singh (and, she argues, for both male and female Sikh identity) been detrimental, forcing Sikh men into “hypermasculine” ideals and Sikh women into roles of passivity and silence (N. Singh xi). In this manner, the traditional reading of the origin of the Khalsa can potentially enact violence on both men and women— and N. Singh’s response to this form of violence / suffering exists for the Sikh men as well as Sikh women.

N. Singh responds to the traditional view of the Khalsa by re-envisioning and re-reading the Baisakhi of 1699. In her re-reading, Guru Gobind Singh exists as the ultimate mother figure— re-birthing the five, feeding them the *amrit*, showering them with attentiveness usually reserved for infants, and rejecting the caste system. And while there are moments where N. Singh’s prose takes on more exaggerated comparisons (e.g. Guru Gobind Singh’s shouts and labor pains), the portrayal of the tenth guru is successful in establishing a more nurturing reading of the Khalsa. After interpreting the Khalsa in a more nurturing light, the possibility of creating new understanding of the identity of Khalsa members (both the original five and those in contemporary times) becomes more feasible. Instead of hawks with “steel in their hands and steel in the soul of Panth,” members of the Khalsa are likened to children, reborn by the mother/father guru. By highlighting the motherly traits of Guru Gobind Singh, who, according to N. Singh shows no partiality towards his children, and by reinterpreting those aspects of the origin of the Khalsa which are traditionally perceived as masculine, N. Singh develops a less machismo possibility for the male Sikh identity and a more egalitarian vision of men and women.

While N. Singh’s re-envisioning of the birth of the Khalsa succeeds in offering new ways of interpreting Sikh identities, the re-memorization offers potential complications, primary among them, the value of the Khalsa as a response to suffering in a historical context. After facing years of oppression, the murder of two gurus, and the supposed cowardice of Sikhs (Guru Gobind Singh believed the Sikhs present at his father’s execution “shrank from recognition for fear that they might suffer a like fate,” (McLeod 27), the birth of Khalsa can be read a direct response to the previous period of suffering. While the re-reading of the Khalsa as a nurturing act does not remove the possibility of a more militaristic impetus, the connection of the Khalsa to the female / mother does alter the interpretation of its origins and significance, particularly when viewed in light of the typical responses to female violence and militant action. In the western tradition, the female response to suffering is typically portrayed as an act of overzealous vengeance (e.g. *Medea* or *Titus Andronicus*) and N. Singh theorizes that, when the tenth guru called for the head of a Sikh, “it was natural and logical to associate him with the goddess Kali. She emerges in the mind of the Baisakhi congregation as a negative force who has infected their guru. She is criticized not exalted. She is accused not worshiped,” (N. Singh 49). By portraying the tenth guru as both male and female, mother and father, nurturer and harbinger of military strength, the Khalsa becomes more of a rebirth of Sikh identity than a religious response to suffering (at least from a historical perspective).

During N. Singh’s lecture last Thursday evening she compared suffering to pool of oil onto which a single flame is placed. The flame (God / the divine) engulfs the oil (suffering) and, in doing so, creates more light. She did not mention the Khalsa in the course of the evening and her metaphor stands in stark contrast to the words of Guru Nanak following Babur’s invasion of India and the subsequent suffering of the innocent, “Creator, you did this, but to avoid the blame / you sent the Mughal as the messenger of death. / Receiving such chastisement, the people cry out in agony / and yet not anguish touches you.” (P. Singh 117). However, the primary goal of N. Singh’s re-memorization is not to question why suffering exists or how Sikhs should respond to suffering, rather, she seeks to consider the birth of the Khalsa as a nurturing act. While the re-memorization may have responded to suffering in a more contemporary manner (addressing N. Singh’s concerns about her religion’s view of women and passivity) much of the traditional impetus (the militarization under Mughal oppression) is downplayed. N. Singh writes, “the male guru in his regal bearing and militaristic attire is not riding off into the distance to hunt or do battle, but like a mother, he draws near, touching our deepest selves,” (40). For the purposes of this particular perspective, the traditional view of the Khalsa as a response to suffering is passed-over, in favor of a potential re-reading which would allow for the re-construction of Sikh identity. This is not to suggest that N. Singh ignored responses to suffering— she noted, in her lecture, that responses to suffering can take the form of social contemplation (through the recitation of hymns) or contemplation of the divine— rather, the purpose of this re-memorization is to postulate how the Khalsa can serve as a tool for re-development of identity rather than as a response to suffering.

Works Cited

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