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Nikky Singh’s Feminist Re-Memorization of Sikhism as a Religious Response to Suffering

Modern day Sikh practices, traditions, and memories have rendered Sikhism a largely patriarchal religion. As a woman and a Sikh practitioner, Nikky Singh has suffered from the religion’s predisposition to exhibit partiality to males. She also suggests that female Sikhs as a whole have suffered and are still suffering from their religion’s androcentrism. From their first entrance into the world, and in some cases before, females are seen as a source of disappointment to Sikh families and Sikh culture. This is evident through the practice of aborting female fetuses (Singh, xviii). The very knowledge of this custom enlightens women to the lack of value that their culture holds for them. Nikky finds this system to be unacceptable as well as hypocritical to the teachings of her religion. Thus, in order to counteract the present problem of male domination Singh goes back to the source of the issue – the establishment of her religion and of the Khalsa. She does this by examining and re-interpreting the early history of Sikhism and the formation of the Khalsa through the lens of feminism. Whereas mainstream Sikhism focuses on the masculine aspects of the Gurus and of the Khalsa, Nikky finds an abundance of femininity. By re-memorizing the happenings of Baisakhi day as equalizing, Nikky is able to replace suffering with empowerment.

Females, or at least Nikky, have and are suffering as a result of the male dominant interpretations of Sikhism and the Khalsa. Thus, Nikky uses her religion to respond to the suffering she experiences by writing “The Birth of the Khalsa”. Her book is a religious response to suffering in that it incorporates historical facts and religious texts, but interprets them differently than mainstream patriarchal Sikhism does. Nikky makes adaptations to the way that Sikhs typically remember Baisakhi Day as a means to alleviate suffering while simultaneously upholding her belief system. Incorporating ideas of feminism and inclusion into collective Sikh memory challenge the modern day practices that encourage male dominance and the exclusion of women.

Much disparity is found in modern day analysis of the first and tenth Gurus of Sikhism. Nikky finds this disparity to be problematic, as well as damaging to the female Sikh community. Guru Nanak is remembered as a lover and pursuer of peace and equality. His final successor, Guru Gobind Singh is remembered as an entirely different character. Known primarily for establishing the Khalsa, Guru Gobind Singh is set apart as militarizing Sikhism. This perspective has had great implications in the way that gender is viewed and valued within Sikhism (Singh, 36). Unfortunately, it has resulted in a hierarchical ordering of gender that assumes the inferiority of women. This ordering has “[robbed] women of their selfhood and authenticity – abandoning them to alienation, injustice, inferiority, and exploitation” (Sing 38). To combat this damaging viewpoint, Nikky uses a variety of analogies about maternity to describe the feminine nature of the installation of the Khalsa into the Sikh religion. Where history would have the world remember Guru Gobind Singh as a mighty warrior, the epitome of masculinity, Nikky looks to the Guru and his implementation of the Khalsa as a challenge to such imagery. As the title of her book illustrates, “The Birth of the Khalsa”, Nikky re-memorizes the creation of the Khalsa as having inherent feminine qualities. The initiation into the Khalsa could have been a private event, limited to only male attendants. However, the Khalsa was birthed publicly, making it an establishment that was accessible to all Sikhs (Singh, 36). The Khalsa brought all Sikhs together and utterly eliminated the divisive purpose of the caste system as members of the Khalsa were given new names, independent of their castes. The Khalsa was a move toward anti-structure, rather than a perpetuation of existing class and gender organizations. While modern society understand the five symbols of the Khalsa as representing masculinity, Singh explains the five Ks as having inherently feminine qualities and as being “symbols of sexual equality” (Sing, 134). By re-interpreting what is typically considered as esteeming masculinity as feminine, Nikky is able to use the Khalsa as a means to overcome the suffering she experiences from being oppressed because of her gender. “From the time of Guru Nanak, the Sikh gurus were extremely sensitive to the subjugation and victimization of women” (Singh, 57). Sikhism, as modeled by its Gurus, is not patriarchal, but egalitarian. By rejecting castes and divisiveness in general, Sikhism promotes the respect of both genders.

Introducing Sikh beliefs about suffering will create a better understanding of how “The Birth of the Khalsa” addresses suffering. Sikhism maintains a variety of views about suffering. While not explicitly stated in Nikky’s book, several Sikh explanations of suffering could be applicable to her feminist re-interpretation. The first understanding about suffering that is applicable to Nikky’s specific experience is hukam. Hukam is the concept of the will or order of the divine. Perhaps the divine’s will is Sikh women is to suffer in order to better know the divine. Clearly, Nikky has come to a much more complete understanding of her divine by coming to a working re-interpretation of the Khalsa. Without experiencing frustration and exclusion, Nikky may never have sought to know the divine in such an intimate fashion. Another belief that Sikhs maintain in regards to suffering is that of haumai. Sikh practitioners believe that haumai, or self-centeredness, is a source of suffering. In this case, the self-seeking practices of male Sikhs has brought suffering on their female counterparts. By privileging males, females have been devalued. Rather than working to bring equality, men have lifted themselves up and in so doing, lowered their sisters. Finally, Nam simaran, the meditation or repetition of divine name, is a way to combat suffering. Nikky’s book could be considered a form of meditation on the divine in that it offers countless examples of the nature of the divine. The book is a constant stream of thought on the character of the divine. Focusing on the positive and feminine attributes of her god, Nikky finds appeasement.

As demonstrated by the examples of Sikh concepts of suffering, Nikky’s book tells us many things about Sikhism in particular. First, it demonstrates that there is space within Sikhism for both genders to be valued. Many modern practices would say otherwise, but Nikky’s interpretation of the establishment of the Khalsa and of the nature of the Gurus suggest that Sikhism is a religion that values equality across caste and across gender. Secondly, “The Birth of the Khalsa” demonstrates how differing interpretations of Sikhism create different realities and practices. People who adhere to patriarchal interpretations of the Guru Granth will have very different experiences as Sikh practitioners than people who interpret Sikhism through a lens similar to Nikky’s. Thirdly, although initially anti-structural and egalitarian in nature, Sikhism has become highly structured and divisive in practice. Sikh reactions to the traditions and teachings of their religion have morphed over time to match cultural and societal norms.

On a more general scale, Nikky’s re-memorization also has a lot to tell us about religion. First, it shows us that people will respond to suffering – even if their own belief system is the source of their suffering. Like Nikky, religious people can experience suffering as a result of their beliefs yet somehow can use their religion to alleviate their suffering. Secondly, it illustrates that people within individual religions do not interpret their religion in the exact same way, but rather multiple interpretations can simultaneously exist. Thirdly, Nikky’s book clarifies that it is practitioners’ responses that are what is most important, not history (Singh, xvi). Regardless of the actual happenings of religious events, people’s responses to them are what create religious practices and realities (Singh, 77). Nikky’s book serves as a re- interpretation of the myth of the Khalsa that can in turn function to create a new reality for Sikhs. Individual and group responses to religious myths are the real producers of religious understanding.

Rather than a literal remembrance of Baisakhi Day in 1699, Nikky Singh offers a symbolic interpretation that demonstrates that femininity and womanhood have a unique and necessary place in Sikh tradition. Re-memorizing important traditions and events in Sikhism through the lens of feminism enable Nikky to use her religion as a catalyst to change modern culture that is oppressive to women. The Sikh religion has been interpreted by patriarchal society to devalue women, which was a source of deep suffering for Nikky. This very pain worked to move Nikky to closely examine her faith to find assurance of her own worth.

Works Cited

Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur. *The Birth of the Khalsa: A Feminist Re-Memory of Sikh Identity*. Albany: State University of New York Press, Albany, 2005. Print.