

Dr. Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh
Sikh Feminisms Exhibit Launch at UFV on Sept 29, 2015

This indeed is historic event and I say this for number One we are celebrating the representation of feminisms in the text and lived realities - across the globe, across the religions. The erasure of women and there has been an erasure of women's experiences. Any epistemological act that contributes to women achieving subjectivity has been neglected from text and visual displays. Here we are at an exhibition informed by women's experiences and activities, it is a major accomplishment.

Two, Sikh world is generally neglected. This is one of those traditions which has been forgotten. Sikhs has been here for the last 100 years or more, we went to the Gurudwara Sahib this afternoon, their contributions, their work ethic, all their achievements but unfortunately the society doesn't know very much so it's really quite important and I think you just had another exhibition just a couple of days ago where they are talking about their hundred year experience so to bring this forgotten tradition, to give it significance is vitality important. This is a 25 million people, sits across the globe – it's a major religion. Even at my college at Maine where they come from very elite colleges, we had that massacre in Milwaukee, the students did not know anything, and very few faculty knew about it, it's very sad. So giving it attention is very important and I am grateful to you.

It was what a hundred years ago Heera Singh arrived here in Canada with his wife and three year old daughter , those are quest women do to land on this soil. Daughter and the wife were both arrested and they faced an unjust deportation, so we are making history that way.

The third one and I am really glad and I am very appreciative of the innovation, and the creativity that the curators have put into this exhibition. They're bringing words, scripture, and theology with the lived experiences. And that's something we don't find. We are looking at women, we are looking at the Sikh world and further more we are looking at just position of the ideal kind of the theoretical, the theological, the imaginary and the practical. And that's really important because that's what makes us hope? (22:21) not either-or we have been dualized, we have living in this descartian world - either or and this is bringing the two together at a very wholesome level. Two, it also helps us connect with one another. It's not just the Sikh women, it's the women across, and it's not just the women, it's also men and women. It's kind of coming from those experiences which are deeply personal and I think that's what I remember Tolstoy, you know where he said communities are created through art, the artist does something it may be the writer, it may be the photographer, it may the visual artist, it may be the video maker – at that they didn't have those but he or she infects the audience with their artist vision and that creates some kind of a bond not only between the artist and the audience but also amongst the spectators. So I tell my students on the first day of class go see a movie, it just does something, you go you share your experiences and there certain kind of a bond that takes place so art creates that bond and here we are in this space where something deep comes out and another part of this is that not only it is visually holistic not only does it has that template for connecting us globally but it also helps us connect to transform things because these are the things that are coming from the very bottom of us.

That's why we need to spell things out, if you need to change society you need to create works of art that's what is most important. Laws don't work - do this do that- India has been equal Egalitarian society we are all equal here too, we live in democracy. Until our consciousness changes, I think that's where art place a very important role. It goes somehow deeply inside us. So it's a template for transformation to

make it a more egalitarian just society we need more works of art and we need works of art from men and women from different ethnicities, cultures, languages, religions, and races. So this one acquires that and I am really grateful for your courageous, innovation and creativity in bringing this *variable (24:43)* together.

I basically want to kind of pick up three elements and that's what I want to share, which are all here, which you see and I just want to highlight those and Satwinder has already introduced us to that.

I just want to start out with the founder of the Sikh traditions, Guru Nanak who was born in the Punjab in 1469 and the Guru Granth which is the centre of all our rituals, our ceremonies, our philosophy our ideology is the Bible, that's it Fourteen hundred and thirty pages. When we get married we walk around the book four times, anything auspicious takes place we read the book, anything tragic takes place we read the book, so the book is everything for the Sikhs. And sometimes the emphasis on the book is so much that we overlook the Visual. We have kind of neglected the visual aspect and I think this exhibition is brilliant and it's really important. From Guru Nanak our founder one of my favourite verse from this entire text is

Rasiya hovey musteka tab gul pachaney

Rasiya -Somebody who enjoys the fragrance of the rose knows the rose. Only somebody who can enjoy it. So the aesthetics sometimes in religion we put aesthetics (26:23) at the bottom part of the ladder. You have religion, you have ethics and at the bottom is aesthetics. Until we learn relish our sensibilities are very important and unless we relish we do not know the reality.

And I want to highlight three points. One is, the three aspects that I find very unique in this exhibition first we see the pervasiveness of the Sikh theological imaginary. The entire text, as I said the Sikh Bible is everything for the Sikhs, the opening of the bible you see ***ik oum kaar: One Being Is.***

This is the theological imaginary and you the one numeral One and you the geometric arch going towards infinity. And this in way sums up the vision, the Sikh ideology. It's the really the quintessential formula I would say of the Sikh faith and the entire text kind of interprets this, kind of (27:30) of this basic principle – One Being Is – it's the numeral one literally it's the numeral one, it's an abstraction. This is Guru Nanak in the 15th Century India which was very rich linguistically, philosophically, but he chose the numeral. And this is universal it appeals to everybody it could be Christian, it could be Jewish and even *Nirwan* is part of it called Guru Granth Sahib. And yet this one is both *aapey purukh aapey hai Naar*, it's both masculine and feminine, its male it's female. It's not kind of an abstraction it's not an impression deem, you are my father and my mother says the Guru 'you are the father and you are the mother' *tu mera pita tu hi hai mata, tu mera bandak tu mera bharata* so there are all these relationships really intimate relationships that are established with the One. Not only that, the Sikh scripture says the One can be addressed in any which way. In those days the two binaries were from the Islamic world and the Hindu world, a monotheistic world and a very poly-world and the Guru says the One you can address them as Ram from the Hindu world from the Hindi Sanskritick background or you can call them Raheem or Khuda from the Arabic world. So both ways it really doesn't matter because the One the transcended up there the divineness there but the divine is also within us, each of us has it, there is a light in all - *sabh main jot, jot hai so* - so there is a light in all and the light is a transcended one. So what I want to say is that this is the fundamental principle of a Sikh tradition. And when you really feel it there is a magic to that infinity, a real magic, you expand you are not a closed insular being, so all those kind of

hatred, isms: sexism, religious fundamentalism, racism, all those isms kind of evaporate and you really feel the infinity and that is what is expressed in that opening and which is exhibited in this space, so that is one, that is Guru Nanak, the founder in 1469.

Then the tenth Guru, as history goes *resh* the identity of the Sikhs and we have them here reflected through beautiful photographs by Suvi. Here the five K's are you know the long hair Sikhs don't cut their hair, they keep the comb, the bracelet, the sword, and the undergarments. These are very simple Ks, have you ever thought why they would be chosen as symbols, items of faith by Guru Gobind the tenth Guru. You really don't think and somehow they are monopolised by the males and maybe at that time they were fighting battles and they were necessary and we don't need them as kind of hold them as signs and in my book the Birth of Khalsa what I emphasized was that we need the connection between the word and the outfit – *The Bani and the Bana* – The Bani is the scripture and text and the Bana is what we wear, the garment, the outside. There is a real connection between the two, and that is what I see being reflected here, these are Suvi's photographs, the model is a female and you don't see that, if all you see any image you'll see it's the male. Its fine include the male but we have kind of really excluded the women and we kind of need to bring it back. And these images kind of I cannot tell you, all of them kind of become symbols. Here I am going to merge Ileyara's definition of symbols they are multi valiant, all symbols are paradoxical there are so many meanings to a symbol, it just doesn't mean one thing and so I offered my own symbols and each of them does something, and I feel they are all (referring to the five Ks) are related to the Guru Granth Sahib with the word. The bracelet men and women wear it together and these images are endorsing my thesis that Guru Gobind Singh, not at a conscious level but at some subconscious, subliminal level took these items from the Sikh scripture itself, from the sacred text, it was something he was very familiar with. So when he is creating, he is giving birth to something very important, a momentous affair he goes back to the text. Here if I read from the bani Guru Granth Sahib Page 359 – *kar kar karta kangan pehnay in vith so vachith kare* – so in the scripture the five items are worn by the female. And here the *Kada* – *kar kar karta kangan pehnay* – she wears the bracelet of the creator around her hand, sub-consciousness is held steadily, so it's not fluctuating it's kind of calm. So whatever you are doing every day, the actions, it reminds you of the divine and it stabilizes you, kind of who you are, gives you a sense of your identity and how you are related to the world. Similarly, *the keshav*, the long hair, most of the time when I read, and I am sorry to say but when I read the expositions of the five Ks whether it be theologians, whether it be anthropologists, whether it be sociologists all the time we are making them into patriarchal, masculine, fighting or how they circumscribe people, you know we are not Hindus and this is a marker of Sikhism, a sign of Sikhism not a Hindu. We were the *Kada* because they did something else, we wear the *kachera* because the others wore the *dhoti* or they practiced circumcision so forth. So there is always a male pitted against the male, we need to think of Guru Gobind Singh the one who gave it, he was a very open minded person and he is the one who said *manas ki jaan sabhay cheeko maan ko* reorganize the singular cost of humanity, he got rid of the cast system, he got rid of all kinds of social segregations and yet we as followers 'oh no we are not them, we are not them' and when we look at these symbols they kind of connect us together the Sword, Virgin Mary had something to do with the sword, Amaterasu the goddess in Japan has a sword and the comb and so forth. So when you start looking at them from a wider perspective, you starts seeing connections with one another and that's where the importance of symbols lies. Another one with the comb, people could keep long hair like today modern day dreadlocks, but for the Gurus it was important to be a part of the society, the sacred and the secular were not two separate realms, they were a part of society. So comb was a part of symbol to be part of society, self-

cultivating yourself. So all of them like Tuco would say it's kind of building up your self-worth and here too I have a beautiful verse for you from the Guru Granth Sahib *dheeraj dhar banavey – Dheeraj* is patience, what is patience, it is kind of creating that mind set we are not angry, we are not agitated, we are not frustrated and She, it's a she, through *Dheeraj* she combs her hair, she braids her hair, we can keep our braids we don't have to wear what the men do. That's another thing I want to share so all these things the long hair and the comb are held by the women and they are combing their hair but it's a physiological, spiritual that is being expressed through the *kangha* (comb). So that's what I have done in the first chapter of my book, if you want to look at the connection is there between the symbols and the gurbani, between word and the image they are all there.

The third final point which I have talked about a lot, those are different stations here. Sikh scripture as I say is very open, very inclusive religiously, gender wise, culturally, linguistically that's why I brought up the word Arabic so you know it was open to all religions and cultures and languages. But somehow or the other the (37:20) stations have created problems, and I remember when I first started teaching at the Colby College and I was the first one I think at upper level to offer a seminar on Sikhism and I am using these translations and [audience] this is not what I know of my tradition it was so alienating and kind of not what Sikhism is. Then I got into translations and I have doing it. You know there are four problems that I see. One is that there is a lot of ----- people love and the original is very simple very beautiful and it creates a kind of intimacy amongst us all. By thou and thee kind of creates the creator there and here is the creation and the two shall not meet, it's an alien world. Whereas the original *tohay mohay mohay tohay antar kaisa* between you and me and me and you what difference can there be. When we put thou and thee it becomes very alienating. The other problem is, and I put the other three together, it's the three little words. Tiniest little words God, Lord, and Soul, these are very rich words and I am not denying them. They come from the Christian world, but these are the ones that are applied to any translations of the Sikh scripture and I think that is a way and it just doesn't. we just bring that word to Sikhism, we are not seeing the Sikh world as it is but we are imposing something on it and people have been doing translations and there is always these main in-between readers and so forth [readers] 'but this word is so beautiful why aren't you using it?' but it doesn't go with it why should I. these are the problems I am having right now

So there are problems and I glad to see our exhibition today puts those problems. You see the words God coming up, the word Lord coming up and the word Soul. Whenever the bride, the female, the former, passion, female figure and a body, her soul is latched on and it's kind of vague, murdering the physicality and the power and energy of the female by adding this word Soul. So they love kind of unworldly and soul, you can see that yourself. I really think this is very innovatively put together and it makes us critical. So today what does it do it me? It makes me ask ourselves what is the foundation Ek Oum Kar that Guru Nanak, what is this foundational state with One Being Is that the successor gurus built upon? What is the feeling we get when we wear the five symbols on our body? Is it some kind of anxiety, is it some kind of superiority or is it a profound confidence. We need to ask ourselves not just wear them, this is making me feel these beautiful photographs images there who are we, what are we, some kind of self-critic that goes on. How do we relate to the sacred verses, why don't we read the Sikh universal lyrics from our own perspective? There is no priesthood in Sikhism and yet we always rely on the male expertise, the interpreters and the Giani's, and the scholars in the Gurudwaras to analyse it for us. The Gurus gave us this poetry we need to kind of familiarise ourselves, so it's very urgent that we do it. So this is ... it makes us question what is holding us back.

Anyway this critical Sikh Feminist ethnographic exhibition that I have just witnessed inspires us to think individually and go be truly in our- who have we been and who do we want to be. At the same time this display collectively bonds us Punjabi or Canadian, White, brown, yellow or black, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian or Jewish, Male or Female to create mutual understanding and experience our shared humanity. Thank you.