Introduction

As far back as I can remember, the characterization of girls and women in my society was a source of constant ambivalence and thus always fascinated me. The Sikh household into which I was born was part of a Punjabi society that brought together diverse traditions in which the status of women was as dubious as it was crucial. I saw them exalted, and I saw them downgraded. Over the years those feelings developed into a search for an explanation of this paradox. I came to the United States to finish my secondary education at an all-girls' high school in Virginia and then went on to study religion, philosophy, and literature at a liberal arts college for women. And yet, I returned every summer to my own home in India and saw once again the paradox of a society in which one woman could be exalted to the prime-ministership and another murdered with impunity for her dowry. Graduate school catalyzed my queries and perplexities. But it was the sessions on Women and Religion at the American Academy of Religion in 1984 that marked a turning point in my life. To hear and be in the midst of women like Mary Daly, Rosemary Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Carol Christ, Judith Plaskow, Naomi Goldenberg – this for me was a moment of enlightenment and empowerment. I wished to turn to my own literature and discover its import from my female point of view. Thereafter the exploration of the feminine dimension in Sikh sacred and secular literature became the dominant motif in my research. These thealogians – for this is how feminist scholars of religion would accurately be described – had launched me onto recovering the rightful position of the feminine principle in my own tradition.

For me, and many other women, western feminists are the ones who inspired us to examine the feminine condition *vis-à-vis* our religio-cultural milieu. They have spurred women around the globe to explore both the presence and the absence of the feminine in our

metaphysical, ethical, and ritual systems. Even in the East, several texts and autobiographies that have emerged from India, Pakistan, Egypt, Iran, in the last decade alone attest to the sensitive guidance provided by western feminists. And yet, although Third World women have excitedly picked up this new wave of western feminism, they find that their own experience has been excluded by the leaders whom they so greatly admire. After all of the significant advances made over the last decade, the understanding of women's experience has remained essentially circumscribed in its contexts. To find today that the leaders of the feminist avant-garde pay no attention to the response these selfsame articulations elicited within groups in some other parts of the world is especially regrettable.

Among women in the East, there is naturally the feeling of being let down, but a substantial group of women in the West has also been omitted. We must not forget after all that there is a large presence of eastern women in the West. Caught between two distinct cultures – maintaining their traditions, while trying to fit in with modern society – these eastern women face some very complex problems. Their multi-dimensional and polytheological–polythe*a*logical worldview is constantly challenged by the western, monotheological one, creating an intense psycho-religious inner tension. There is, then, an urgency that their Angst be shared, their voices be heard.

Even such a work as the substantial anthology of feminist spirituality *Weaving the Visions* is not as inclusive as it claims to be, although it does address a wide range of women's experiences in a variety of methodologies, voices, and forms of expression. In their introduction, co-editors Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ acknowledge that, in their first volume, *Womanspirit Rising*, published a decade earlier, women's experience only stood for "white, middle-class women's experience." They also admit that in exploring women's heritage, it focused on the Christian past, with brief forays into Gnosticism and goddess religions.[1] They realized that they had used "women" in an exclusivist manner just as patriarchal thinkers so often say "human" when they are only talking about males. Their second volume attempts to break away from both abstractionism and exclusivity, and echoes the voices of Jewish, Native American, African-American and lesbian women who express themselves palpably in discursive, non-linear, meditative, and poetic forms. Alas, the experience of women from the Middle East, South Asia, and the Far East is still absent.

The western feminists inspired me to follow their example and helped me to recognize that a feminist consciousness ought to be extended to eastern cultures. The task of reevaluating my tradition was a deeply personal act of self-discovery, but it was also a very necessary one to fill a major hiatus in the world of feminist writings. The feminine principle in the Sikh vision of the Transcendent will add a rich and colorful pattern to the visions woven by western feminists. Within the Sikh scriptural corpus the feminine principle is especially significant, and furthermore in the writings of the Sikh Gurūs, pride of place is given both to the female person and to the female psyche. *Ikk Oaṅ Kār* (One Being Is) is the core representation of the Sikh faith: the numeral 1 (Ikk or One) celebrates the existence of That which is beyond gender, space, time, and causality, and refers directly to the Ultimate Reality, to Being Itself. Yet this One is sensuously addressed and cherished in the Sikh holy writ as mother and father, sister and brother – thus as both male and female.

Focusing on the feminine dimension, we discover that Sikh literature is replete with rich feminine symbols and imagery. The Gurū Granth, the Sikh scripture, refers to the ontological ground of all existence as *mātā*, the Mother; to the divine spark within all creatures as *joti*, the light; to the soul longing to unite with the Transcendent One as *suhāgan*, the beautiful young bride; to the benevolent glance coming from the Divine as the feminine *nadar*, grace. Later Sikh writings both in poetry and in prose also evoke feminine models to portray physical and mental strength, spiritual awakening, existential Angst, ethical values, and mystical union. Thus Sikh literature continuously provides us with a multivalent and complex feminine imagery; the variety presents a host of options through which we can see who we are and what we might hope to become.

Modern western feminists have made us aware of the widespread negative effects of the exclusion of the feminine experience from Jewish and Christian scriptures. Carol Christ formulated western women's problem over a decade ago in the following words:

> Her word [Mary's] never became flesh and dwelt among us. Perhaps no one ever asked her what she was thinking. Perhaps she never heard stories which could give her words for her own experience. Perhaps the man who wrote the gospel narrative simply could not imagine what it felt like to be in her position. Whatever the reason, her experience and the experience of other women have not shaped the sacred stories of the Bible.[2]

Carol Christ's words still haunt us. Western women have inherited a worldview wherein "the daughters do not exist" and the images and symbols of sons and males are predominant.[3] In "Transcendental Etude," Adrienne Rich laments the estrangement women suffer from themselves and from other members of modern western societies because of the omission of feminine expression. Christine Downing has poignantly expressed the need for female images:

> We are starved for images which recognize the sacredness of the feminine and the complexity, richness, and nurturing power of female energy. We hunger for images of human creativity and love inspired by the capacity of female bodies to give birth and nourish, for images of how humankind participates in the natural world suggested by reflection on the correspondences between menstrual rhythms and the moon's waking and waning.[4]

Ironically, Sikh literary heritage abounds in precisely the kinds of images for which western feminist critics yearn so painfully. We see her in many roles: as the Mother, as the bride figure, as Durgā riding her lion fearlessly, as the maiden weaving, as Suṅdarī galloping in the jungles, as the unknown Punjabi woman walking solitarily to the lake, as the ambrosial Word that comes from the other world, as Rāṇī Rāj Kaur going through her mystical experience . . . In one mode or the other, *she* expresses the sacredness and honor bestowed upon woman and indicates the multivalency and richness of her power. No negative associations belittle her. Instead of being a hindrance, she is the paradigmatic figure who opens the way towards the Divine.

Through the varied and vivid imagery is expressed joyful affirmation of the feminine as a category of being with essential values and strength. The denigration of the female body "expressed in many cultural and religious taboos surrounding menstruation and childbirth" is absent from the Sikh worldview.[5] There is nothing inferior or abhorrent about the sexuality or sensuality of the bride. Gurū Nānak openly chides those who attribute pollution to women because of menstruation. "How can we call her polluted from whom the noblest of the world are born?" he asks.[6] In another passage in the Gurū Granth, Gurū Nānak reprimands his contemporaries for barring menstruating women from religious worship: "Pollution lies in the heart and not in the stained garment."[7] Female activities and accoutrements are assigned a high value, even a transcendent value: necklaces, ribbons, jewels, clothes, and cosmetics, and feminine

activities such as stitching, dressing, or applying make-up are all imbued with spiritual significance.

The feminine principle in the Sikh vision of the Transcendent presents a holistic way of imagining and experiencing sacred power that can itself be a mode of empowerment. Such symbolism fits in snugly with the objectives of modern feminists who both recognize that female and male images perpetuate modes of domination and power-over and seek "ways to imagine sacred power as present in the whole complex web of life, not as power-taker but as empowerer."[8] The multitude of structurally united meanings present in the female figure manifest the unity of mind, body, and spirit; of social hierarchies; of transcendent and this-worldly; of cosmos and individual; of the self and others; of religion and art. The representation of the feminine in the Sikh tradition is an especially useful source for contemporary feminist thealogies since it enables us to rethink and restructure traditional ideas. As Marion Ronan has affirmed, "A central task of feminist spirituality is experiencing, expressing and bringing about the connectedness of creation, a connectedness seriously endangered by patriarchal polarization and phallocentrism."[9]

Many feminists join in condemning this dualistic antithesis which lies at the heart of the patriarchal vision of reality. The alienation of the masculine from the feminine is discerned to be the root of all dualities out of which emerge all other forms of alienation, for example, the split of the mind from the body, the separation of the subjective self from the objective world, the subjective retreat of the individual from the social community. Rosemary Ruether traces the roots of this bi-partite structure in which nature is subordinated to the spirit back to the apocalyptic–Platonic religious heritage of classical Christianity. Her argument can be heard in these powerful words:

> a static, devouring, death-dealing matter is imaged, with horror, as extinguishing the free flight of transcendence consciousness. The dualism of nature and transcendence, matter and spirit as female against male is basic to male theology. Feminist theology must fundamentally reject this dualism of nature and spirit. It must reject both sides of the dualism: both the image of mother–matter–matrix as 'static immanence'; and as the ontological foundation of existing, oppressive social systems and also the concept of spirit and transcendence as rootless, antinatural, originating in an 'other world' beyond the cosmos, ever repudiating and fleeing from nature, body, and the visible world.'[10]

In Sikh literature, on the other hand, whether as Mother or bride or Durgā or Suṅdarī, the woman is portrayed as the center, interlinking many realms. Such a representation symbolically discloses varied images of how humankind can – and does – participate in the varied connecting spheres of the family, society, nature, cosmos, and the Transcendent.

Furthermore, in the Sikh vision of the Transcendent that Singular Reality, totally beyond, is to be revisioned within the very self. In the West one comes across many feminists who have rejected the Ideal notion of a white male god sitting up there. This insight has been brought forth in a passionate statement by Alice Walker which has become justly famous. In *The Color Purple*, Celie writes to her sister Nettie and in the letter she quotes Shug: "God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you are not looking, or don't know what you looking for."[11] Shug's revisioning and redefining of God as the spirit within her and everyone else finds a parallel in a verse in the Sikh scripture: "sabh mahi joti joti hai soi – there is a light in all and that light is It."[12] That the transcendent reality remains within all beings was an enlightenment for a contemporary black southern woman in the USA. That was also the revelation Gurū Nānak, the first Sikh Gurū, brought to men and women in fifteenth-century India.

The Sikh vision of the Transcendent is derived from the Gurū Granth, the Sikh scripture. Its manifestation in secular literature – especially that manifestation which seeks to recapture and reinterpret the elements composing the ideality – is a vital topic to study in the context of the Sikh understanding of the Ultimate Reality. My primary objective, then, is to analyze the feminine dimension in the Sikh vision of the Transcendent One in both sacred and secular literature. I will be sifting through the more representative creations of the Sikh literary imagination and aesthetic sensibility in order to identify the status allocated to that component. To understand how the Sikh tradition has cherished the feminine principle, we must apprehend its significance in Sikh scripture and metaphysics as well as in Sikh literature and aesthetics.

My study, I hope, will accomplish a second, albeit ancillary, objective. Modern scholarship has posited Kabīr, the medieval Indian devotional poet, as a precursor of the Sikh faith,[13] and many

have averred (see, for example, S. M. Ikram[14]) that Gurū Nānak was a follower of Kabīr. Historians are hard put to it to determine the extent to which Kabīr influenced the thought of Nānak or even to authenticate a time and place at which the two met (if they ever did!). Kabīr, as some scholars have pointed out, was rather contemptuous of and derogatory towards women.[15] Gurū Nānak certainly did not share that perspective, so to what extent can he be considered as a "follower" of Kabīr? Do not such constructs – Kabīr as master, Nānak as follower – in fact undermine the divine revelation that Gurū Nānak received independently? This line of argument implicates the entire debate surrounding what has been termed "the origin of Sikhism." I find it necessary to seek to extricate the Sikh enterprise from the usual presumption which, in identifying its origins, declares that Sikhism is a "cross between Hinduism and Islam."[16] The scriptures and the Sikh Gurūs, my study claims, have a *raison d'être* all their own. The celebration of the feminine principle within the Sikh tradition not merely acknowledges this principle as a significant component of Sikh identity but also gives us a measure of the autonomy of Sikh identity.

As far as methodology is concerned, I will use a hermeneutic approach to the literary texts. The remembrance and recognition of the feminine principle in the Sikh literary sensibility demands an analysis of the vocabulary, imagery, and themes articulated by seers and composers themselves. I consider the principles of "epochē" (bracketing out all presuppositions), "eidetic vision" (seeing things in themselves), and "critical corporate self-consciousness" to be universal academic virtues to which I would, of course, attempt to adhere stringently. In searching out a base for studying the Sikh vision of the Transcendent, I have become sensitive to the views of some contemporary scholars who have expressed methodological concerns in a more inclusive manner. Gaston Bachelard's method of "Poetics" in particular has impressed me as one that follows these three hermeneutic principles and reveals an exceptional sensitivity to language. He is especially conscious of the subordination of the feminine in literary discourse: "Vocabulary, it seems, is partial; it gives a privileged place to the masculine while treating the feminine very often as a derived or subordinate gender."[17] Bachelard's goal is to reawaken our appetite for language and our taste in words, and his method is "to lay bare the feminine depths in the words themselves."[18]

Without wishing to sound trivial or sacrilegious, I quote the final passages from his introduction to *The Poetics of Reverie*:

> But it is not sufficient to receive; one must welcome. One must say with the pedagogue and the dietician in the same voice, "assimilate." In order to do that, we are advised not to swallow too large a bite. We are told to divide each difficulty into as many parts as possible, the better to solve them. Yes, chew well, drink a little at a time, savor poems line by line. All these precepts are well and good. But one precept orders them. One first needs a good desire to eat, drink, and read. One must want to read a lot, read more, always read.
>
> Thus in the morning, before the books piled high on my table, to the god of reading, I say my prayer of the devouring reader: "Give us this day our daily hunger . . ."[19]

Bachelard's approach promises to be very relevant to the present study. While embracing many principles of phenomenology, Bachelard does not adhere exclusively to this system for its own sake. In fact, his approach avoids the dangers inherent in the preoccupation with "methodology" *per se*. In his lecture on "Methodology and the Study of Religion: Some Misgivings," Wilfred Cantwell Smith states that "methodology is the massive red herring of modern scholarship, the most significant obstacle to intellectual progress, the chief distraction from rational understanding of the world."[20] Smith is absolutely right in saying this. There is today an overemphasis on the *how* – on the methodology, on finding the right (right being defined as scientifically objective) approach – which diverts us from the actual content, thereby giving precedence to the *method* used in studying a particular subject over the *actual* study of it. This danger is short-circuited by Bachelard: a brief but ardent prayer – and off he goes to his books. In emulation, I propose not to waste time armoring myself with a methodological coat-of-arms.

Bachelard's approach is also attractive in that it seems to be in harmony with the Sikh perspective on learning and knowledge. In fact, the very genesis of the Sikh faith is traced to Gurū Nānak's (the first prophet) *drinking* of a cup of ambrosia of the Divine Name. And the Sikh holy writ concludes by inviting all readers to savor fully the Divine Word:

> thālu vici tini vastū paīo
> satu saṅtokhu vīcāro . . .
> je ko khāvai je ko bhuṅcai
> tis kā hoi udhāro.[21]

> On the platter lie arranged three delicacies:
> Truth, contentment, and contemplation . . .
> S/he who eats them, s/he who savors them
> Obtains liberation.

In this passage, which constitutes the epilogue to the Gurū Granth, the scripture itself is perceived as a delicious platter, containing the epistemological values of truth, contentment, and contemplation. Through the centuries, Sikhs have derived constant nourishment from the Divine Word. Bachelard's analogy with physical appetite and savoring is sustained throughout Sikhism. The French literary critic enables us to recognize the integral connection between aesthetics and epistemology in Sikhism, and he entices us to look at the texts closely. Hungry and thirsty, we approach with a wholesome appetite rather than with a fastidious intent to test and sample but never quite enjoy.

The Sikh scriptures, certain transitional writings of the Sikhs, and modern Sikh secular literature will form the core of the present work. These writings span almost five centuries of Sikh literature, from the utterances vouchsafed to Gurū Nānak (1469–1539) to the works of the modern Sikh poet and scholar Bhāī Vīr Singh (1872–1957). The parameters of my study may appear extensive, but this breadth is necessary to obtain a clear understanding of the subject as pursued through the different phases of Sikh literary history. The focus, however, will remain on the feminine principle, and my course will be well marked. The scope of the study will be further restricted by limiting the choice of authors and works to such as will for obvious reasons be necessary. The criterion for selection in both cases will be their capacity to illumine the theme of the feminine principle. The abundant materials at hand point to the significance of that theme.

The book falls into eight chapters. Each approaches the Sikh vision of the Transcendent from a different perspective: historical, scriptural, symbolic, mythological, romantic, existential, ethical, and mystical. Throughout, the leitmotif is the unearthing of the feminine principle.

In the first chapter, "The Primal Paradox: seeing the Transcendent," I shall look into the historical origins of the Sikh religion – focusing on the revelation bequeathed to Gurū Nānak. As recorded in the *Purātan Janamsākhī*, Gurū Nānak received *bāṇī*, the Divine Word – feminine in gender – from the Transcendent One Itself. More than five centuries later, the Sikhs today observe their faith

vividly through *bāṇī*. Icons and images form no part of Sikh sacred space. It is the *bāṇī* alone – wherever and whenever seen, heard, or recited – that makes their space and time sacred. The Sikh community's ideals, institutions, and rituals continue to derive their meaning from it. Chapter 1 then addresses issues such as these: What constitutes the phenomenon of seeing? How can the Transcendent One be seen so palpably, so sensuously through the Word? What is the significance of the feminine in the divine–human encounter?

Taking up the problem of religious language, Chapter 2, "Mother: the Infinite Matrix," will explore the analogical ontology of the feminine principle. In Sikh literature itself, male and female principles play an equally important role in the process of analogy, but in Sikh studies up until now, the male principle has tended to dominate. Clearly, a more holistic comprehension of the Singular Reality is required in order to do justice to the Sikh vision of the Transcendent, and it is precisely this holistic perspective that is provided by the term *mātā*, Mother, and other images and concepts that are born of her. The analogical relationship between the Transcendent and the Female shows that she embodies what the Reality uniquely is. Mother, the Infinite Matrix, and the Transcendent Reality are linked together by common attributes. She is *joti* or light, the spirit informing all – the She within us all whom Ntozake Shange found and loved fiercely. She is *kudarati*, creation itself, the intimation of the Transcendent One – the *saguna* form of the totally *nirguṇa*. She is *nadar*, the benevolent glance from beyond. She is the "Eternal Feminine who draws us onward."

Fundamental to Sikh scripture, the Gurū Granth, is the image of the bride with whom the Sikh Gurūs, beginning with Gurū Nānak, identified themselves and expressed through her voice the ardor of their hearts. In Chapter 3, "The bride seeks her Groom," I explore the intricate and vibrant network of the physical, psychological, and spiritual realms woven by the young bride who is essentially embodied, passionate, relational, communal, and religious. This chapter will focus on the way in which the symbol of the bride presents a holistic pattern of imagining and experiencing the sacred that can be a mode of empowerment. How does the bridal symbol expand women's heritage? How does Gurū Nānak's symbol – so distant in time and space – nourish diversity? These are vital questions that must be addressed.

Gurū Gobind Singh, the last of the ten Gurūs or prophet-teachers