

GURU NANAK'S TRANSCENDENT AESTHETICS

One of the foremost exponents of the Sikh religion and of related Punjabi literature offers here a sustained exploration of the aesthetics of Sikhism's founder, understood as "a symbiosis of his prophetic revelation, his poetic genius, and his pragmatic philosophy – embedded in his visceral expression of the transcendent One." Drawing on a wide range of sources, Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh explores in full all the beauty, intimacy, and inclusive richness of Guru Nanak's remarkable literary art. Her subject's verses – written in simple vernacular Punjabi – are seen creatively to subvert conventional linguistic models while also inspiring social, psychological, environmental, and political change. These radical lyrics are now brought into fascinating conversation with contemporary artists, poets, and philosophers. Moving beyond conventional religious discourses and spaces of worship in its attempt to sketch a multisensory, publicly oriented reception of Sikh sacred verse, this expansive book opens up striking new imaginaries for twenty-first-century global society.

NIKKY-GUNINDER KAUR SINGH is Crawford Professor and Chair of Religious Studies at Colby College in Waterville, Maine. A celebrated authority on Sikhism and Sikh studies, she has received numerous awards for her previous publications and scholarship. Recent books by Professor Singh include *Poems from the Sikh Sacred Tradition* (Murty Classical Library of India, Harvard University Press, 2023), *Janamsakhi: Paintings of Guru Nanak in Early Sikh Art* (Roli Books, 2023), and *The First Sikh: The Life and Legacy of Guru Nanak* (Penguin Random House India, 2019). Her earlier and groundbreaking study, *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent* (also published by Cambridge University Press), appeared in the Cambridge Studies in Religious Traditions monograph series in 1993.

“This is a richly referenced, authoritative, forceful, and long-overdue response to the exceptional poet Guru Nanak – to whom, also, Sikh tradition owes its initial impetus and vision – rather than, as is usually the case, an account of Guru Nanak as the ‘founder’ of the Sikh religion (with only more occasional mention of his poetics). Professor Singh rightly identifies this significant gap in the scholarship to date, and her work is a landmark in Sikh Studies as well as in the literature on the poets of South Asia. Singh’s text is distinctive in being both joyfully exuberant and academically innovative, relating Guru Nanak’s compositions to Plato and more recent and contemporary philosophers, literary critics, activists, environmentalists, and novelists. It also provides a setting in the older Janam Sakhi literature and the words of Bhai Gurdas while successfully drawing out connections with the much older Indic context – including the Jain and the Buddhist, alongside the ‘Hindu’ – as well as with Sufi and more general Islamic tradition. The author’s attention to the foregrounding of female experience in the *Guru Granth Sahib* helps redress gendered imbalance in both commentary and exposition. Taken as a whole, her book is delightful and fascinatingly illuminating.”

—*Eleanor Nesbitt, Emeritus Professor of Sikh Studies,
University of Warwick*

“This is a thought-provoking and powerful study of Guru Nanak’s poetry. It effectively brings Guru Nanak’s poetry into conversation with a wide range of sources from classical rasa theory to various Western studies of aesthetics. It shows how earlier scholarship in India and the West has flattened or diminished the full scope of Guru Nanak’s expression and elucidates elements of the poetry that many have missed. It is a very enjoyable, well-written, and engaging read for anyone in Sikh Studies.”

—*Robin Rinehart, Richard H. Jr., ’60 and Joan K. Sell
Chair in the Humanities, Lafayette College*

GURU NANAK'S TRANSCENDENT AESTHETICS

NIKKY-GUNINDER KAUR SINGH

Colby College



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-56253-9 — Guru Nanak's Transcendent Aesthetics
Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009562539

DOI: 10.1017/9781009562560

© Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh 2025

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions
of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take
place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

When citing this work, please include a reference to the DOI 10.1017/9781009562560

First published 2025

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

NAMES: Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur, author.

TITLE: Guru Nanak's transcendent aesthetics / Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, Colby College, Maine.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge, United Kingdom : Cambridge University Press, 2025. | Includes bibliographical references.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2024025169 (print) | LCCN 2024025170 (ebook) | ISBN 9781009562539 (hardback) | ISBN 9781009562584 (paperback) | ISBN 9781009562560 (epub)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Nānak, Guru, 1469-1538—Criticism and interpretation.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC PK2659.N27 z835 2025 (print) | LCC PK2659.N27 (ebook) | DDC 294.6/82—dc23/eng/20240712

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024025169>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024025170>

ISBN 978-1-009-56253-9 Hardback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence
or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this
publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will
remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Note</i>	x
Introduction: Guru Nanak’s Transcendent Aesthetics: Setting the Stage	i
1 Aesthetic Stairway: The <i>Japuji</i>	28
2 Aesthetic Repertoire and Literary Appetizers	71
3 Aesthetic Designs in the Language of Love	110
4 Aesthetic Agents: The Sensuous Quintet	161
5 Aesthetic Revealer: Poet-Songster-Jeweller	205
Conclusion: Aesthetic Praxis	237
<i>Bibliography</i>	259
<i>Index</i>	275

Preface

This volume is a homecoming of many sorts. I grew up in a Sikh home in the Punjab, resounding with Guru Nanak's hymns. A part of life, they were simply taken for granted – a hearing without listening. It's only when I came to the USA to attend a girls' high school and felt uprooted from home and heritage that I became attentive to the world I had lost. A course on American Transcendentalists was quite nourishing, for just as Walt Whitman's earthy democratic "leaves of grass" began to seep into my psyche, the vitality of Sikh scriptural verses began to unfold inside me. The urge to learn about my literary heritage took me back home each summer to study at the Punjabi University where my father chaired the Department of Religious Studies and later edited the *Encyclopedia of Sikhism*. For my BA honors thesis at Wellesley College, I chose to study Sikh literature. The academic areas and methodologies of my teachers in New England and in the Punjab were worlds apart, and the geographical distance between the two continents in the 1970s was dauntingly wider. But Professors Lucetta Mowry (Christianity), Robert Garis (English), and Ingrid Stadler (Philosophy) in America and the Sikh scholars Dr. Taran Singh, Dr. Attar Singh, Giani Gurcharan Singh, and Dr. Rattan Singh Jaggi in India were equally valuable to me. What intrigued me then was the extraordinary feat of Guru Nanak: How can he express an utterly metaphysical subject so sensuously?

This project is a return to that very matter, a focused attention on Guru Nanak's transcendent aesthetics. By "transcendent" I do not mean the other world beyond, nor does "aesthetics" pertain to some elite sphere of art and philosophy; transcendent is the all-inclusive materiality of Guru Nanak's poetic body, and aesthetics is its affectivity in the everyday lived realities. In fact, the founder guru of the Sikh religion identifies himself as a poet (*shāir*) and songster (*dhāḍhī*) whose breath (*sāsu*) and flesh (*māsu*) belong to the infinite One (*Guru Granth Sahib* [GGS]: 660), and enraptured by the Beloved who informs each

physical phenomenon, he voices a love that extends to all finite bodies, forms, and shapes. But patriarchal presumptions, dualistic intellectual habits, and scholarly emphases on Guru Nanak's theological and historical contributions have eclipsed his aesthetic legacy. Here I explore how his sensuous lyrics sanctify bodily faculties (*somatophilia*) crucial for divine love (*theophilia*) and extend to fellow beings (*anthropophilia*) in this very world (*biophilia*). My desire is that Guru Nanak's hymns make their way beyond Sikh religious discourses and spaces of worship to their public multisensory reception so that new imaginaries and new existentialities can be reproduced in our twenty-first-century global society.

My research entails a revisiting and revisioning of primary Sikh source materials. These have fueled a wide variety of scholarly approaches for me, including a feminist analysis (Cambridge University Press 1993), scriptural translations (HarperCollins 1995, Penguin 2001, I. B. Tauris 2012, Penguin 2019, Harvard 2021, Harvard 2022), visual renditions (Roli 2023), introductions to the Sikh religion (I. B. Tauris 2011, Penguin 2019), and rememory of Guru Gobind Singh's Khalsa (State University of New York Press, 2005). At this point I am using that lens to closely study Guru Nanak's literary constellation composed of tiny rhythmic tissues. And boundless each of them is! They resist denotations, subvert conventional linguistic models, and motivate psychological, social, environmental, and political changes to happen. Promising practical consequences in the here and now, Guru Nanak's poetics foreshadows the recent burgeoning philosophical subfields of "Somaesthetics" and "Everyday Aesthetics."

This undertaking has come to be a heartwarming reunion with my revered editor Alex Wright. Some thirty years ago the topic of Sikhism was basically an academic outcast in the West. During an annual conference of the American Academy of Religion, I recall going around the book exhibition halls with my manuscript, "The Feminine Vision of the Sikh Transcendent." While other editors treated it as an untouchable, Alex at Cambridge University Press greeted it with a sparkle in his eye. That moment is deeply imprinted in my mind and has been a constant source of inspiration. I am ever grateful to Alex and am delighted that Cambridge University Press will be publishing this lifelong project of mine. I also want to express my gratitude to the anonymous readers for their excellent suggestions. Thanks also to my colleagues far and near, to my endearing Colby students, and to the Sikh community. Their encouragement and love sustain me more than I can express.

Preface

ix

I end by repeating the words of Sardar Harjinder Singh Dhami, President of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee. During an online celebration of the India Heritage Month in Ottawa (April 30, 2022), he urged audiences to wear (*bandaunī*) the guru's language (*gurbānī*) on their body (*pinḍe te*). Guru Nanak's transcendent aesthetics is a disclosure of the colorful fabric that all beings, animate and inanimate, are equally a part of. By wearing his language as this study recovers, the fabric wears out and becomes the skin of each wearer: we feel the oneness we are.

Note

The translations from the Guru Granth Sahib (GGS) are all mine. I have also included transliterations of Guru Nanak's original verses that are essential to my arguments. Others can be found in my *en face* translation of Guru Nanak's poems in the Murty Classical Library (2022). In the transliterations I have kept the case endings -i and -u wherever they appear in the original text. For example, *sat* can appear as *sati* (locative case) or *satu* (direct case).