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a Kaur's story – the Beginning

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Abstract

A personal essay that highlights the journey of a Sikh immigrant woman who grew up with a nation riddled with contradictions. Arriving in her twenties to a 'free' world, where in her struggle to survive, she lost herself. The essay highlights how she found her voice and is now dedicated to strengthening it - not just for herself but in helping the women around her. By recording their stories and experiences, she ensures that history records the ordinary lives that make up the universe.

Keywords: *personal journey, faith, patriarchy, a Kaur's story.*

Dear Reader,

Fateh, I am Arvinder Goomer. I came to the US in 1995, to be with my newly wedded partner in life. In the years that followed, I gave birth twice, ran multiple businesses, worked various jobs, took care of family, volunteered, and strengthened my faith in *Waheguru*. What I kept postponing was my desire to author a book. I kept that goal on a slow burn, occasionally taking it out making copious notes, and then shoving those notes back in a drawer. My life partner kept pushing me to take the leap and pick up a pen.

In 2022 as we celebrated our son's marriage, I found myself in the role of a mother-in-Law. I struggled with breaking free from stereotypes and realized how deep patriarchy ran in me. To my horror, mentally, I found myself slipping into a traditional mother-in-law archetype, expecting to be wooed and revered at my son's wedding. Fortunately, I slapped myself out of any grandiose notions before articulating them in time. I started shoving advice and ideas for the wedding at my daughter-in-law, not giving her any space to voice her desires. I was understanding and patient if my ideas were accepted. I wanted her to love me and see me as a mother, but on my terms.

The moment of realization meant a reckoning for which I was ill prepared. I often caught myself saying things I did not mean and unintentionally hurting my kids. There was a debate in my head all the time, between who I wanted to be and who I was. I started talking to friends and family in similar situations, realizing where some of our issues were stemming from.

I realized that the women around me were dealing with a system that was rigged against them, which sparked the idea of a book in my mind.

The essay you are about to read is a chronicle of my journey, an exploration of who I am, and how I arrived at a pivotal moment in 2022 when I started drafting my book. It is a deeply personal essay. While history meticulously records our extraordinary accomplishments and failures in detail, it often overlooks how the

ordinary moments shape our existence, shape our world vision, and make us who we are. It is the ordinary that people need to know, for true merit is in showing up every day for the mundane. As I share my reflections and evolution of thoughts, I invite you to understand the influences that shaped me as of today. Please keep that thought central as you read the essay and follow my journey.

Thank you.

The Essay

I am a child of the seventies, growing up with a nation that was, and still is, struggling with secularism, nationalism and diversity. India had won its independence in 1947, at a great cost. The colonizers departed drawing a line through the Northern part of the country, dividing it forever into two countries forever at odds since their inception.

By the time I graduated from high school, India had fought two wars with Pakistan, three border disputes with China, and was torn apart by riots that broke out with alarming frequency across the nation.

I witnessed the Indian Army storm Harmandir Sahib and Akal Takht Sahib in Amritsar, the highest seat of authority for Sikhs. In the aftermath I saw the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her bodyguards and felt the terror of a mob fueled by politics of religious grandiosity target Sikhs in the aftermath. All this by the time I had turned thirteen.

Entering college, under the carefree joy of freedom only a freshman can feel, I carried with me a deep-seated anger and disillusionment.

While the political leaders of our times had failed us repeatedly, their treason was almost expected. For a generation that grew from the ashes of a colonized India, freedom was not a gift. We did not honor it or respect it, for us it was a right. The moral code of honesty and national pride had become a commodity, but my anger was not with the polity or the general populace, it was with my community. It was with Sikhi.

In school, our history lessons glorified the freedom fighters, their love for their country and the willingness to die for the cause. It was important for the government to ensure the general populace recognized the sacrifices made by past generations to attain independence, highlighting how colonization had scarred people who for years had been treated as second-class citizens.

Our country where Lord Ram was a household name, warriors like Pandavas renowned for their prowess and loyalty, had been under siege for too long. Following the decline of the Mughal empire, dismantled by multiple wars with Marathas, the colonizers stepped into a world ripe for taking. The general population had been living under tyranny for ages, only now the oppressors looked different. When generations grow up under servility and indignities, it takes a concerted monumental effort of rebellion to reclaim freedom. For years, Indians had been fighting for freedom; leaders like Gandhi, Bhagat Singh,

Jawahar Lal Nehru, Mohammad Jinnah and many others, had dedicated their lives to a free India. Our history lessons taught us the struggles of these leaders, and only with maturity did we come to recognize their human flaws. And freedom had come at a high price: a country had been left traumatized by partition and millions displaced.

ਨਿਰਭਉ ਰੱਬ ਸੀ
ਭਉ ਮੇਰਾ ਸੀ
ਨਿਰਵੈਰ ਉਹ ਸੀ
ਵੈਰੀ ਉਹਦੀ ਰਚਨਾ ਸੀ
ਰੱਬ, ਨਾਂ ਤੇਰਾ ਸੀ, ਲੜਾਈ ਉਸ ਨਾਂ ਤੇ, ਉਹ ਮੇਰੀ ਸੀ

ਪਿਆਰ ਤੇਰਾ ਸੀ, ਨਫ਼ਰਤ ਮੇਰੀ ਸੀ
ਇਕ, ਤੂੰ ਸੀ, ਤੇਰੇ ਨਾਂ ਤੇ ਮਜ਼ਹਬ ਮੇਰੇ ਸੀ

ਸੱਚ ਤੂੰ ਸੀ, ਝੂਠ ਮੇਰੇ ਸੀ
ਮੈਂ ਕਿਆ, ਅਕਾਲ ਤੂੰ, ਸਰਬ ਵਿਆਪੀ ਵੀ ਤੂੰ ਸੀ
ਕਰਤਾਰ ਤੇ ਦਇਆਲ ਤੂੰ ਹੀ ਸੀ
ਪਰ ਕਿਸ ਮਜ਼ਹਬ ਦੀ ਤੂੰ ਮਲਕੀਅਤ ਸੀ
ਏਸ ਫੈਸਲੇ ਦੀ ਹੁੱਜਤ ਮੇਰੀ ਸੀ

My God is Fearless

All the fears are mine,
My God is without malice,
Their creation carries the malice within,
God, the name is yours, the fights in your name are
ours,
You are love, God but the hatred is mine,
You are One God, but in your name all the multiple
religions are mine
You are the Truth, all the lies are mine
I call you Timeless, omnipresent,
I call you the Creator and the Compassionate
But who do You belong to, that audacious thought
and the audacious decision is mine.

Into this world of conflicts, and a search for identity, I was born, the youngest child in my family. Amidst the rising popularity of the family planning slogan of “*hum do, hamaray do*” (us two, and our two kids), I was ripe for teasing by my siblings for being the third child. I grew up with normal sibling tomfoolery, and love from parents who were deeply rooted in Sikhi. There were pictures of the Gurus around the house, but my mother brought them to life with *sakhis* (stories of our Gurus lives) and her faith. I would listen to her tell us about Guru Nanak's *Udaasis*, his travels by foot, while attempting to reconcile the image of the warrior I learnt about with the serene portrait I saw of him everywhere. To me, Guru Nanak did not look like a stereotypical prophet, one who preached while sitting on a pedestal. My Guru Nanak was a traveler, an engager, and a warrior of words.

This was my introduction to the power of words, and words became one of my closest friends. My mother was pleased with my interest in reading. I discovered shops that lent books, just like a library. I would sit in basements and storage rooms of my family and friends, finding old magazines, newspapers and books to read. If you could not find me in the house, everyone knew that I would be hiding in a corner, reading.

My biggest dream was to write a book, a dream I hugged close and often dreamt about. This dream inspired me to study English Literature in college. I loved spending time with books and not with people. My mother had brought home books about our Gurus, hoping that between her storytelling and the reading, her kids would find a connection to Sikhi. However, reading these books helped me realize the dichotomy that the women in my life navigated. They were devout Sikhs, immersed in *Gurbani*, teaching

their families about the radical notions of equality and equity that our gurus had preached about. In their real lives though, their roles and positions did not reflect those Sikh “values.”

In all my conversations about Sikhi with my elders, one theme was always highlighted: Guru Nanak's advocacy for the equality of women. It was a truth universally acknowledged, something that set Sikhs apart from any other religious group- a revolutionary concept affirming women were equal to men. The men would swell up in pride, and the women, although trying to be modest, could not help but beam when they mentioned how our Gurus had brought the change. In, *Gurudwaras* (Sikh places of worship), the priests through their recitation of *bani* (written words of the Gurus) and its meaning, often compared how Sikhi, unlike other religions, considered women equal to men. Yet, I felt there was a hypocritical grandiosity in their statements as I looked around and never even saw a female *sewadaar* (volunteer) in any of the gurudwaras.

This duality troubled me deeply. In the world I inhabited, there was a stark contrast between practical reality and theoretical ideals. I grew up in a home where traditional roles of the provider and the nurturer were followed. My older brother, being not only the first born, was also the only son. He enjoyed privileges that were not granted to me and my sister. I remember driving my mother crazy, constantly challenging this duality. I wanted the same freedoms he had: the freedom to stay out late, to drink if I wanted to, to go out alone if I wanted to- all I wanted was for her to see me as his equal, in terms of privilege.

My mom's response never varied: she trusted me, but not the world. The suggestion that she treated us unequally was, to her, profoundly unjust. Thus, throughout my college years, I seized every opportunity to challenge the social norms. I argued for the right to travel with my friends, to be out late, not to marry until I had a job, pursue my master's degree, and even to simply stand outside at night and talk to a friend. This involved a considerable amount of emotional blackmail on both sides, mine and my parents. Every decision in my adult life seemed centered around the invisible gendered wall of rules that I had to obey.

By the time I started college, we had already endured Operation Blue Star, witnessed Indira Gandhi's assassination and hidden in our homes, had front row seats to the genocide of November 1984. If India's path to secularism was in jeopardy, I was navigating my own angst-ridden journey. I had been visiting gurudwaras all my life for birthdays and significant events. *Gurpurabs* (religious days commemorating a Guru) required a visit to the prominent gurudwaras, Nanak Piao or Bangla Sahib. Yet I had never felt a spiritual connection. The recitation of *paath* (specific Sikh prayers) was a chore enforced by my parents- an exercise of repetition, not of love.

This disconnect put me on a path to reject my *virsa* (legacy or heritage) and by my freshman year in college, I had donned the mantle of an atheist. I could not and would not pay lip service to a religion whose practice was hypocrisy.

I observed a persistent uneven distribution of labor within Sikh families around me, where women were required to be quiet, submissive, caught in culturally stereotypical roles of mothers - a stereotype upheld by women themselves. In media and in literature, the narrative persisted, women were expected to serve,

lose their identities after marriage, making Gurbani's message seem shallow by comparison. Young women were encouraged to study and be ambitious but only as long as it did not interfere with the holy grail of marriage.

As a vocal feminist, my perspective at that time was critical of the women around me. I had no understanding of their struggles and their compromises; I only saw surrender. I blamed Sikhi for this inequity, and in my mind my faith had failed me, Waheguru had failed me. I grew up believing that Waheguru punishes those that do wrong and rewards honest truthful living, but I saw no proof of that in real life. I asked for punishment for those who had massacred the innocent Sikhs in 1984 genocide. The men who had burnt down my school, the men who had beaten up families, the men who had raped grandmothers and babies: where was the justice for these victims?

In November 1984, after days of living in fear, I finally stepped out to go to school, and saw a ravaged neighborhood- houses burnt, blackened by ash, people averting their eyes as they walked past those houses. The shops were looted and destroyed, a testament to man's capacity for senseless violence. My school, freshly painted, had sections of it cordoned off until repairs were completed, and my teachers were hiding their tears, trying to be strong for the frightened children in front of them. The media circus that followed, the apathy of the government to those who had lost everything, and the audacious braggarts that talked of avenging Indira Gandhi's assassination by killing thousands of Sikhs, just cemented my belief that Waheguru did not exist. Religion, I concluded, was only a ploy by men to keep a society subservient to its ideologies and not think for itself.

It was easy to reject an ideology that no one practiced and blame the philosophy for its' failures. I was too caught up in the unfairness of it all to look past the hurt and realize that it is "us," the practitioners who corrupt them, not the other way around. My college years were spent arguing with my parents about God and my lack of trust in Sikhi. I openly flaunted my atheism to anyone willing to listen, embracing the role of a rebel within my family, as if it were a religion of its own. I could discuss for hours the demerits of organized religion.

Then came 1994, bringing with it not only marriage but also a move to the United States. By a twist of fate, I ended up married to a man of deep faith, and with him started a life of fresh spiritual challenges. In a new country, it was easy to follow my partner's routines until I developed my own. His weekly visit to the local gurudwara was my introduction to our community. A promise of *langar* meant no cooking for at least a day. Gradually I formed friendships and our *granthis* (priests) at the gurudwara became like surrogate brothers to me. I would listen to their *kirtan* (hymns), enthralled, because I had a personal connection to them. The gurudwara began to feel like the only place where I felt comfortable. I was having a challenging time adjusting to America. I was learning a new way of life, dependent on my husband for transportation, unfamiliar with how banking worked, faced with an overwhelming variety of foods, struggling to understand the accents, and constantly feeling out of place. The gurudwara became a second home and a place where I felt seen and heard.

Within months of arriving in the U.S. I was pregnant, feeling scared and more alone than ever. My pregnancy also brought forth intense rounds of introspection and spiritual assessment. I made the decision that since I had my roots in Sikhi, my children would too. It was the only thing from home that I could give them. India still felt like home to me, and so, like my parents, I would give my children a strong foundation in Sikhi. What they did with their faith would be their choice. It was an instinctive decision, and it would be years before I would understand the truth behind it.

As I began introducing them to Sikhi, I myself was reintroduced to its beauty. In the struggle to teach my kids *Gurmukhi*, I fell in love with Gurbani. I felt a connection with bani that I had never felt before. The peace I found reciting paath was new to me and I welcomed it with open arms. My heart, which once felt isolated and lonely, was filled with peace when I listened to kirtan. As I eagerly looked up the meanings of *shabads* (Sikh prayers) I listened to, my heart began to heal.

My roots in Sikhi were deeper than I realized. Yet what I had not considered was the extent of my own mental conditioning. During my single years, I was questioning religion and the patriarchy around me, however, the “married me” adopted the traditional role of the nurturer slowly and unconsciously. My husband and I looked to our parents as role models and as the demands of our lives weighed on us, we slid down the slippery slope of a system that I had been fighting all my life.

ਲੜ ਲਗੀ ਮੈ ਤੇਰੇ, ਪੱਲਾ ਮੇਰਾ ਤੇਰੇ ਹੱਥ ਫੜਾਇਆ,

ਪਿਓ ਨੇ ਹੰਜੂ ਰੋਕੇ, ਮਾਂ ਨੇ ਵੀ ਹੋਕਾ ਸੀ ਭਰਿਆ,

ਭਰਾ ਨੇ ਚੁਪ ਕਰਕੇ ਮੋਡਾ ਸੀ ਘੁਟਿਆ,

ਨਾਲ ਹਾਂ ਤੇਰੇ ਇਹ ਸਮਝਾਇਆ
ਓਹਨੇ ਵੀ ਤਾਂ ਕਦੀ ਪਲਾਓ ਫੜਿਆ ਸੀ

ਅਥਰੂ ਮੇਰੇ ਦੇਖ ਕੇ ਭੈਣ ਨੇ ਛੇਤੀ ਇਕ ਰੁਮਾਲ ਸੀ ਦਿਤੀ
ਦਿਲ ਵਿੱਚ ਮੇਰੇ ਸਵਾਲ ਸੀ ਓਠਿਆ, ਕੀ ਇਹ ਹੀ ਸੂ ਗੁਰੂ
ਦੀ ਮਰਜ਼ੀ?

ਇਕ ਪੱਲੇ ਨੇ ਹੀ ਕਰ ਤੀ ਧੀ ਪਰਾਈ,

ਮੈ ਤਾ ਓਹਦੀਂ ਸਮਰੂਪ ਸੀ
ਜੇੜ ਸਾਡਾ ਪਾਕ ਸੀ, ਇਕ ਦੂਜੇ ਦਾ ਸਾਥ ਦਿਹਾਂਗੇ,
ਗੁਰੂ ਦੇ ਲੜ ਲਗ, ਇਕ ਦੂਜੇ ਦਾ ਮਾਣ ਕਰਾਂਗੇ,
ਪਰ ਮੈਨੂੰ ਤੇਰੇ ਪੱਲੇ ਲਾਇਆ,

ਮੈਨੂੰ ਤੇਰੇ ਮੋਡੇ ਪਾਇਆ
ਚਲ ਇਹ ਤੋੜੀਏ ਇਹ ਰੀਤੀਵਾਦ,

I am bound to you, by a piece of cloth handed to me,

a father struggling with his tears, a mom barely controlling her sobs,

a brother silently squeezing my shoulder, offering me his support,

helping me remember he is always with me,

He had held a piece of cloth like that too one time, when he got married,

A sister offering me a tissue to wipe my tears,

A question in my mind, is this what my Guru had envisioned or hoped for women?

a piece of cloth would make that bride a stranger in her home,

I thought I was like my husband, equal to him,

our union blessed and pure, with mutual support,

bound to our Guru, we will respect each other,

but they offer me to you like a burden being lessened,

and a responsibility that you must bear,

Let us break these cultural norms and traditions,

ਬਣੀਏ ਇਕ ਕੱਠੀ ਅਵਾਜ਼,
ਮੈਂ ਤੇਰੀ ਤੂੰ ਮੇਰੀ ਹਿੰਮਤ,
ਇਕ ਦੂਜੇ ਦੇ ਪੱਲੇ ਲਗ ਕੇ, ਗੁਰੂ ਦੇ ਸਬਦ ਨੂੰ ਉੱਚਾ ਕਰੀਏ

and in a United voice,
Let us become each other's strength,
Bound to each other with that piece of cloth, let us
honor our Guru's vision and Their words.

(The ਪੱਲਾ or the long scarf, referred to here as a piece of cloth, is traditionally draped around the couple's shoulders, with the father usually handing each end of the scarf to the couple right before the beginning of the wedding ceremony)

I stopped reflecting on my actions, focusing instead on what I was supposed to be doing. I had children to take care of, a house to clean, laundry, groceries, homework, a job, cooking, doctors' appointments, and countless small tasks demanding my attention, in rare moments of self-awareness, I would turn my gaze inward and wonder where I lost the warrior within me. I wanted that fearless woman back, the one who questioned the status quo, and believed in her own power.

I had lost her, to a world that had demanded her submission.

As my children grew, my voice became stronger. The Bani I read every day challenged me to stand up against hypocrisy and inequalities around me. Each shabad reminded me of my guru's vision turning that incessant scream in my head into a ringing noise awakening my conscience. It demanded that I wake up to see the other women like me, who were writing the same stories, mired in centuries old roles, bearing the weight of patriarchy on their shoulders, oblivious that they had the choice to no longer accept the burden.

Women have been the torchbearers for patriarchy, acting as its' guardians and lulled into false sense of superiority as long they continue to dominate each other. Women are taught early on about their designated roles in life, taught to view their stay as a temporary dweller in their parent's home until marriage and motherhood as the ultimate life goal for them. They learn that their place and survival in society depends on asserting their influence over other women, even as the ultimate power remains with the men in their lives.

The prevailing belief is that women must nurture, as being mothers is what their bodies are designed to be. They are paid less, fought hard for the right to vote or to open an account, or to have a credit card in their own name. Media constantly depicts the ideal woman slim, subdued, and always perfectly put together. The image of a superwoman who effortlessly juggles motherhood and a career with grace and patience, never relying on her partner for support, and silently shouldering the load of her family's emotional and logistical burdens- that is a woman worth celebrating.

These are the struggles faced by a woman in the 2000s, but the expectations placed on them and unfairness of it all hit me harder. For as a Sikh woman, I hold the Sikh men to a higher standard, expecting them to embody all the values of Sikhi.

However, societal double standards prevail:

A man's assertiveness is a woman's aggression; prized in a man and abhorred in a woman.

A man's thirst for power is ambition, in a woman, it is greed.

A man's obsession with work is expected, in a woman it is unseemly.

A man's work is necessary, and a woman's work is dismissed as a hobby.

Throughout my lifetime, I have come to realize that while we practice some core values of Sikhi, we often overlook the important ones. While we espouse how our Gurus valued equality, we do little to practice it. As my son married welcoming a beautiful daughter-in-law into our family, I could not stay silent about the inequities I observed. I had long seen my sisters struggle with their identities, and learned behavior, striving to find a seat at the table, fighting to have their voices heard and silently bearing a mental load that should have been shared. I had also realized that my own mental conditioning needed to be confronted.

Motivated by my love for words and a firm belief in their transformative power, I resolved to share these inequalities, through my writing. I felt compelled to pursue my childhood dream: to write a book. It became essential for me to write a book, one that would encapsulate the lived experiences of the Sikh immigrant women around me.

Our stories needed to be told, we needed to remind ourselves and honor our gurus, by recognizing our worth. It was crucial to acknowledge the struggles we shared, to remind each other about our faith and of its' expectations of us. These realizations had to be articulated. I was driven to take tangible steps, and what holds more power than words?

Authoring a book has always been my dream. Motivated to share the stories of women around me, the arrival of a daughter in our family had served as a final push. So, I devised a plan to collect stories, true stories of real women around me. Immigrant Sikh women like me, who had created a life here in the US but at what cost?

I developed an online survey and sent it to all the women I knew, asking them to pass it to the Sikh women in their circles. The women who responded to the survey were invited to recount their stories. They shared, I listened, and I wrote. They asked for anonymity, and I embraced their stories as mine. Recognizing that it was *haumai* (ego) in me that made me believe I could be their voice, I approached the stories with increased humility, determined not to fail my sisters.

The culmination of this journey into their lives is my book, "a Kaur's Story." It is a labor of love and heartache, of triumph and resilience, of joy and surrender, of identity and our search for it. Each story has been written in first person, allowing the women who shared their experiences and had invited me into the deepest parts of their lives. The stories they shared were intimate, often painful. Among my sisters, some had compromised, others had fought for respect, and few chose to let things be. In my conversations with them, I learnt about courage, and I learned to listen without judgment.

The process proved to be mentally exhausting, so I found comfort in Gurbani, and asked Waheguru ji for strength. The stories I heard were ones of resilience, faith, and constant struggle. Some women had compromised so much that they could not recognize themselves, while others had initiated change. Each story, inspirational and challenging.

But that is life, isn't it? Change is the constant and the only steadfast reality of our existence. Whether we accept it gracefully or resist it, change is inevitable. It is coming with our daughters and sons, with our children who refuse to back down, the warriors who challenge our stereotypes, forcing us to look inward and acknowledge our biases. Change is coming with our kids who are breaking barriers, those of gender, stereotypes, occupations, and ageism, to name a few. They are inviting us on their journey, willing to hold our hands and live the life of Sikhi.

The stories we share are important, because just as history needs a record of the significant events, it also needs to document the struggles and triumphs of the people living through them. History isn't just about the battles fought or the inventions made, but it is a record of the efforts of its people, their lives and emotions, and what fuels their passions. It is in understanding the mundane, that seeds of change can sprout and bear fruit.

My sincere hope is that my book inspires the readers to have conversations within their homes and in the communities around them. I hope it encourages all Sikhs to engage in conversations and be the torchbearers of change. I hope that we can get past the barriers of gender and caste, to truly accept each other as equals and celebrate our gurus' legacy.

Author Note

Arvinder Goomer, a Sikh immigrant, is a budding writer, with a focus on women's rights. She is passionate about being a voice for women especially within her community. With a strong belief in equality and empowerment, she uses her writing to shed light on the lived experiences of women around her. Through her work, she strives to inspire others to take action and make a positive impact in the world.