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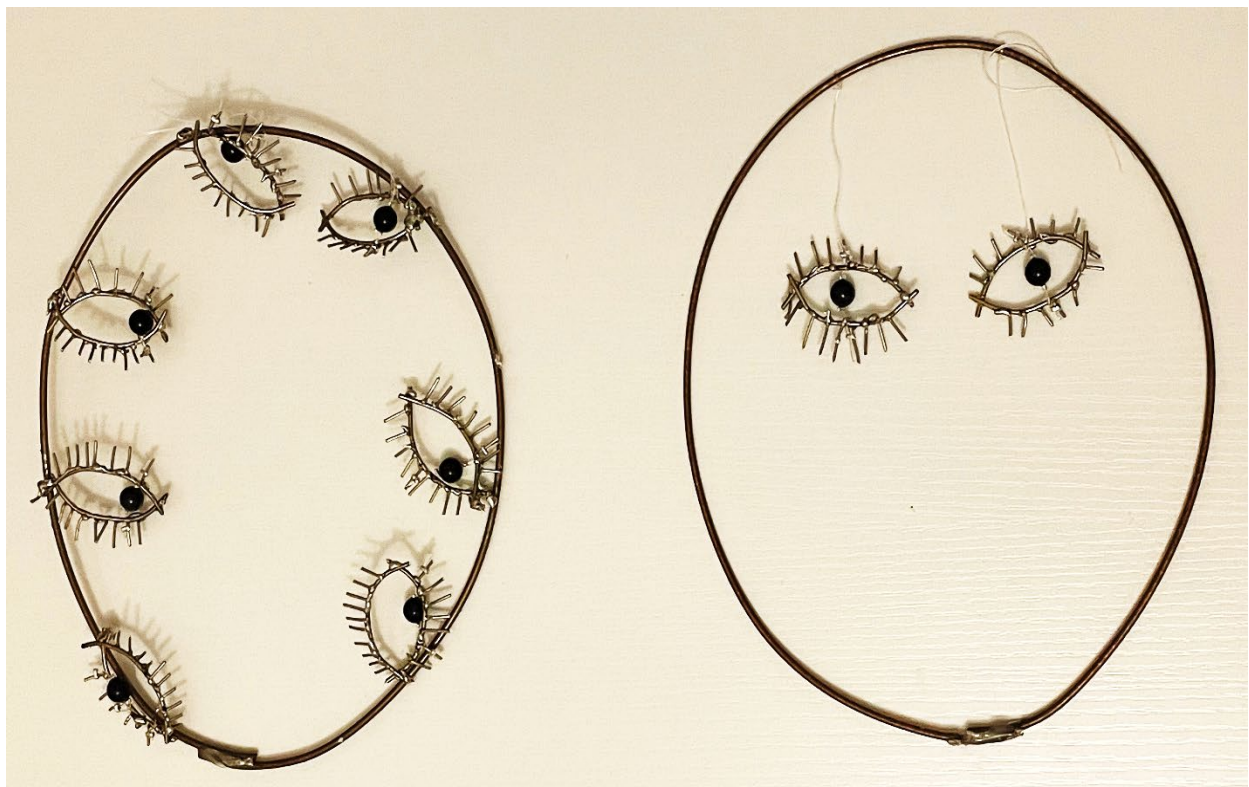
## “Loki Ki Kehen Ge?”: Gurbani, Liberation, and Subverting Cyclicalities

Tavleen Kaur

### Abstract

This short piece, comprising of a poem, reflection, and sculptural art, is a love letter to wanting more out of life. While “loki ki kehen ge?” (“what will people say?”) is a fear felt by all who have ever been encumbered by this violent sentiment—either as the oppressor or the oppressed, this piece offers a peek into all that is possible beyond fear. Inspired and informed by Gurbani, the wordplay poem, personal reflection, and metalwork sculpture collectively demonstrate how perspectival shifts in our perception make the difference between surviving and thriving, and between fearing “what will people say?” to imagining “what could people say?”.

**Keywords:** *domestic violence, Gurbani, healing, liberation, sculpture, Sikh, intergenerational trauma*



**Figure 1**

*Nazar* (Above left): Approx. 12” in height. Steel, soldering wire (tin and lead), blue sandstone beads, and epoxy.

*Nadar* (Above right): Approx. 12” in height. Steel, soldering wire (tin and lead), blue sandstone beads, and epoxy.

<i>Love letters to...</i>	<i>Nazar</i> (glance, perspective, sight, or vision)	<i>Nadar</i> ("Divine perspective")
All of us conditioned to compromise our own well-being because of the fear of what others will say:	What will people say? These four words. In this order. Distress.	What could people say? This foreword. In disorder. De-stress.
All of us finding ourselves repeating patterns we detest in others:	What will people say? Endless words. Toxic traits. Intergenerational.	What could people say? Ends of worlds. Talks it straight. In-turned rationale.
All of us witnessing, experiencing, and perpetuating pain and hurt:	What will people say? I suffered. And so shall you. This just is.	What could people say? Eyes offered. End social rue. This justice.
All of us used to harsh and relentless self-critique:	What will people say? Careless. Mistake. Humiliate.	What could people say? Care less. Mystic. Humility.
All of us learning to question social constructs like race and gender and learning to embrace fluidity:	What will people say? She, he, they. Pronouns? Worried sick.	What could people say? <i>Shaheedi</i> . Pronounce. Varied Sikhs.
All of us witnessing and experiencing the violence of imperialism and empire:	What will people say? Mind full. Depressed. Wit's end.	What could people say? Mindful. Deep rest. Witness.
All of us reckoning with intergenerational traumas that manifest in the body and the mind:	What will people say? My hurt. Risks you. Lives discontented.	What could people say? My heart. Rescues. Life's this intended.
All of us learning how minuscule our perspective and understanding of the expansive world is:	What will people say? How come? Fear. Sure, but...	What could people say? <i>Hukam</i> . Freer. <i>Sarbat</i> .

This love letter above is dedicated to all of us who have been, currently are, or will be encumbered by the violence of *loki ki kehen ge?* (“What will people say?”). This little yet weighty phrase has claimed lives and dreams. *Nazar*, the collection of stanzas in the middle column, is inspired by first- and second-hand experiences, real events, and social formations that have widely known devastating effects on the minds and bodies of both the perpetrators and the targets of this violence. *Nadar*, the collection of stanzas in the last column, is a Gurbani-inspired reimagination of the perceptions that cause deep harm and damage. In their reimagined form, the words in these stanzas are reclamation stakes. Purposely meant to be a poetic phoenix rising from the ashes, these reimagined words reconceptualize the fear and shame-based insinuations of *loki ki kehen ge?* to love and liberation-based subversions instead. *Loki* (people) will speak regardless; may our speaking be radically liberatory, especially when the more convenient choice is to perpetuate or endure cycles of harm.

The two-part art piece (Figure 1) accompanying this poem is a tangible and visual representation of the idea of *loki ki kehen ge?*.<sup>7</sup> The first art piece, *Nazar*, correlates with the middle column, and the second art piece, *Nadar*, correlates with the last column of the love letter. Though in Punjabi *nazar* and *nadar* have the same meaning (glance, perspective, sight, or vision), with colloquial and Gurbani contexts, however, their meanings change. *Nazar* is also used colloquially to mean “evil eye,” or the belief that one’s successes or accomplishments can be negatively affected by the perceived envy or jealousy of others. In Gurbani, though *nadar* is often translated as “Divine grace,” my interpretation of it is “Divine perspective,” that is, liberatory and transformational ways of seeing and perceiving the world.

My intention of naming the art pieces *Nazar* and *Nadar* is rooted in these additional colloquial and Gurbani contexts of each word. In the *Nazar* art piece, the eyes looking in different directions symbolize the human tendency to look externally for validation, safeguarding from the “evil eye” by being hypervigilant of “what will people say?” On the other hand, the *Nadar* art piece, with centrally placed eyes having focused vision, symbolizes Divine perspective that is introspective and carefree of the looking around from *loki ki kehen ge?*.

The connection between the poem and the art pieces is deeply intertwined. The *Nazar* stanzas represent violent encounters with heteropatriarchy, classism, casteism, and imperialism that I have experienced firsthand and have borne witness to. The *Nadar* stanzas represent a reworking of their counterpart stanzas, claiming agency over what was meant to be hurtful to what can be overcome. In this manner, each stanza of the poem represents the power ensuing from flipping and subverting the narrative from pain to liberation, from *nazar* to *nadar*, from *loki ki kehen ge?* (“what will people say?”) to *loki ki keh sakde hai?* (“what could people say?”). Simply by

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<sup>7</sup> Materials used for the art pieces: steel, soldering wire (tin and lead), blue sandstone beads, and epoxy. My thanks to Inderpal Singh for his support and guidance in bringing this art concept to life.

renarrativizing and transforming perception, the debilitating waves of thought of *bhau* (fear) of the time to come and *vair* (enmity) of the time that has passed are transformed into rehabilitating waves of *bhao* (love) instead.<sup>8</sup> This poetic and intellectual shift exemplifies Divine perspective.

I arrive at poem and art pieces through first- and second-hand experiences with both “what will people say?” and “what could people say?” I write with two particular anecdotes in mind, one comes from a collection of memories from my own life, and the other comes from a fellow Punjabi Sikh Brown woman’s death. The anecdotes from my own life come from being around abusive older male relatives whose frequent verbally and physically abusive outbursts (exacerbated by their alcohol addiction) affected everyone in the family. Though I had spoken up when I had felt it was safe to do so, many times, I had stayed silent. It is reflecting on my silence that initially led me to this poem. Over time, I have learned to subvert the phrase of *loki ki kehen ge?*, thus depleting it of any social power it is structured to have over the mind. As counterintuitive as it sounds, I have even considered that *loki ki kehen ge?* can be *generative* but only when I can subvert it. *The subversive power comes not from worrying what others will say about my words or actions but from considering what they will say about my silence instead. What will people say when they learn that Tavleen Kaur stayed silent in the face of experiencing and witnessing abuse of any kind?* I wholeheartedly recognize that even my subversion of *loki ki kehen ge?* is deeply self-indulgent and seeped in *haumai* (self-affirming ego); nonetheless, I hope readers will find it even infinitesimally relatable.

While I have this privilege and platform to safely breathe words into memories I have not shared publicly before, Mandeep Kaur (1992-2022) of Richmond Hill, New York City did not. On August 3, 2022, Mandeep Kaur died by suicide after facing eight years of violent abuse from her husband. Mandeep Kaur breathed life into her words (and worlds) in the form of a testimonial video that went viral when community support and activist organizations learned of it.<sup>9</sup> In the video Mandeep Kaur recounts the agony of her husband beating her, also mentioning that he had extramarital affairs.<sup>10</sup> However, by the time the world saw Mandeep Kaur’s testimonial video, as well as other photos and videos that surfaced afterward, each of which showed her bruised skin

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<sup>8</sup> My thanks to the Gurmat Therapy team in the U.K. for sharing their interpretation of *Nirbhau* and *Nirvair* from the Mool Mantar in these radical terms.

<sup>9</sup> Since this reflection piece is geared toward a broad audience (as opposed to only an academic audience), I have purposely held off on using external references. Further, due to not feeling ethically comfortable in further broadcasting such a painful video as “evidence,” I am choosing not to share a link to Mandeep Kaur’s heartbreaking video and am thus avoiding perpetuating “trauma porn.” For those wishing to learn more may do so via this article, published on August 9, 2022 by Sakhi, an organization centered on South Asian women’s rights and services available for them: <https://sakhi.org/mourning-the-loss-of-mandeep-kaur/>

<sup>10</sup> An additional video released publicly by The Kaur Movement shows Mandeep Kaur’s husband hitting her while their two daughters are visible in the background, crying. The video was made public by The Kaur Movement, an independent, social media-led initiative (primarily via Instagram) that shares stories submitted by Sikhs who have faced or are currently facing sexual and domestic abuse.

and even blood streaming down her face, it was too late. In addition to two daughters, now aged seven and five years old, Mandeep Kaur leaves behind an ethnoreligious community founded on the promise of the well-being of others—*sarbat da bhala*—but a community that often struggles to deliver on this promise, largely because of the fears of *loki ki kehen ge?*

Roughly two months after Mandeep Kaur's passing, I had a chance to go to New York for research. When I was at one of the Richmond Hill gurdwaras in New York City, I happened to meet Kamal (pseudonym), a middle-aged Sikh woman who runs a local business. Kamal knew Mandeep Kaur personally. Kamal shared that she had seen Mandeep Kaur several times around the gurdwara area and that she (Kamal) had no idea Mandeep Kaur was facing such violence.

The full conversation with Kamal taught me that, for those who have suffered and witnessed patriarchal violence, even the idea of speaking freely and unabashedly is a challenging one to fully embrace. In the conversation, the points Kamal shared with me seemed to oscillate on a metaphoric see-saw, demanding vigilance over every word she uttered. Kamal mentioned that she has taught her own children—a son and a daughter, both in their early-to-mid 20s—to stand up and speak for themselves, lest they face the kind of violence Mandeep Kaur did, or, worse, perpetrate it. Hearing these words felt comforting, as they reflected an active and ongoing commitment to justice, especially in memory of the victims and survivors of domestic violence. However, when Kamal happened to mention her own life experiences, including experiencing and surviving domestic abuse, she phrased it as something that just happens, like aging or grass browning after intense heat. Perhaps rationalizing her experiences in this way has been a survival strategy for Kamal. I refrained from asking further questions, as our chance encounter was coming to an end and because asking Kamal to share details of her life with a stranger felt wrong. We bid one another farewell and went our separate but not disconnected ways.

How might we re-envision our place in the world if we become the *loki* (people) who listen empathically and speak purposefully? How can we cultivate *nadar*—Divine perspective—such that we transform from the loathed *nazar* of *loki* who speak ill of others to the *loki* who encourage the breaking of silence, and in doing so, expand our own worldviews? The poem I present is a play on words; the subversive exercise it presents is a play on worlds. In keeping with this play, I close with a parting reflection on the name of the woman whose life was not as well-known as her death: Mandeep, whose name translates to “enlightened mind,” leaves us with a call to action to enlighten our minds by shifting our gaze from *nazar* to *nadar*.

**Author**

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