

Gender Abolition, Limits of Sikh Feminism, and Critique

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Abstract

This paper reflects on Sikh feminist critique and its mobilization of egalitarianism as a horizon. In doing so, I explore how Sikh onto-epistemologies unsettle liberal conceptions of equality, critique, and justice. By problematizing the very system and construct of gender, I orient gender abolition as a horizon to ask the question, what can Sikhi teach us about gender abolition? In analyzing the life around this question, I think through ethics of academic production in its engagement with Sikhi.

Keywords: *queerness, transness, secularism, gender abolition, Sikh feminism*

Introduction

A few years ago, I created a Twitter (now X) account, and one of my first tweets stated that the Guru Sahibs were queer. Looking back, I was naive not to anticipate the huge response and backlash it would generate. Within a day, it became the subject of widespread conversation on Sikh Twitter, as a digital war erupted—as it often does—around such a speculation.

That was also when I first encountered the word “blasphemy,” which, as I came to find out, is Sikh Twitter’s favorite accusation. Blasphemy is commonly defined as showing contempt or a lack of reverence for the sacred or Divine. Yet my speculation, that Guru Sahibs were queer, or later, gender-benders, did not come from a place of contempt, but from reverence and love for the Divine. The purpose of this paper is not to justify my tweet. Rather, I open with this moment to illustrate how an unverifiable speculation, something some might even regard as fictional, attempts to rewrite history in service of imagining a particular understanding of gender, sexuality, and Sikhi.

The question of gender in Sikhi is a widely debated topic in academia. Sikh feminist interventions continue to push us to think critically about the place of gender in Sikhi. Such interventions are crucial in Sikh Studies, a field largely dominated, shaped, and interpreted by men, in pushing us, the *panth* (literally translating to “path” to refer to the Sikh collectivity), to interrogate the persistence of gender inequality. The question “what about women?”—now rephrased as “what about gender?”—has oriented many toward the horizon of gender equality, inviting us to examine our distance from it and offering tools to navigate toward it. As gender inequality continues to stand in contradiction to (and as some argue, within) the egalitarian teachings of Sikhi, gender equality often becomes the horizon against which the liberatory potential, or failings, of Sikhi and Sikh communities is measured.

But horizons are, by nature, fleeting, impossible to grasp, and illusionary. Still, the way we understand, position, define, and capture the horizon also shapes and constrains us (Muñoz, 2009). The terms we use to define (and limit) the horizon determine our future orientations, how we travel and struggle toward it (and against other horizons). The grammars of the temporal present that project a horizon of futurity also

shape our understandings of the past and present, becoming the means through which histories are produced, interpreted, understood, and judged; through which understandings of justice are formed; and through which identities and ideas of selfhood are cohered and mobilized. Our horizons, then, reveal much about who we are, where we come from, and where we are trying to go. In other words, as much as we articulate our horizons, our horizons also articulate us. Simultaneously, the limits that capture us today also shape our horizons—reminding us again about the (im)possibilities of horizons.

This meditation results from my own question: what horizons am I invested in and desiring movement toward? As a trans non-binary Sikh who finds a home in neither “man” nor “woman,” I walk the spaces in-between and beyond—navigating complex and extensive cartographies of passing and clocking, exclusion and inclusion, privilege and marginalization, locations and dislocations, lined with performances of complicity and deviance, embodiments and unbodiments, and toll bridges that fissure and divide the inner and outer self which never seem to fully align, the very category and system of gender is a manifestation of *dubidhaa* [duality] (kehal, 2025; kehal, forthcoming; singh, 2024). For me, gender is a site of violence and frustration, and not a site upon which I can conceptualize equality and liberation. Gender equality, then, is a horizon that I have struggled to invest in—as it still presupposes the existence of gender as a system, with essentialized categories, even if mediated through the language of parity.

I want to begin this paper then, by naming two assumptions: first, the very system and construct of gender—as opposed to, though separate from, exclusion or marginalization—is my “problem”, and second, that I orient gender abolition as my horizon. This paper is an attempt to ask: What can Sikhi teach us about gender abolition? Through this inquiry, I reflect on the limitations of critique and academic production in engaging with Sikhi from within and against the frameworks that structure both.

Interrogating Questions

As I’ve argued, what and how we articulate and capture where we are trying to go—particularly the questions we pose to guide us—reveals our ontological and epistemological presumptions. Before tending to the question itself, I want to first reflect on how the question “what can Sikhi teach about gender abolition” even emerged. I am indebted here to dr. prabhdeep singh kehal for offering a methodological (re)orientation that invited a moment of pause and reflection [*rahaa*], which helped me reframe the question and expand the limits of the horizon I had previously been captured by.

Since the digital wars of Sikh Twitter, I had wanted to write this paper as a formal claim that gender abolition is a foundational principle in Sikhi, or, put differently, that Sikhi is gender abolitionist. I envisioned a paper supported by evidence drawn from *gurbani* [the Guru’s Wisdom] and *sakhis* [stories]. Yet a hesitation kept me from writing it. I began to question how generative such a paper would truly be in its life after publication. Such a paper, I feared, would simply recreate dualities. I imagined offering my perspective as an “alternative” that some members of the community would embrace while others would consider blasphemy. And in that back and forth, my writing, intended to affirm the place of queer and trans Sikhs, might unintentionally end up being more harmful than generative by further entrenching, reifying, or reenacting divisions in the panth.

I thought about the different groups who might resist such a claim and the basis of their resistance. Some responses, I anticipated, would be motivated by misogyny, queerphobia, or transphobia: pairing gender abolition and Sikhi in the same sentence might be perceived as a threat to power—especially by some cis het men. Others might accuse me of projecting my “modern” or “colonized” lens onto Sikhi, of appropriating (and polluting) Sikhi for my own purposes—a critique I imagined from those labeled “orthodox” or “traditional” Sikhs. Still others, particularly some Sikh feminists, might point to the historical and ongoing presence of gender inequality and gender violence as evidence of Sikhi’s failings and limitations for liberatory possibilities. Each of these claims, and the imagined groups, overlap and are not mutually exclusive nor limited by fixed identities.

The imagined counterclaims by different stakeholders were only a part of the problem. The more significant issue lay in the very framing of *my* question. My articulated questions “Is Sikhi gender abolitionist?” or “Can Sikhi be a source for gender abolition?” were framed in dualism, inviting a yes or no response and setting the stage for endless arguments and debate. These questions took on an evaluative posture, positioning Sikhi as the object (rather than the source) of critique, judged for its relationship to gender. This framing establishes a terrain where each of us could affirm, reaffirm, and accumulate *haumai* [ego]. In the back-and-forth process of “what do I think, what do you think,” we each articulate ourselves through moral, ethical, and affective grammars rooted in personal experiences, epistemologies, allegiances, and points of injury and pain, all while Sikhi becomes the battlefield and decontextualized *tukks* [lines of Gurbani] become weaponry hurled to critique and contest one another.

My initial question also operated within essentializing logics. In seeking to distill Sikhi into what it *is* or *is not*, I risked inviting responses that, while divergent in perspective and stakes, would also reproduce similar essentialisms. Resistance motivated by investments in cisheteropatriarchy would reveal an investment in sex and gender essentialisms. At the same time, resistance grounded in critique of gender inequality and violence in Sikh communities would also reduce and dismiss Sikhi as a monolithic tradition, concluding that Sikhi is patriarchal and thus limited in its liberatory potential.

To be clear: the stakes of each differ. The first is committed to preserving violence and power, while the second comes from a place of love and struggle against power and violence—longing for Sangat outside the grammar of violence. However, both approaches, despite their divergent motivations, risk flattening and capturing the dynamic, ever-becoming nature of Sikhi. They inadvertently entrench the very *haumai* that each seeks to overcome.³

This self-interrogation, of my own ethics and commitments, in the context of ever proliferating and polarizing divisions and distances, has led me to think more critically about how I engage with Sikhi, especially when furthering academic production. The dissonance between the divisive potential of critique and Sikhi’s commitment to destabilize and transcend *dubidhaa* [duality] invites a necessary pause. It has forced me to sit with the limitations of critique itself.

³ Judge writes that “we must remember what we have *learned* in the Sikh tradition to rethink the trappings of the ego that reinscribe the very contours we wish to erase—the separations that we consider divine gifts” (*Prophetic Maharaja*, 184).

This paper, then, seeks to foreground the ethics of *learning* from Sikhi, not positioning Sikhi as the subject or object of critique or defense. By discarding my initial question (which attempted to defend Sikhi against different critiques), I challenge the assumption that Sikhi requires defense from an “Other”—a stance that would only reaffirm another dualism (Judge, 2022). Instead, approaching Sikhi with *nimrata* [humility] necessitates an openness to transformation of the Self, and a willingness to evaluate and relinquish any attachments I may hold in how I approach Sikhi.

Although this paper is centered around conversations on Sikh feminism by asking what Sikhi might teach us about gender abolition, it is not seeking to critique Sikh feminisms, nor defend Sikhi against feminist critiques. Instead, I use Sikh feminism as a case to illustrate a broader concern about the limitations of critique itself. In this way, paper is not just an inquiry into critique, but a critique of critique. And perhaps, it asks: how can we learn critique from Sikhi?

Situating Terms

Before tending to the question of what we can learn from Sikhi about gender abolition, there are a few terms I need to situate. There is a risk here, as to define it is already to capture and set limits. This section then delineates which risks I am mobilizing and amassing—and how.

Sikhi

I understand Sikhi as the learnings from, of, for, and toward the Guru— a continual struggle (to learn?) that begins and ends with the Guru. The Sikh tradition occupies the ever-unfolding and nonlinear space in-between. Talal Asad (2003) and Rajbir Singh Judge (2024) offer that tradition is not a static essence marked by authenticity and contained within the grammar of historicity, but a never-ending site of contestation, struggle, and disputes towards an impossible coherence. In other words, the Sikh tradition is always in formation, unfixed, and ever-becoming. Such an understanding of tradition, and in this case, the Sikh tradition, is an intervention against secularism’s demand to construct, cohere, capture, and discipline the space of religion around essentialized sites like texts, belief, and practice. Instead of situating Sikhi as a repository of texts, beliefs, and practices, this understanding frames Sikhi as an onto-epistemological center with its own authority, on its own terms, one that includes, but also exceeds, “us.”

Gender and Feminism

Defining gender or feminism is not easy, as both evoke traditions full of contestation, with multiple, competing, and ever-shifting genealogies. Recounting these contestations is beyond the scope of this paper, but I want to point to a few important threads that help clarify how I am mobilizing each of these terms.

The category of gender is a relatively recent one, gaining prominence in the twentieth century through debates around the differences between sex, sexuality, and gender—debates shaped by the medical and psychiatric industries and later appropriated and mobilized across feminist, queer, and trans studies (Gill-Peterson, 2021). Theories of gender range from arguments for and against biological determinism, to views

of gender as socially constructed and performative, to recontextualization of gender itself as a technology constitutive of racial and colonial violence and governance. For purposes of this paper, I situate gender as both a construction and a system of power to classify, organize, discipline, and govern. Gender, in this framing, is not just a category, but an institution that stratifies and regulates value and violence.

Similarly, feminism comes with its own set of contentions that have informed its expansions and contractions, making it difficult to reduce it to a single definition. Perhaps, it is easier to define feminism by what it is oriented toward. Feminism aims to address and undo the stratifications of value and violence, seeking an end to sexism and patriarchy—and, with the interventions of Black, Indigenous, and women of color feminists, the end of all systems of oppression. In many ways, feminism is a project oriented toward its own obsolescence: towards the day the very project of feminism becomes unnecessary. But like all political projects, it remains in constant struggle with the horizons it imagines, and the horizons that shape and constrain it. This paper speaks to one such horizon: that of gender equality.

Sikh Feminism

Sikh feminism is also heterogeneous, one can argue it is a tradition in its own right, situated at the intersection of both the Sikh and feminist traditions, though the classification of traditions is not my primary concern here. Its scope ranges from recovering, highlighting, and learning from feminist hermeneutics and the feminine voice in Gurbani (Bal and Sarkar-Daman, 2021; Kaur Singh 2005); to exposing the erasure of and recuperating Sikh women's identities and histories (Jakobsh, 2000; Dhavan, 2010; Kaur Singh, 2000); to interrogating and reinterpreting Sikh rituals and practices through a feminist lens (Bains, 2020; Kaur Singh, 2000); and to critically examining the construction of Sikh masculinities at the intersection of martial formations (Dhavan, 2010; Gill, 2022; Sabherwal, 2024; Kohli, 2016a; Kohli, 2016b).

While I do not claim to offer an exhaustive or comprehensive account of the diversity of Sikh feminism, it may be more generative to define it through its orientation. What is shared across much of Sikh feminist scholarship is the horizon of gender equality. The articulation of this horizon pays homage to both the Sikh and feminist traditions from which Sikh feminism emerges: Sikhi is often articulated as an egalitarian tradition, and (gender) equality continues to be a central focus across many strands of feminist thought. Therefore, the dominance of gender equality as a guiding horizon reflects the confluence of these two traditions that Sikh feminism builds on.

Much of Sikh feminist critique and intervention, then, has worked to foreground the persistence of gender inequality in order to uncover and fill the gap between principle and practice, a gap that marks the distance from the horizon of gender equality. Across the heterogeneity of Sikh feminist thought, even where there is agreement that Sikhi is oriented toward gender equality in principle, lived practice often becomes the (archival) evidence to assess and expose the failings and limitations of Sikhi. In this way, while Sikh feminism seeks to critique and transcend the *dubidhaa* [duality] that exists across Sikh communities in the form of gender inequality, misogyny, and patriarchal violence, its interventions can themselves remain captured by and reliant on reproducing *dubidhaa* through oppositions like practice/principle or feminist/non-feminist. With the understanding that this entrapment in *dubidhaa* limits the liberatory potential of Sikh feminism, this paper is not written to critique Sikh feminists. Rather, it is indebted to both Sikh and feminist thought,

invested in finding a way through the trappings of *dubidhaa* in order to invite an expansion of Sikh feminism (re)oriented towards its own end.

Much of this *dubidhaa* coheres around defending and contesting the claim that Sikhi is egalitarian—a claim that cements the horizon of gender equality. Here, I want to interrogate that very claim: what are the limitations of translating Sikhi as egalitarian in the first place? The reduction of Sikhi to an egalitarian framework, as inherited by Sikh feminists, is shaped by the demands of secularism and liberalism, the forces that have long dominated the construction and understandings of both the Sikh and the feminist traditions. Scholars such as Talal Asad (2003), Wendy Brown (1995), and Saba Mahmood (2012) have traced how secularism and liberalism work together to frame and value equality and autonomy as inherently virtuous. Following their work, we can see how the claim that Sikhi is egalitarian and oriented towards equality universalizes, essentializes, and assigns a permanence to categories like gender and caste— terms through which parity can be conceptualized.

Sikh onto-epistemologies, however, are antagonistic to liberal conceptions of equality. They teach the impermanence of the temporal, and this includes all temporal categories including that of caste and gender. This impermanence is critiqued as falsehood (*ਕੁਰੂ*: *kūru*) which stands in contrast to Truth (*ਸਤਿ*), which, as the Gurus teach, characterizes only the Divine. Accordingly, the Guru emphasize Naam, or Identification with the Divine, as opposed to that which is transient, is the path to liberation (Sikh Research Institute, 2022; Sikh Research Institute, 2023). The body, in its impermanence, serves as a material iteration of *dubidhaa*, both a site for entrapment and an instrument to traverse that very duality (singh, 2024). The body can be mobilized as a vehicle towards, but does not serve as the source for, liberation. This perspective differs significantly from many strands of feminist thought—including those that inform a lot of Sikh feminist critique—which often (over)emphasize the body as the primary site of constitutive performance, subject formation, knowledge production, and the accrual (or denial) of freedom and rights.

Gender Abolition

An orientation towards gender abolition, I argue, offers a way through the *dubidhaa* that the framework of gender equality remains trapped in. The project of gender abolition, indebted to Black trans feminist thought, begins with the question “what if gender is a kind of prison?” to argue for the end of gender (and sexuality) altogether as we know it (Bey and Goldberg, 2022).

Gender abolition seeks to dismantle the foundations upon which the (carceral) system of gender rests—in other words, to disrupt the very ontology and the epistemology of gender. It calls for an “unfix[ation of] gender from essentialist moorings” (Bey, 2022, p. 3). This orientation also challenges the centrality of the body as a source of liberation. If the body is the primary site upon which oppressive forces construct our subjectivities, then gender abolition necessitates “finding liberation in the aspects that are not confined to the body” and in the “aspects of subjectivity that exceed and ooze out of the body” (Bey, 2022, p. 4).

In this process, gender abolition asks for the “dissolution of the things we may have come to regard as quite dear—namely, our given, and even reclaimed, identities.” This letting go is a part of detaching from the

categories that capture us, and also from the very landscapes in which the captures are mediated. It is a call toward the “eradication of every and all violent holdovers” (Bey, 2022). Gender abolition puts into question a lot of the assumptions that undergird (Sikh) feminist strands of thought, including that of biological determinism (Oyěwùmí, 1997); cisnormativity, which assigns a permanence to categories of “Man” and “Woman”; and the emphasis on corporeality to conceptualize and assess justice through representation, through demanding the destabilization of gender altogether.

Learning Gender Abolition from Sikhi

In seeking to learn gender abolition from Sikhi, I turn first to *Bani*, or the Wisdom of the Guru, to draw out a few insights. In this paper, I dwell on several *tukks* [lines] from *Ramkali ki Vaar*, revealed by Bhai Satta and Bhai Balwand. This *vaar* describes and praises the anointment of various Gurus to Guruship and was historically recited during the succession ceremonies of Guru Sahibs. In *Raag Ramkali* on *Ang* 967, they reveal:

*balvand khivī nek jan jisu bahutī chāu patrālī.
laṅgari daūlati vanḍīai rasu ammritu khīri ghiālī.
gursikhā ke mukh ujale manmukh thīe parālī.
pae kabūlu khasamm nālī jāṁ ghāl mardī ghālī.
mātā khivī sahu soi jini goi uṭhālī.*³

Balvand (signature): Khivi is a virtuous being whose shade is very leafy.

In the langar, wealth is distributed (along with) the essence of *amrit* (and) *khir* (enriched) with ghee.

The faces of the Guru’s Sikhs are radiant; the self-centered have become (dull like) paddy straw.

(Bhai Lahina) became accepted by (his) master, when (he) performed a manly deed.

The husband of Mata Khivi is that who has uplifted the universe.^{3, 4}

Although this *pauri* [verse] specifically praises Guru Angad Sahib, that praise is made possible through the celebration of Mata Khivi. Within brahminical landscapes, where notions of purity and pollution segregate castes, Guru Nanak Sahib’s institution of *langar* [community kitchen and collective eating] served two crucial purposes:

- 1) foreground care and care work, sustenance, and material redistribution as a spiritual practice, and
- 2) challenge caste, gender, and class-based hierarchies and separations in setting up the practice of sitting and eating together (*pangat*) as a prerequisite for spiritual congregation (*sangat*) (Kaur, 2023).

Mata Khivi, the wife of Guru Angad Sahib, was foundational in expanding and formalizing langar to the extent that langar came to popularly be known as “*Khivi da Langar*” (“Langar of Khivi”). These *tukks* offer valuable insights into what Sikhi can teach us about gender and gender abolition.

⁴ Translations from The Guru Granth Sahib Project by the Sikh Research Institute.

For one, ideas of manhood are explicitly evoked, as Guru Angad Sahib is praised by Satta and Balvand for gaining approval of Guruship through a “manly deed” that secures an acceptance from the Master. In other words, *submission* to the Master—to the Divine, to the Guru—is described as “manly.” By invoking the scripts of masculinity and manhood, these scripts are also simultaneously redefined: the performance of a masculine manhood is for the purpose of, in service to, and recognized in the first place as a “manhood” worthy of celebration if it leads to acceptance by the Husband Divine.⁵

The fact that the praise of Guru Angad Sahib is made possible through the praise of Mata Khivi is also insightful. The identification of Guru Angad Sahib as the husband of Mata Khivi, as opposed to the other way around, is a significant intervention that contests and flips the brahminical normative order, which defines a woman’s identity and value through the man. However, this contestation does not seek to secure the coherence of an autonomous (gendered) identity for Mata Khivi. For that matter, even the coherence of an autonomous identity for Guru Angad Sahib is challenged under Sikh onto-epistemologies, where Guru Angad Sahib is not viewed as an independent successor to Guru Nanak Sahib, but rather as an extension of the Guru. As Guru Nanak Sahib’s *ang* (limb), Guru Angad emerges at the very site where Bhai Lehna, the Sikh, dies through submergence into the Guru, thereby becoming the second Nanak.

Sikh onto-epistemologies orient away from procuring and securing a liberal, autonomous Self, which only further entrenches *dubidhaa*, marking separation from the Divine, and instead, they orient towards an un-becoming that seeks the death of the Sikh. In this process, Identification with the Divine (i.e. Naam, Guru) transes (i.e., transgenders, transitions, transfigures, transmutes, transforms) the Sikh into the Guru. The Guru becomes the vehicle through which the ontology of the Self is dissolved.

Thus, the contestation against the normative order that derives a woman’s value and identity through the man also seeks to destabilize and challenge the category and value of “man” and “manhood,” including the division, attribution, and stratification of labor and value enabled by gender in the first place. Care, sustenance, and nurturance are unfixed from constructions and attributions of femininity, and instead democratized as virtues that all must foster to move towards the Divine. Guru Angad Sahib’s praise as the sustainer and emancipator of the world is credited to Mata Khivi’s labor and leadership in the institution of *langar*, collapsing the separation not only between Guru Angad Sahib and Mata Khivi, but more broadly, between Guru Angad Sahib and Guru Nanak Sahib.

This is important to understand because asking why women are only recognized through their roles as mothers or wives, or why Mata Khivi is being collapsed with Guru Angad Sahib, reflects a desire to recuperate an autonomous identity for women. Within that framework, the very signifier of Mata Khivi as Mata, or “mother,” would be seen as evidence of an anti-feminist failing. However, following Saba Mahmood’s (2004) work on the agency of religious Muslim women, which complicates secular-liberal feminist criteria of freedom and equality that equate submission with oppression, the forms of submission

⁵ Here, I am referring to the very common metaphor across Gurbani that situates us all as human-brides separated from and longing for the Husband-Divine.

and collapsing presented here are examples of Identification with the Divine. They aim to subtract and dissolve, instead of accumulating and securing, a Selfhood.

Furthermore, Guru Angad Sahib's praise as the sustainer and emancipator of the world is credited to Mata Khivi's labor and leadership in the institution of langar. Although a critique could be made that associating Mata Khivi, and women today, with langar simply reinforces their relegation (yet again) to the kitchen, such a critique is limited if it misses the centrality of the kitchen to the sangat. In the Sikh tradition, the sovereignty of the kitchen precedes the sovereignty of the *darbar* [here, main hall of the Gurdwara]. In many ways, the sovereignty of the darbar rests upon the kitchen. This becomes more explicit through the *sakhi* where Emperor Akbar is asked by the third Nanak, Guru Amardas Sahib, to first eat langar—to sit on the same level and to eat the same food as everyone else—before visiting the Guru in their darbar, exemplifying the tradition of “pangat before sangat.”

The juxtaposition of Sikh onto-epistemologies and those mobilized by liberal feminists reveals a difference in moral frameworks: Guru Sahib was seeking to institute a very different moral order in which submission and the failure of the Self, rather than the securing of an autonomous subjecthood, is prioritized. In the house of Guru Nanak Sahib, it is not the “highest of the high” but the “lowest of the low” who emerge as truly victorious in gaining acceptance from the Sovereign Divine. Under a moral framework that prioritizes autonomy, the centrality of the institution of langar becomes unintelligible. However, the institution and principle of langar emerges as a foundation for Sangat itself, not only because of its political orientation toward serving the most marginalized, but also because of its capacity to foster humility and the lowering of one's Self to occupy the place of the “lowest of the low.”

By highlighting these few tukks, I do not intend to follow the practice of appropriating and decontextualizing isolated lines in service of personal agendas. Instead, these few tukks exemplify the pedagogical approach widely employed by the Guru, whereby temporal scripts (including those of gender and caste) are evoked, challenged, destabilized, and redefined. All temporal significations are evaluated, requalified, and redirected through the criterion of whether they lead one toward, or away from, the One Divine. Temporal categories like gender become a means through which one practices a form of *subtraction*—the subtraction of the Self and the attachments that define it. This understanding of gender as subtraction, rather than accumulation, orients one toward submission instead of autonomy, toward transcending (or transing) rather than seeking parity or coherence within existing temporal significations.

Sikhi's ontological (and epistemological) orientation toward subtraction and un-becoming reveals the limitations of critique in its capacity to move us toward Truth. Michel Foucault (1996), in his lecture “What is Critique?” and Judith Butler's (2004) response to it, both characterize critique as a “practice of freedom” that emerges from, interrogates, and is therefore limited by the onto-epistemological conditions and terms of the present. Critique, as they argue, poses a risk: in being bound to historicity, it can further cement the very parameters and categories it seeks to escape. The question of “what about women?” that seeks to locate and evaluate the subject of woman marked by sexed difference, risks reifying an essentialized rigidity rooted in biological determinism. While such critique is generative in inspiring movement and in tending to the important gap between principles and practices—a gap it seeks to expose and bridge,—it also risks: (1)

reproducing the very dualities that (Sikh) feminism projects are committed to transcending; and (2) reducing the always/never/un-becoming of Sikhi into a static repository to mine for answers or evaluate for perceived failures.

The limitations of critique reflect tensions between “competing moral frameworks,” as critique, arising from within a particular moral framework, often falls short in its translatability to another moral framework (Butler, 2013, p. 97). Here, I sit with Judith Butler’s (2013) question: “what would judgment look like that took place not ‘within’ one framework or another, but which emerged at the very site of conflict, clash, divergence, overlapping?” (p. 98). In closing, I want to return to the speculation of Guru Sahibs being queer, which not only provides insight into how gender and sexuality are understood in Sikhi, but also offers a glimpse into this very question of critique.

Beyond Critique

The speculation of Guru Sahibs as queer is not about searching for queer and trans people in the Sikh tradition through a question like “what about queers?” Instead, by destabilizing the attachments that define queerness and transness, or in other words, queering queerness and transing transness, this speculation becomes an insistence on seeing queer and trans people everywhere in Sikhi. In becoming unstuck from the heuristic of loss and scarcity in which critique often operates, and following Anjali Arondekar’s (2023) work, this unverifiable speculation becomes a practice of the heuristic of abundance, or, articulated through Sikh modes, a practice of *chardi kala* [Rising Power].⁶ Such speculations about Guru Sahibs as queer and trans are not only mobilized by queer and trans Sikhs to affirm themselves or seek inclusion; they also lay claim to the dynamic contingencies that shape and unshape the Sikh tradition itself. In their interview with the Sikh LGBTQIA+ Oral History Archive, Jaspreet Sangha (2023) speaks of meeting Sikhs “who don’t know that they’re Sikhs, who don’t have the vocabulary to explain that they’re Sikh” mobilizing the instability inherent to Sikhi to insist on seeing the Sikh (and by extension, the Guru) outside of any fixed biological, gendered, caste, cultural, religious, or national categories. Thus, the speculation of queer and trans Sikhs and Gurus refuses to refract queerness and transness through the prism of embodiment, representation, or, more broadly, temporality and historicity, categories that would further subjectify, subjugate, and delimit the queer, the trans, and the Sikh.

Speculations, then, can signify a mode of engagement that exposes and dwells with and against the carceral grasp of historicity. Saidiya Hartman (2008) offers “critical fabulation” as a method of working within and against the limitations of historicity and representation, which in the case of the transatlantic slave trade, is overdetermined by and impossible to represent outside of the grammar of violence and loss. Hartman demonstrates how such a speculative method challenges the insatiable, impossible desire for historical recuperation or restoration by necessitating a “refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure” (p. 12). Such gaps, that evade historical enclosure, expose and challenge the coherent integrity of the Self and hold the potential to reconfigure the self, subjectivity, and relationality.

⁶ Translation of *chardi kala* from the Sikh Research Institute.

Donna Haraway (2016), in her argument for feminist speculative fabulations, describes speculations as a method of sympoiesis--a "making-with" that "enlarges and displaces autopoiesis and all other self-forming and self-sustaining system fantasies" (p. 125). In this way, the speculation of Guru Sahibs as queer and trans becomes a sympoietic move, whereby queer and trans Sikhs insist on and materialize a central relation to the Guru and the Sangat. This relation reconfigures their queerness and transness as a practice of Sikhi, and their Sikhi as a practice of queerness and transness. Such a speculation operationalizes gender and sexuality outside of dominant Eurocentric, cisheteronormative scripts, enacting a gender and sexuality whose function is to cultivate a relationship to Guru Sahib, or in other words, to cultivate Guruship. Rather than serving reproduction and brahminical white cis/heteropatriarchy, gender and sexuality are transformed into sites and means through which queer and trans Sikhs to learn, claim, and embody *patshahi* [divine sovereignty]. In this process, dominant notions of gender and sexuality as properties, claimed by and constitutive of, the bounded self are destabilized and rerouted toward understandings of them as relational practices— means of "making-with" and "becoming-with" the Sikh tradition.

Such a move aligns with the strategies employed by Guru Sahibs that evoked, proliferated, destabilized, and rerouted the very categories and scripts like that of gender and caste. Sikhi is pointing toward a mode of critique that seeks to question and destabilize the very intelligibility and coherence of the moral frameworks from which critique and its terms emerge. By proliferating each moral framework and interrogating its stability, the very grounds upon which the separation and categorization of "competing moral frameworks" coheres are put into question through such an insistence.

What possibilities emerge from the insistence that the Sikh is everywhere, that queerness and transness is everywhere in Sikhi, and that women, too, are everywhere in Sikhi? What possibilities emerge from mapping womanhood onto Guru Sahib themselves? Here, I am wary of what Biddy Martin (1994) has described as "antifoundationalist celebrations of queerness [that] rely on their own projections of fixity, constraint, or subjection onto a fixed ground, often onto feminism or the female body, in relation to which queer sexualities become figural, performative, play," through which "operations of misogyny disappear from view" (p, 104). Martin cautions against the valorization of mobility and transversal of boundaries that ends up obscuring the particularity and materiality of patriarchal violence. Hence, the speculative turn I am suggesting must remain responsible and accountable to, as opposed to dismissive of, particularity. In other words, speculative feminism and situated feminism must exist in a productive tension and entanglement (Truman, 2019), both keenly attuned to the violences of misogyny and patriarchy that govern the structures of gender and sexuality, *and* alert to the configurations of gender and sexuality that are illegible to and exceed the normative frameworks within which the critique is often contained. Such a mode of engagement can give way to undoing the overdetermined grasp of gender on us and in developing Sikh onto-epistemologies of gender that differ from Eurocentric and universalized notions of gender (Martin, 1994; Barker, 2017). This approach could reorient the project of Sikh feminism by prompting the development of moral and ethical frameworks than those currently being deployed, more specifically, by drawing on and building from frameworks grounded in Sikh onto-epistemologies that demand a fundamentally different conceptualization of gender.

An engagement that presumes and builds from the authority of Sikh onto-epistemologies would necessitate an interrogation of secularism in structuring our analytical horizons. As Joan Wallach Scott reminds us, the very idea of gender inequality as rooted in religion is an innovation of secularism, which functions to: 1) naturalize and justify gender difference and inequality through the logics of reason and science; 2) obscure the centrality of gender inequality in articulating and maintaining the dualistic binaries between public/private, man/woman, universal/particular, and religious/secular; 3) construct and discipline the very category of religion by divorcing it from spheres of political economy; and 4) displace the violence of gender inequality in secular societies in order to secure secularism's claim as the sphere in which equality and emancipation are imaginable (Scott, 2018; Scott, 2013; Asad, 2018). Secular logic also demands coherence, visibility, and representation as preconditions for autonomy and liberation, and constitute the very grid of intelligibility that frames and enables the articulation and circulation of discourses on injury and blasphemy (Asad, 2013; Mahmood, 2013). Stated more directly, Sikh feminist critiques that center gender inequality as evidence of Sikhi's failings, and position Sikhi as the primary source of women's subjugation, risk reifying the very gendered logics of secularism that frame and obscure how Sikhi, gender, and gender (in)equality are understood.

These gendered logics of secularism are not so different from those that frame and facilitate the charge of blasphemy against the speculation of Guru Sahibs as queer and trans. If blasphemy signifies a transgression of limits, then the charge of blasphemy reveals the operation of those very limits, and the normative onto-epistemological frameworks that establish and allow for the contestation of those limits (Mahmood, 2013). Such a charge presumes a certain definition of the sacred, along with delimitations of what constitutes the appropriate and authoritative terms of reverence. Each of these presumptions is entangled with, and secured through, gendered logics that govern not only the coherence and recognition of religious subjectivity, but also who may access the Divine, and how. The charges of blasphemy circulating on the secular landscapes of Twitter point less to theological dispute and more to the significance of secularism in shaping the terms through which Sikhi is debated, delimited, and defended. These responses echo secularism's demand for a distinct and bounded "religion," governed by specific and gendered norms of principle and practice. Many of the responses to the speculation of Guru Sahib as queer or trans did not objection to the existence of queer and trans Sikhs— so long as queerness and transness were framed as privatized identities or individualized "choices." What was deemed blasphemous, rather, was the act of "projecting" them onto the Guru Sahibs. In other words, the objection was not to queer and trans Sikhs themselves, but to the relationality they enacted with Guru Sahib, one that refused liberal individualism and insisted on intimacy and identification with Guru Sahib. This distinction reveals secularism emphasis on individual choice, which renders unintelligible forms of engagement and attachment that exceed liberal scripts (Mahmood, 2013). The living relationship queer and trans Sikhs enact with Guru Sahib and Guruship through such speculation exemplifies an excess that secularism marks as blasphemous.

If the analysis that gender serves as the means through which relationality to the Divine is disciplined, policed, and rendered intelligible or illegible, within both religious and secular registers, is already predetermined by, and overdetermined with, secular onto-epistemologies, then what other meanings of gender can we think with, learn from, build on, and mobilize? What are alternative meanings and functions

of gender when it is not in service of reproduction and to white and brahminical cis/heteropatriarchy?⁷ What is gender when it is oriented towards the Divine, towards the Guru? A project of Sikh feminism that takes up these questions would reposition the space between principles and practices not as a “problem space,” but as a space of our making and unmaking, within which the carceral limits that both construct and capture us can be traversed and undone.⁸

⁷ This question is inspired by Jack Halberstam who writes “The transbiological element here has to do with the alternative meanings of gender when biology is not in the service of reproduction and patriarchy.” See Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁸ Provocation inspired by Rajbir Singh Judge who writes, “We must remember what we have *learned* in the Sikh tradition to rethink the trappings of the ego that reinscribe the very contours we wish to erase—the separations that we consider divine gifts.” See Judge, *Prophetic Maharaja*.

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