

# The Novels of Bhai Vir Singh and the Imagination of Sikh Identity, Community, and Nation

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**his chapter examines three novels of Bhai Vir Singh: *Sundri*, *Bijai Singh*, and *Satwant Kaur* and the ways in which they shaped notions of Sikh identity, community, and nation. Bhai Vir Singh, the ‘Father of the Punjabi novel’, authored them during the Singh Sabha movement, in which he was a crucial player. Singh intended the novels to reform and empower the Sikh community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is the period that I call the first ‘life’ of the novels. The second ‘life’ of these novels is realized in the 1980s when they are translated into English and distributed by Sikh booksellers in the United States. Sikh community groups used these translations to educate and invigorate young Sikhs settled and raised in countries outside of the Punjab. I argue here that these novels in some measure provide narratives that facilitate the imagination of a Sikh world and its inhabitants with the Punjab as its origin.

I expound on the important features that distinguish the first lives of these novels and contextualize the texts and their author in the Singh Sabha period. I will examine how the narratives

serve to delineate Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim identities and establish ideological and political connections between these three groups. Crucially, the central figures of these novels are extraordinary women who cook, clean, nurse, kill and die for their faith and the *panth* (Sikh community). Therefore, I will explore the narrative functions of these heroines and the ways in which women are posited as the root of the family, panth, *qaum* [lit., 'people who stand together], community, and nation. Later, I turn to the second 'life' of these novels, manifest in the translation endeavors in the 1980s. Notably, the translations appear during this time frame, contemporaneously with the agitations for Khalistan. Hence, it is very difficult to view these translations outside of the political environments to which they are rooted. Having situated these novels in their contemporary contexts, I explore those narrative features that are both useful for imagining the Sikh world and particularly easy grist for the mills of transnational nationalisms.<sup>1</sup>

#### BHAI VIR SINGH AND THE POLITICAL NOVEL

The Punjabi novel, in its conception, was a vehicle for Singh Sabha ideology and Vir Singh was the foremost writer of the Singh Sabha movement. As the project and ideology of the Singh Sabhas have been documented elsewhere (Oberoi 1994, 1988; Kapur 1986; McLeod 1989; Fox 1985), my notes here will be brief. The first Singh Sabha was established in 1873, in response to four Sikh students at the Mission School in Amritsar who had announced their intention of taking Christian baptism. The second followed in 1879 in Lahore and several satellites followed. Within the Singh Sabhas, the Tat Khalsa emerged as a specifically religious reformist sector and promulgated historiographies and doctrine that brought great change both in the ways that Sikhs viewed themselves, and the way that non-Sikhs came to imagine Sikhs.

The Singh Sabhas, and the Tat Khalsa in particular, sought to forge a new and distinct identity for the Sikh panth, distinguishing Sikhs from what they decided was Hindu, and to homogenize a polyphonous tradition by squelching dissent within. The identity propounded was specifically that of the Khalsa,<sup>2</sup> instituted by the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh on Baisakhi in 1699 at

Anandpur. The Singh Sabhas began Sikh newspapers for the purpose of spreading polemical material and promoting Punjabi as the sacred language of the Sikhs. In 1894, Bhai Vir Singh began the Khalsa Tract Society to disseminate polemic religious material. In 1908, the Khalsa Handbill Society was founded to reach areas that were not accessible to or influenced by the Singh Sabha chapters. These endeavors were blatant co-optations of the Christian Missionary enterprises and were commonplace features of nineteenth century religious/reform movements in South Asia. In 1902, the Chief Khalsa Diwan (CKD) came into existence to coordinate the efforts of the various Singh Sabha satellites.<sup>3</sup>

Bhai Vir Singh, though he is most known for his poetry, wrote four novels that have been considered outstanding examples of Punjabi fiction. *Sundri* (1898/1899),<sup>4</sup> *Bijai Singh* (Parts I and II, 1900), (Dulai 1975: 49); *Satwant Kaur* ( Part I in 1900, Part II in 1927 ), (Khosla 1984: ‘Chronology’) and a fourth novel *Baba Naudh Singh* (serialized from October 1917 to December 1921), which is unrelated to the trilogy that the first three comprise (Khosla 1984: 14; Oberoi 1994: 332).<sup>5</sup> The first three are historical accounts, with similar ideological agendas and historical contexts.<sup>6</sup> Vir Singh, in writing this trilogy, claimed to have had numerous intentions, all of which were coincident with Singh Sabha objectives, including encouraging Sikhs to embrace their heroic and important past, expunge corruption from their religious practice, and embrace ‘orthodox’ Sikh teachings and cultivate the Punjabi language as the sacred language of the Sikhs (Dulai 1975: 50–1).<sup>7</sup>

#### THE NOVELS AND THEIR HEROINES

The three historical novels are situated in the eighteenth century, depicting the bravery of the Khalsa Sikhs as they struggled against Mughal oppression. Importantly, for their future redeployment in the Sikh world in the 1980s, they occupy the historical space between the death of the tenth guru, Gobind Singh, and the establishment of the Khalsa Raj under Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Hence the target readers, Sikhs, would know that the martyrdom and valour would eventually come to fruition with the establishment of the Khalsa Raj. As he explained in

the introduction to *Bijai Singh*, this is a particularly important period of time for *Khalsa* history. It is a period of Khalsa–Sikh martial skill and bravery, a period from which Sikhs should derive pride and therefore aspire to the Khalsa. Hence, by writing these novels, Sikhs will be proud to be *Khalsa* Sikhs. This historical location is important because it was Guru Gobind’s Khalsa that is believed to have been subject to Mughal persecution. Faced with the Mughal intentions to annihilate the Khalsa, Vir Singh narrated how the Khalsa Singhs, by tenaciously clinging to their Khalsa identity, survive extinction. Vir Singh hoped to inspire such loyalty to the Khalsa at the turn of the twentieth century.

## THE NOVELS

### Sundri

This novel narrates the experiences of a young girl, Surasti, who is the daughter of a wealthy Hindu family in a quotidian Punjabi village. The narrative begins when the recently-married Surasti is kidnapped by a Mughal Nawab before she goes to her in-laws. Her father and husband beg the Nawab for her release, but, to no avail. However, when Surasti escapes, the Nawab and returns to her maternal home, they send her away fearing the reprisals of the angry Nawab. Meanwhile, her brother, Balwant Singh has returned to the village after taking *amrit* (initiation) and joining the ranks of the Khalsa fighting the Mughals in the forest. Furious with his family’s decision, he takes Surasti to the forest with him. However, en route to rejoin the Khalsa, they are captured by the same Nawab. Surasti is to be converted and become the Nawab’s wife and Balwant is to convert as well. However, the Khalsa army storms in and rescues both upon which they all return to the Khalsa camp. Surasti then requests that she stay and serve the Khalsa, *as their sister*, in the forest. Soon thereafter, Surasti takes *amrit* and becomes Sundri. Most of the text subsequently involves Sundri eluding the lustful Nawab and exhibiting behaviour that Vir Singh believes is the model for contemporary Sikh women.

One day, Sundri stumbles across a wounded Muslim soldier, who, upon recovery, kidnaps her for the Nawab. Her honour, virginity, and faith are saved by her own piety and a timely rescue

by her brother. The narrative digresses into historical mode, featuring a host of historical figures such as Lakhpat Rai, Kaura Mal, and Surat Singh. The use of historical characters gives the illusion that the book is not fiction, but a historical account. (This illusion is further fostered by the use of footnotes. All three of the novels use these techniques to elide fact and fiction.) There are numerous plot twists, all of which are generally used to demonstrate the ruthlessness of Muslims, the pusillanimity of Hindus and the valour and piety of Sikh men and women in the keeping of their faith. In the end, Sundri is wounded and seriously ill and again in the care of the same licentious Nawab. This time, once she is rescued by her brother and the other Singhs, she dies. Up to her death, Sundri exhibits extreme piety and desire for the Guru Granth Sahib. In her last breath, she exhorts her brothers to continue the fight.

This text discursively articulates distinct Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh communities. Muslims are notable for their ruthlessness, killing and kidnapping women, and torturing and killing Khalsa Sikhs because they refuse to accept Islam. Hindus are weak and effeminate and return their abducted daughters to their captors—after grovelling at the feet of the captors fails. They refuse to help the Khalsa openly or sell food to the Khalsa; but they do *accept* the help of the Khalsa in time of need. Sometimes they collude with the murderous Mughals. Sikhs are brave and valiant. The Khalsa army, much smaller in number than their Mughal foes, succeeds in miraculous victories. They are the antitheses of Muslims and Hindus and remain firm in their faith under the most difficult of circumstances.<sup>8</sup> These categories or identities are not necessarily static or fixed by birth. For instance, an effeminate Hindu can become a mighty Singh (lion) by taking amrit and becoming a Khalsa Sikh. Examples of the amrit transformation abound: Balwant, Surasti turned Sundri, a hapless Kshatriya couple who endured the tribulation of captivity.

Sundri's is a model of piety and sacrifice which Sikh women should strive to imitate and she is a tool by which men are incited to heroic behaviour. Much of *Sundri's* narrative is interrupted by various authorial exhortations for women to reform themselves and abjure heterodox Sikh religious practice such as believing in charms, worshiping at shrines, and languishing in luxury and comfort. I contend that these exhortations clearly demonstrate

a significant contempt for his female contemporaries whom Vir Singh posits as the root of corruption, which he believed permeated the Sikh community.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Sundri's heroism is manifest at the expense of the very women she is *supposedly* inspiring. In fact, Vir Singh considered the contemporary women of the qaum to be lax, superstitious, apostate, and spoiled, leading themselves and their *sons* and *husbands* to hell. In this novel, women are exhorted to save the panth by taking amrit and becoming Singhnis like the fictional Sundri who saves herself by leaving her Hindu roots behind and embracing the Sikh future. Notably, Vir Singh's use of a female protagonist chastises and questions the masculinity of Sikh men. While Sundri is clearly domestic (cooking, nursing, fetching water), she also has a decidedly militant mode. She lives in the forest with the Khalsa. When she is attacked by a group of Turks, she kills one with her dagger before she is captured again. In the final analysis, what man could possibly compare himself favorably to this protagonist Sundri?

While Vir Singh, in this novel evinces disgust with the behaviour of his female contemporaries, Vir Singh *did* advocate social reform with respect to women. The novel chastises those who practise female infanticide and reminds the reader that the Gurus gave women equal rights. While men who mistreat women and consider them their inferior are discredited in the novel, Vir Singh forcefully exhorts women to be pure and faithful.

### Bijai Singh

This novel chronicles the trials and tribulations of Bijai Singh and his wife Sheel Kaur at the hands of a host of historical characters like Mir Mannu. Like Sundri, Bijai Singh is not born into Sikh family. Rather, Bijai Singh is born Ram Lal, the son of the historical Diwan Lakhat Rai. By taking amrit, the scrawny Ram Lal is transfigured into the courageous, albeit humble, Singh. His conversion to Sikhism turns his family upside down and he leaves the house with his Sahajdhari Sikh wife Sheel Kaur, and their son. Upon striking out, his wife is injured in the first round of battle. She is superficially hit in the belly, and Bijai Singh must stay behind the Khalsa Dal to care for her. The narrative weaves in and out of their various bouts with captivity and separation. Upon her capture, manoeuvred by a corrupt

pandit, Sheel Kaur becomes the object of ubiquitous Mughal lust. Her life is spared as she is targeted to become his wife, pending coerced conversion that awaits all three of them. She is imprisoned with her son, while Bijai is sent to a separate cell. This is the beginning of their separation. Much of the narrative takes place during this separation, allowing both Sheel and Bijai to be the alternating protagonists of the story.

Sheel and her son are imprisoned with other women and children who are hideously tortured.<sup>10</sup> Often, the author enters the narrative to laud the strength of these women; true Singhnis would rather see their husbands and sons killed than forsake their faith. These women, as opposed to Bhai Vir Singh's contemporaries, are not superstitious or bent on engaging in Hindu rituals. Mir Mannu wants Sheel as his wife and tortures her sister Singhnis to convince her to accept his offer. For several chapters, the exploits of Sheel Kaur's spiritual strength are narrated. When the narrative returns to Bijai Singh, he is saving women from Muslim atrocities. Though he has heard that his wife has become Mir Mannu's bride, he does not believe it, for, '[i]t is impossible for a Sikh woman to live with violated honour' (Duggal 1983: 109). He proceeds to get her. However, Mir's wife begins to desire and pursue Bijai. This is a strange inversion of the predatory Muslim male sexuality that underlies and compels the narratives of the trilogy. Mir's wife, the Begum, is the only woman in this trilogy who pursues her sexual desires. Finally, upon escaping, Bijai Singh dies as a consequence of battle wounds. Sheel Kaur too dies upon uttering her last words: 'Nanak, they alone are true *Satis* who die with the sheer shock of separation' (ibid 165). The novel concludes with Vir Singh informing his audience that Bijai's orphaned son grows to be a great hero.

Like, *Sundri*, much of this volume is comprised of didactic authorial musings. The narrator specifically explains to the reader that they should learn from Sheel Kaur, whether they be man or woman. The narrator, referencing Sheel's various predicaments, cautions Sikhs to beware the lure of other, clearly false, religions and to remain steadfast to the truth of Sikh precepts. At various places in the novel, the narrator reminds Sikh women that it is their sacred duty to protect their honour. Both *Sundri* and *Bijai Singh* reference the success of Christian missionary efforts and

suggest that the weakness of Sikh women facilitate this. As such the novels encourage Sikh women to summon up the strength of imaginary women to combat the influx of Christianity. Indeed, the narrator actually explains that books like *Sundri* are positive influences in assisting women to persevere in their Sikh *dharam*. However, the narrator is also clear that men must also honour these obligations.

Curiously, Sheel is a Sahajdhari Sikh, perhaps a narrative trope intended to gloss the very serious Singh Sabha question as to where the Sahajdhari should be located in the Khalsa panth.<sup>11</sup> By virtue of marriage the Sahajdhari Sheel is included conjugally in the Khalsa panth. The separate but not-quite equal status of Sheel Kaur, when compared to the *kirpan*-swinging amritdhari Sundri, is manifest in several ways. First, unlike Sundri, Sheel and Bijai do not immediately join the Khalsa Army in the forest because of her initial injury. Second, Sheel Kaur does not engage in active battle; rather, she is crafty and uses ruses to escape her various predicaments. Third, when Sheel Kaur is in Mir Mannu's prison, various female prisoners exhort her to be like Sundri. Hence, intertextually, our Sahajdhari heroine is told to take her amritdhari predecessor as a model by which she can save herself. Fourth, she dies not as a consequence of battle wounds; such a death befits a Khalsa Sikh like Sundri. Rather, Sheel the 'true sati' collapses upon her husband's death. Note that like Sundri, Sheel cannot return to the life of a householder; she too must die.

### Satwant Kaur

Unlike the other protagonists, Satwant Kaur is born into a Gursikh ('orthodox') family. Satwant, like Sundri, is captured by a Muslim soldier she was assisting. The reader learns the details of her abduction by Vir Singh's use of flashback and Satwant's own recounting of her travails with other characters. Satwant is sold into servitude in Kabul and becomes the private servant of a Khan's wife, Fatima. The Khan is an abusive alcoholic for which his wife seeks recourse with the Amir of Kabul. Much to the Begum's dismay, the Amir orders his execution. The Begum relies excessively upon Satwant in all spheres of life. Satwant even attacks the Khan and wrestles him to the ground

when he attempts to kill Fatima. Ultimately, it is Satwant who manoeuvres to save the Khan's life through a gender-bending, cross-dressing escapade. He returns to Fatima, a reformed and doting husband. The Amir, of course, is amazed by her strength and courageousness which puts the men in his court to shame. He decides that she will convert to Islam and become his wife. Ultimately, Satwant escapes and reaches Fatima, who hides her in a secret chamber and cares for her surreptitiously. Fatima, in the course of Satwant's self-imposed captivity, comes to be exceedingly dependent on Satwant, who has become Fatima's protector and instructor in Sikhism.

Finally, dressed as Jaswant Singh, Satwant joins a caravan heading to the Punjab; to escape inspection, Jaswant must take on the dress of a Muslim man. In the caravan, she meets a soldier, Agha Khan, who is drawn to Jaswant because s/he is reciting Gurbani. Trusting Jaswant, Agha Khan entrusts her/him with the safety of his nanny, Saeen, who is also dressed as a Muslim man. Saeen reveals that she is a Punjabi Hindu woman who is sympathetic to the Sikh cause. She later reveals that Agha Khan is none other than a Sikh, the son of a famous Sikh ruler whose wife was captured. Khan's mother was killed, as she refused to convert, and he was raised by the cruel and ruthless Pathan, Hasan Khan. Saeen, the faithful servant of Agha Khan's mother, was charged with raising Agha Khan to, one day, rejoin the service of the Khalsa. Saeen is now endangered as Hasan Khan is worried that she will tell Agha of his past.

Upon learning that he was a Sikh, Agha Khan enthusiastically took to serving the panth which he does vigorously. When they arrive in Amritsar, Jaswant tells Saeen and Agha Khan (now an amritdhari Sikh named Alamba Singh) that she is really Satwant Kaur. They are obviously shocked and express amazement that there was never even a hint of her girlhood. Back in Amritsar, people are amazed that Alamba Singh is alive and is a courageous Sikh, though he was raised as a Muslim all of his life. It is proposed that Alamba and Satwant marry, but Alamba, horribly embarrassed, insists upon the brotherly-sisterly affection between them. Satwant dedicates herself to a life of celibacy and community servitude. All are reunited with their families and everyone lives happily ever after.

Like Sundri, as Jaswant Singh, Satwant challenges men to master the virtues that she embodies. As Satwant, she is a role model for women, the appropriate companion for the 'new' Sikh man. Like Sundri, she does not become the marital companion and re-producer of new Sikhs. Rather, she refuses to return to the fold of the householder and pursues her life as a *sewakar* (one who performs *sewa*).

#### SUMMARIZING THE FIRST LIVES OF THESE TEXTS

All of these heroines are radically uprooted from a stable familial structure: Sundri and Satwant Kaur are taken from their parental homes and Sheel Kaur is taken from her husband's realm. Nikky Singh alleges that Sundri, and perhaps by extension we can include the other heroines in the trilogy, defiantly rides in the forest alongside men. Nikky Singh argues that Vir Singh contrasts Sundri's rebellious freedom to the tortured women held under Mughal captivity. But does she ride *equally* beside men? Even though, when necessary, she does kill, she is still the domestic locus of the Sikhs in the forest. Clearly, these non-householding women are not the reproducers of his vision of Sikh culture. Moreover, the heroic deeds of these heroines are manifest only as the result of their continual response to the lustful pursuits of various Muslim men. Ultimately, having left the realm of 'patriarchal civilization' for the liminality of the 'uncultivated world' of the forest, they can never return. Their options are death/martyrdom or to become sewa-performing ascetics. Perhaps it could be that their deaths, or, choices to remain sewakar constitute resistance to 'patriarchal civilization'. However, they never leave that realm by choice, but by abduction. Therefore, it does not seem to me that the authorial disposal of these liminal heroines is a productive site upon which we may posit heroic agency.

This trilogy does much to distinguish boundaries between Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims and to characterize them by behaviours. However, while Muslims are rapists and killers and Hindus are effeminate, these designations are not necessarily static. A Hindu can always take amrit and become a Singh like Surasti/Sundri, Ram Lal/Bijai Singh, and Agha Khan/Alamba Singh. However, it is interesting that the only nominal Muslim,

converted via amrit, was by birth a Sikh. This trilogy contributes to establishing Khalsa hegemony within the panth, by narrating the persecution and martyrdom of the Khalsa panth. In *Bijai Singh*, Sahajdharis are brought in the Khalsa fold, but feminized and subjected to the masculine field of the Khalsa. All three texts address the lack of solidarity in the panth and the forsaking of Singh dharam among the author's contemporaries. The state of women is posited as the root of this rot, which must be apprehended. The 'Singhly' behaviour of women is to be established as the source of the panth, while it is the bravery and heroism of men that is to protect the panth. Moreover, men are saddled with the obligation to designate themselves as Khalsa by wearing the five Ks generally, but the turban specifically. Though women are also supposed to wear the five Ks, few wear the turban. In all three of these texts, the Punjab is posited as the *desh* (homeland/Punjab) of the Singhs. In *Satwant Kaur*, *desh* is meaningfully understood in terms of its counterpart, *pardesh* (Kabul).

#### THE SECOND LIVES OF THE TEXT: A NEW SIKH WORLD AND NEW SIKH NATIONALISMS

While highly speculative, this section contends that these novels, translated into English and circulating throughout a globalized Sikh world, in some measure had utility in the re-imagining of a transnational diasporic Sikh world. Translated into English and circulating in the 1980s during the most intense phase of Khalistan agitation, these novels helped to redefine the boundaries of the Sikh community at a time when boundaries were increasingly being challenged. It may be said that these novels by themselves are an insignificant artifact of Sikh reproduction of their community in English-speaking countries. *In situ*, however, these novels can be seen as one conveyance of Sikh identity production that works in conjunction with several others, similarly intended, imaginative instruments at the conjuncture of mediascapes and ideoscapes (Appadurai 1990). For this reason, it is useful to contextualize these English translations in their contemporary social and political ecologies. Note that *Sundri* and *Bijai Singh* were published in English in 1983 and again in 1988. Ujagar Singh Bawa first published his

English *Satwant Kaur* in 1987 and 1988. The first two were issued in the midst of pre-operation Blue Star Khalistan agitations. *Satwant Kaur* was translated after Operation Bluestar and the subsequent anti-Sikh riots in November of 1984. Sikhs all over the world were jolted by this event, even those Sikhs who were not previously supporters of the Khalistan movement. Hence, these novels emerged at a critical time in the recent history of the Sikhs. Many of the themes of these novels lend themselves easily to being re-deployed in this particular environment.

The retooling of these novels for a new Sikh world are explicit objectives in the efforts of at least two of the translators of these novels. *Sundri* was translated by Dr Gobind Singh Mansukhani and *Bijai Singh* by Devinder Singh Duggal; both were published as a set, courtesy of the Sri Guru Nanak Satsang Sabha Gurdwara Katong of Singapore. *Satwant Kaur's* translation was entirely a 'diasporic' enterprise. Whereas the translators of the other texts seem to be working in India under the auspices of the Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan in Delhi, Ujagar Singh Bawa translated *Satwant Kaur* from Washington DC. Bawa, a professor of economics in Pennsylvania by profession, is highly involved and structurally important in the Washington Sikh Center, under whose organizational auspices the book was first published.

I asked Bawa in an interview why he translated this text. He told me that 'we were running out of books on Sikhism in English'.<sup>12</sup> Of course, these texts are not books on Sikhism, they are fiction. But Bawa has made, obliquely, an important note on the genre of these texts and the format in which Vir Singh wrote them. As historical fiction, they are footnoted. Though the exact footnotes are not retained in the English text, the translators still retained the footnoted format, though their exact notes differ. Given that the narrative landscapes are populated with legions of historical characters that are readily locatable in *The New Cambridge History of India: The Sikhs of the Punjab*, it is easy to question the fictional-ness of the protagonists. These footnoted novels appear to present an interesting case of 'genre-bending'. We can only assume that the translators of the texts had a similar opinion of the footnoted originals, as they retained the same structure in their own texts.<sup>13</sup>

What intentions underlie these translated texts? All three texts are armed with explanatory prefaces. For instance, Harbans

Singh wrote in *Sundri*'s 'Foreword' that the Singapore Gurdwara 'have [sic] taken up a programme to get Bhai Vir Singh's works translated into English and other languages, publish them and make the [sic] available to the people in foreign lands' (Mansukhani 1983).<sup>14</sup> Devinder Singh Duggal writes in his 'Introduction' to *Bijai Singh* that he was motivated to translate the volume by many of the same passions with which Vir Singh wrote the novel, in the hopes that it would contribute the 'moral regeneration of the Sikh Youth' (Translator's Note, unnumbered). Similarly Sat Jiwan Singh Khalsa, an Attorney at Law in New York, opined in Bawa's 'Foreword' that

the paucity of historic information about the Sikh way of life heightens the import of Bhai Vir Singh's works in terms of both their inherent value as historical accounts and as educational sources for all. As Sikhs increasingly become an international community and the ability of succeeding generations to be literate in Punjabi wanes, at least in present times, the importance of Dr. Bawa's translation of this classical work of Vir Singh is obvious (Bawa 1988: vii).

Bawa writes of his own work that:

Besides, selfishly, there is a dire dirth [sic] of English books for our children in *America, Canada, United Kingdom, and elsewhere in the western hemisphere* where Sikh children, for no fault of theirs, lack adequate preparation and facility in learning to read and write Punjabi....It is paramount for the Sikh children to be treated with religious and political episodes of our past, fictional or real, so that they are able to structure a perspective of their own. With these aims and constraints, *Satwant Kaur*, by Dr. Vir Singh has been translated (Bawa: ix).

It seems reasonably evident that these texts were translated with many of the same intentions as Bhai Vir Singh's in writing the novels. Of course, the scope and dispersion of the panth had radically changed by the time these translations came into existence. The language contention is no longer whether Sikhs should learn Punjabi at the expense of Hindi or Urdu, but how should children be taught in the Sikh world—be that American, Canadian, in the United Kingdom, or elsewhere in the western hemisphere? Should they be taught Punjabi at all? How can they know their history if they don't know their language? In these texts, the Punjabi language and retention of the Khalsa five Ks are the markers by which the Sikh identity is gauged to be self-replicating or disintegrating.

These texts, apparently aimed at young teens, with some other imaginative tools, provide a means to link second generation Sikhs to the Punjab, a land that they may or may not have seen. The Punjab, as all of these translators maintain, is the source of Sikh identity, yet Punjab is far removed from most of these children's lives. These novels are one of the means to bring children into the world of the Punjab. Hence, these novels may help to imagine a Sikh world both vertically through time, trans-historically, and laterally through distance, transnationally. Sikh pre-teens, and teens while reading these novels, are exhorted to compare their lives with both the protagonists and the audiences posited by Bhai Vir Singh. While imagining themselves as a part of the historical panth, they are also drawn into the geographical imagination of the panth. Sikhs in New York giving their speech on Satwant Kaur are invited to move through Kabul with her to get 'home' to the Punjab. It seems, therefore, that the 1980s is a moment of redeployment of these texts during which time the textualization of the 'homeland' and 'nation' becomes particularly salient.

These novels also seem to have particular utility in defining a Sikh homeland (that is, the Punjab) as well as particular notions of Sikh nationhood. The translations are replete with references to the Punjab as 'my country' (*desh*) and fellow Sikhs (*qaum*) as 'countrymen.'<sup>15</sup> In many ways, these Punjabi words are translated through the language of nationalism in ways that are not entirely faithful to the original Punjabi. This is consistent with Dusenbery's observation that a subtle means of reconfiguring the Sikhs as an ethnoterritorial community is through the 'increasing substitution in Sikh discourse of the Persian loan word *qaum* (lit., people who stand together) or the English word 'nation' in reference to the Sikh collectivity' (26).<sup>16</sup>

In translation, these novels create a discursive homeland for the Sikhs. *Satwant Kaur* in this regard is the most powerful as the protagonist is held in Kabul, far away from the Punjab. Satwant laments that she does not know the language there, though over time she does learn. For her survival, and for her family's survival, she must return to her *ghar* (home/house), *desh*, *watan* (homeland). These novels replicate a common theme that resonated throughout much of the 1980s that the Punjab must

be the source of identity of the Sikh world - even if it is not in actual practice.

In the context of Khalistani aspirations, an exceedingly important feature of these texts is that the narratives are situated between the death of Guru Gobind Singh and the establishment of the Khalsa Raj, during which time the physically marked Khalsa Sikhs were subject to murderous assaults. The attack on Khalsa identifiers and the struggle to retain them in the face of martyrdom resonates on multiple fronts in the contemporary Sikh World. Operation Bluestar and the massacre of Sikhs that ensued have ruptured the imagination of the Sikh world and its connections with the Central Government in Delhi. While this is not a chapter about the Khalistan movement, it needs to be noted that these novels are exceedingly suitable for imagining the creation of such a Khalistan.

The depiction of the persecution of Khalsa Sikhs and horrific martyrdom in the eighteenth century under Aurangzeb *et al* invites young Sikhs to superimpose their own situations upon these narratives. The struggle of young men to wear their turban may resonate with their Khalsa forefathers who *died and killed* to keep these markers of faith and identity.<sup>17</sup> Readers of Bhai Vir Singh's trilogy likely know that in the texts' narratives, Maharaja Ranjit Singh will follow with the establishment of Khalsa Raj. Once the Khalsa Raj is established, the Khalsa can flourish without persecution. Hence, the readers are invited to desire such a sovereign Khalsa Raj, Khalistan, or Sikhistan, in which they are free from persecution. I think it is not unreasonable to suggest, as many Sikhs have, the parallels between Zion, the homeland of the Jews in post-Holocaust nationalist discourse, and Khalistan, the homeland of the Sikhs in post-1984 Sikh Nationalist discourse.<sup>18</sup>

In translation and for diaspora, the heroine cluster also serves potentially important purposes that Vir Singh could not have imagined. Young female Sikhs reading these texts are invited to make several identifications. The first is comparing herself and her contemporaries to those women that Vir Singh ostensibly addresses. Similarly, young Sikh girls are also invited to ask themselves whether they are the source of their panth's strength or decline. That is, are they more like Sundri *et al* or Bhai Vir Singh's female contemporaries? The pressures of the dominant

culture include dating and intimate knowledge of partners prior to marriage. Hence, according to Bawa, the issue of dating is one which is addressed during the Sikh Youth Camps.

The heroines of these English texts are conveyances by which female sexuality is checked and subordinated to the needs of the panth. All three female protagonists would rather die than submit to sexual defilement or renounce their dharam. In chapter 15 of *Satwant Kaur*, in all three versions, Satwant's father and mother express that their 'greatest worry is that she should be able to retain her honor and Sikh faith. If she could retain these, it is immaterial whether she is dead or alive, it is all right' (Bawa 1988: 71). Needless to say, the entire narrative is compelled by the various protagonists endeavouring to protect their virtue and dharam. These heroines are interpreted as feminist models for Sikh women and girls, notably by Nikky Singh. Sikh women are trying to reconcile the scriptural equality between men and women, articulated by Guru Nanak, and the gross social inequality that persists. In fact, Nikky Singh's book is an attempt at reclaiming Sikhism for feminists of all persuasions. Sundri *et al* provide young Sikh women and girls with apparent evidence that once, in the days of the Khalsa, men and women were equals. Moreover, Sundri *et al*, when taken in moderation, are characters by which second generation Sikhs can have their feminism and their chastity too.

#### NOTES TOWARDS CONCLUSIONS

Placing these novels in the historical period of the Singh Sabha demonstrates how these texts contributed to early boundaries between Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims and propagated specific notions of the Sikh community. That is, the primary identity of the Sikhs should be the Khalsa. The Khalsa, gendered specifically as masculine in its physical designators, subsumes and subordinates alternative Sikh identities such as the Sahajdhari.

In translation, these novels provide an imaginative process by which young Sikhs visualize the Punjab as the homeland of the Sikhs. I have suggested that in the particular contexts of the Khalistan movement(s), these texts have a particular salience due to their historical situation and the ways in which they

narrate Sikh resistance to persecution and renunciation of their physical markers in the face of adversity.

## NOTES

1. By transnational nationalisms I specifically mean the various forms of Sikh nationalism (with or without Khalistani demands) that span several nation states. That is to say, Sikh nationalisms are not confined to one nation-state. Yet, these various internationally based nationalist organizations may be connected tentatively by their affiliation with such organizations as the SGPC or various Akali Dal organizations that have positioned themselves as global representatives of the Panth.

2. The Khalsa Sikh, either male or female, is initiated into the Khalsa by taking *amrit* in a ceremony called *khande di pahul*. Having undergone *khande di pahul*, a Khalsa Sikh is obligated to keep the five Ks, *panch khakar*, and follow numerous behavioural proscriptions and prescriptions. Sikhs who have taken *amrit* are called Amritdharis. Keshdharis are Sikhs who keep their hair and very likely maintain the other Ks as well, however they have not taken *amrit*. Sahajdharis Sikhs, in the current use of the term, are Sikhs who cut their hair but uphold the Khalsa as their ideal. However, Sahajdhari may not have always meant this. See Oberoi, 1994.

3. The CKD was the impetus and organizational base for numerous other Sikh political bodies, such as the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandak Committee (SGPC) and the Akali Dal.

4. S.S. Dulai indicates that 1899 was the publication date of *Sundari* (Dulai 1975). G.S. Khosla indicates that the publication date is 1998 (Khosla 1984). [Editor's note: There are variances in the spelling of Sundri/Sundari].

5. It is not clear whether or not *Bijai Singh* or *Satwant Kaur* were printed in serialized form.

6. Many scholars have noted this feature (See Oberoi 1994; Dulai 1975; and N. Singh 1993). Most scholars agree that these texts constitute a trilogy. (See Sekhon 1992; Duggal 1983; Das 1991; and N. Singh 1993).

7. Dulai translated this from the Punjabi text; See the Introduction to the English version of *Bijai Singh* in Duggal.

8. At Surasti and Balwant's planned conversion, two sepoys are chatting about the might of a Sikh and the outright resistance of a Sikh to convert. The first sepoy says to the second: 'They [Sikhs] are very obstinate. Hindus are soft like butter, but the Sikhs are hard as stone. Heaven knows from where they have got the strength of their conviction' (Mansukhani 1983: 13).

9. For an alternative—but in my view, incorrect, interpretation of Vir Singh's use of the heroines, see Nikky Singh 1993: 189. Singh takes the mere use of female heroines in these novels of probative of Vir Singh's proto-feminist credentials.

10. For example, the women's children are dismembered alive and the subsequent body parts are thrown into their laps. This is one of the eighteen 'canonized' means of martyrdom that are recalled of the Mughal era.

11. The basic innovation of the Singh Sabha was to re-incorporate the Sahajdhari Sikh into the Khalsa Panth by rendering the Sahajdhari a 'slow adapter' to the Khalsa ideals. Though Sahajdharis are not, and may never become, Khalsa Sikhs; they nevertheless, in Singh Sabha logic, hold the Khalsa to be the ideal to which they aspire. This semantic manoeuvring of the Singh Sabha erased the resistance to the Khalsa implied in the various histories of the term and inscribed the Sahajdhari into the Khalsa (McLeod 1989: 71).

12. Interview with Professor Bawa, February 1995.

13. Nikky Singh notes that this same criticism was lodged against Bhai Vir Singh. She quotes Harbans Singh, 'Bhai Vir Singh's most devoted admirer', who said: 'The footnotes added to later editions of the book to document some of the statements and events further weaken the illusion of the story' (N. Singh 1993: 203).

14. Harbans Singh, Honorary General Secretary, Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan wrote the 'Foreward' to Mansukhani's translation of *Sundari*.

15. See for example, 'O' Parmeshwar! What has gone wrong with my country? Why can't it take care of itself? What have my countryman [sic] to go through after they are brought here...My country has the strength but is unable to defend itself...She was bewildered at these surprises and contemplated deep thoughts about the impact of the truthfulness of her country' (Bawa 1988: 128).

16. Dusenbery also notes (based apparently upon Oberoi 1994) that the claim of intimate ties between the Sikhs and the Punjab is quite recent. If this is the case, Bhai Vir Singh was a pioneer in making this connection between Sikhs and the Punjab.

17. Again, we must keep in mind that the tradition of (male) martyrs is always in the foreground. Sikh Gurdwaras often have graphic pictures representing the eighteen ways to be martyred. A new addition to Gurdwara art is the depiction of the destroyed Akal Takht and a portrait of Bhindranwale.

18. In these texts, there seems to be a deliberate linking of events of Sikh history with the language of other aspects of Jewish History. For instance in *Sundri*, there is an account of the 'Small Holocaust' and in *Bijai Singh*, we find an account of the 'Big Holocaust'. Apparently *ghallughara* (massacre) was translated as Holocaust. This is not an innocent translation. Moreover, J.S. Grewal (1994: 229) makes the important point that the Delhi riots were a reminder of the ghallugharas of the eighteenth century. Attempts to frame murderous assaults on Sikhs within the language of the Holocaust, for a wide English reading audience, seems to represent attempts to situate the Punjab crisis in a well-known idiom of hatred, genocide, and the need for protection in a sovereign state, Khalistan. The obvious implication of positing Khalistan as Zion, is that eventually Khalistan will materialize as a political, sovereign entity.

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