Article

‘Woman Seems to Be Given Her Proper Place’: Western Women’s Encounter with Sikh Women 1809–2012

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Abstract: Over a period of two centuries, western women—travellers, army wives, administrators’ wives, missionaries, teachers, artists and novelists—have been portraying their Sikh counterparts. Commentary by over eighty European and north American ‘lay’ women on Sikh religion and society complements—and in most cases predates—publications on Sikhs by twentieth and twenty-first century academics, but this literature has not been discussed in the field of Sikh studies. This article looks at the women’s ‘wide spectrum of gazes’ encompassing Sikh women’s appearance, their status and, in a few cases, their character, and including their reactions to the ‘social evils’ of suttee and female infanticide. Key questions are, firstly, whether race outweighs gender in the western women’s account of their Sikh counterparts and, secondly, whether 1947 is a pivotal date in their changing attitudes. The women’s words illustrate their curious gaze as well as their varying judgements on the status of Sikh women and some women’s exercise of sympathetic imagination. They characterise Sikh women as, variously, helpless, deferential, courageous, resourceful and adaptive, as well as (in one case) ‘ambitious’ and ‘unprincipled’. Their commentary entails both implicit and explicit comparisons. In their range of social relationships with Sikh women, it appears that social class, Christian commitment, political stance and national origin tend to outweigh gender. At the same time, however, it is women’s gender that allows access to Sikh women and makes befriending—and ultimately friendship—possible.

Keywords: Sikh; western women; status of women; India; colonial; diaspora; missionaries; travelogue; suttee; infanticide; friendship

1. Introducing the Western Women

Women’s writing is almost completely absent from published collections of European source material on Sikh history (see, for example, Singh 1969; Grewal 2012). Yet some eighty ‘lay’ western women have provided accounts of encounters with Sikhs, or at least with the Sikh religion, between 1809 and 2012 (see Nesbitt 2020). Here the adjective ‘lay’ is used to distinguish the European and North American travelers over the past two hundred years—the wives of soldiers and administrators and the novelists, artists, missionaries and other travelers—from the professional women scholars (of whatever ethnicity or religious identity) in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century Sikh Studies. The specific subject of Sikh women—whether living in north India, or outside India in, for example, the Malay Peninsula (Bird 1883) or, more recently, in the UK—is mentioned by some of these eighty women, along with features of Sikh life such as their sacred writings and sacred places, and Sikh soldiers and princes.

Many of these female commentators on Sikh women have been upper middle class—the wives of senior army officers and administrators, including Viceroys. Some were daughters or wives of Church of England clergy and a number were themselves protestant missionaries, mainly with the
Church Missionary Society. Most of the women—at least in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—shared both a Christian worldview and unswerving certainty of the rightness of British rule over India (Nesbitt 2018, 2019). Helena Blavatsky, a Russian and the co-founder of the Theosophical Society, and her friend and successor, Annie Besant, are among the significant exceptions.

Blavatsky, Besant and some of the other women—for example Emily Eden—have been the subject of substantial scholarship, but their attention to Sikhism and, more specifically, to Sikh women has not been investigated.

2. Writings of Feminist Scholars

Scholars have examined colonial and post-colonial representations of Indian women more generally (Ray 2000); they have considered ‘the white woman in colonial India’ (Sen 2017; Chaudhuri and Strobel 1992), and the literary output of these memsahibs (e.g., Ghose 1998a, 1998b; Raza 2006). Some of the Victorian women cited in the present article (Harriet Martineau, Flora Annie Steel and Annie Besant) are themselves regarded as feminists and Penelope Tuson has published their selected writings on Indian women (Tuson 1995). Feminist scholars’ attention has focused on colonial representations rather than on post-1947 portrayals of South Asian women.

The historian John C. Webster studied the women of Amritsar—Hindu, Muslim and Sikh—through late nineteenth-century missionary eyes (Webster 2005). He questioned the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society’s generalised characterisations of ‘the secluded middle class women of late nineteenth century Amritsar as in bondage to religiously sanctioned custom and the patriarchal joint family’ (Webster 2005, p. 284). As well as suggesting the possibility of the women’s agency and their ambivalence about their situation, he suggested that Christian missionaries opened up for them new opportunities and choices.

Webster refers to publications (not specifically on the women of Amritsar) by Ramusack (1992) who recognised British women in colonial India as activists who gave voice to a ‘maternal imperialism’, by trying to influence British public opinion. He also notes that Burton (1994) demonstrated how British women tended to view Indian women as a foil to gauge their own progress, while Fleming (1992) focused on their vision of Christian womanhood/domesticity.

Sangeeta Ray’s analysis (Ray 2000) of women in nationalist fiction by both Indian and British writers includes attention to descriptions of suttee by the nineteenth-century female authors, Harriet Martineau (sometimes called ‘the first woman sociologist’), and Flora Annie Steel, a prolific writer and a champion of girls’ education.

Jakobsh is unusual in having looked at colonial representations of Sikh women in particular (Jakobsh 2003, pp. 50–83), and at the representations and self-representations and identity of Sikh women over a longer period than the British raj (Jakobsh and Nesbitt 2010). Jakobsh cites Flora Annie Steel, along with many male colonial sources (Jakobsh 2003, p. 71). However, scholars have not so far examined a wider range of western women’s accounts of Sikh women (or, for that matter, of Sikhs and their religious tradition more generally), whether before or during the raj or after 1947 in India and the diaspora. Consequently, scholars have not yet considered the possible contribution of these female western observers to constructions of Sikh womanhood. It is this gap that my research flags up and begins to address. In so doing, it asks whether the women writers’ ‘race’ trumps their gender in their representation of Sikh women. Certainly, in the case of colonial representations of India’s women, Indira Sen has noted that western women ‘were writing in a colonial context where the factor of race (that is, white women belonging to the ruling race) far outweighed the factor of ‘gender’ (that is, the commonality of their being women)’ (Sen 2008, p. xxv). The material quoted in the present article provides a basis for considering how far race, class, or indeed religion trump gender in western women’s presentation of Sikh women and whether the start of imperial rule over Punjab in 1849 or the end of empire in 1947, or the settlement of Sikhs in Britain in the twentieth century, mark any shifts in their perspective.
The Women’s Writings on Sikhs

The women’s literary genres overlap, since journals were written like letters and letters sometimes reproduced journal pages (as in the case of Juliette Low, founder of the Girl Scouts of the USA1) and both letters and journals were later published as, or provided the basis for, travelogues and memoirs. Sikhs feature in the 1830s’ journal and letters of General Sir Henry Fane’s daughter, Isabella Fane (Pemble 1985), and the journals of the Governor General’s sisters, Emily and Fanny Eden (Eden 1997; Dunbar 1988 respectively). Authors of published travelogues and memoirs, based on journals, include the intrepid solo traveler, Hervey (1853), as well as Honoria Lawrence, the devoted wife of the distinguished military officer and administrator, Henry Lawrence (Lawrence and Woodiwiss 1980) plus Julia Maitland, whose first husband was a senior merchant in the East India Company (1846) and both the evangelical Christian traveler, Baring-Gould (1901), and the Irish cyclist and travel writer, Murphy (1965). Landscape architect Sarah Lloyd’s memoir of her life with a Sikh villager, Pritam Singh (‘Jungli’), with its incidental comment on Sikh women, was published to critical acclaim (Lloyd 2008).

Two British women published works solely devoted to Sikhism, namely Annie Besant’s lecture for the Theosophical Society (Besant 1979) and Dorothy Field’s articles (Field 1912, 1913a, 1913b) and monograph (Field 1914). Other women have written carefully researched fiction featuring female Sikh characters. In the UK, this includes Carol Lake’s ‘Ajit’s Story’ (Lake 1989), which appears to present the author’s real-life contact with a hard up, ailing Sikh single mother. Best known is J. K. Rowling’s novel The Casual Vacancy (Rowling 2012) featuring the Jawanda family in the imagined English village of Pagford.

The missionary women wrote books and booklets (e.g., Hewlett 1886; Hooker 1889)—one, Margaret Wardell, co-authoring with a male author (Gidoomal and Wardell 1996). More often, the missionaries produced reports or short magazine articles (e.g., Hilhouse 1903; Wauton 1907; Guilford 1915), which include reference to Sikh women. One prolific volunteer missionary, Charlotte Tucker, produced fictional stories, as ‘little bullets against idolatry’ (Tucker n.d.). Writing of ‘[t]he women of Amritsar through missionary eyes’ and focusing on just one missionary society’s annual reports and on articles in its magazine, John C. Webster identified ‘four different literary forms’ in these source materials for ‘the missionaries’ perceptions of Amritsar’s women’ (Webster 2005, p. 271), namely generalisation; anecdote; biography/character sketch and analytical description. This taxonomy is pertinent too for the wider range of genres, deployed by western women more generally, with anecdote and generalisation being the most frequent of Webster’s ‘forms’ of output on which the present article is based, while Ranjit Singh’s mother, Raj Kaur, and his youngest wife, Jind Kaur, were the subject of brief ‘character sketches’.

Two of the women illustrate the ‘maternal imperialism’ identified by Webster: though not writing specifically about Sikh women, Harriet Martineau sought, in the immediate aftermath of the 1857 ‘Uprising’, to influence the British public’s understanding of India by informing them about its history. Just over fifty years later, Dorothy Field’s stated aim was to impress upon Government the vital role that a reinvigorated Sikhism could play in British rule over an increasingly unsettled India and the need for Government to come to the religion’s aid (Field 1912, pp. 350–65). Women writing with other clear agendas were Flora Annie Steel, publishing out of her concern to further female education in Punjab, Annie Besant, with her nationalist message, and the missionaries, Guilford (1915); Hewlett (1886), Hooker (1889), Charlotte Tucker (Giberne 1895), Wauton (1907) and Margaret Wardell (Gidoomal and Wardell 1996) who all hoped to win Sikh women as converts. Sen noted colonial women’s goal of modernisation while stereotyping the ‘unchanging east’ and assuming the impossibility of change (Sen 2017, pp. 74–75) but none of the women encountered in the present study were activists regarding, for example, the issues that a few mentioned of suttee or infanticide. Isabella Bird did, however, promote medical care in Punjab and Kashmir many years after her observation of Sikhs in the Malay Peninsula. Moreover, with regard to the women of Harnal village, bereaved in World War 1, Eva

1 Low, Juliette journal available at https://dlg.usg.edu/collection/jglow_jglowc (accessed on 1 April 2019).
Bell ‘became not only a campaigner for their educational advancement but also an advocate for closer relations between them and the wives of British soldiers with whom they had so much in common’ (Allen 2017, p. 37). Rachel Scott’s narrative indicates how a teacher in the UK tried to educate Sikh and other South Asian school-leavers about the patterns and values of the society into which they had been plunged. It had to be made clear that here in the West the position of women was profoundly different from that to which they were accustomed . . . (Scott 1971, p. 184).

The women’s scope for observing, and even interacting with Sikh women, changed over the decades. Whereas Ann Deane had reported a chance encounter in 1809 with Ranjit Singh’s wives (Deane 1823), Isabella Fane and the Eden sisters were actually introduced to them in 1837 and 1838 respectively. In contrast with these early encounters with royalty, it is often village women who feature in the accounts of missionaries and also in the writings of Eva Bell. Bell wrote sometimes as Mrs G. Bell and sometimes as John Travers. Her husband, Captain George Henry Bell of the 27th Punjabis, died in service in 1916. Bell then visited the mothers, wives, widows and daughters connected with her husband’s regiment in Harnal, a village near Rawalpindi. Her aim was to ‘share a few days of the anxiety and mourning together’ (Travers 1918, p. 348). Women crop up too in Sarah Lloyd’s narrative of living among Sikhs in a village near Amritsar and in a dera (religious settlement centred on a baba or spiritual head) in the early 1980s (Lloyd 2008). On occasion, western women received wedding invitations and they observed and described the brides (Hilhouse 1903; Scott 1971, pp. 180–83). In the second half of the twentieth century, women befriended Sikhs who had recently moved to the UK (Scott 1971; Lake 1989; Hooker 1989). Only with J. K. Rowling’s interviews, in 2012 does one sense friendship with a young Sikh woman on an equal basis. In this case, a shared language (English), a non-colonial context, and a lack of evangelical agenda combine to allow Rowling to listen receptively. Her assessment of Sikhism as emancipatory fits the dramatic need of her plot for an element of ‘religious morality’ and for ‘second generation Britons’ who are ‘insiders and outsiders simultaneously’ (see http://www.sikhnet.com/news/how-sikhism-fits-jk-rowlings-new-book [accessed 25 June 2019]).

Writing about colonial women travellers, Indira Ghose recognised:

There is no specifically female gaze. Instead there is a wide spectrum of gazes by woman travellers. (Ghose 1998b, p. 159)

What western women wrote about their Sikh counterparts reflects not only the historical period and particular circumstances of their encounters but also their own differing personalities and approaches, and, in the case of contrasting character sketches of Jind Kaur, it reflects the women’s diverse political views.

3. The ‘Sikh’—‘Western’ Binary

The dichotomy between ‘Sikh women’ and ‘western women’ needs to be examined before proceeding further, as these groups are no longer mutually exclusive. In north America especially there are women of European ancestry who self-identify as Sikh. Moreover, many women of Sikh heritage have grown up in Europe and North America. Furthermore, Sikh women worldwide are implicated in ‘western’ culture in a way that was, however, unthinkable for most of the two centuries spanned by this article. Among the women writers featured in the present article, and the women they described, only Bamba Sutherland (described by Juliette Low) blurred an otherwise uncontroversial distinction. Although Low met her in Lahore, and although her grandfather was maharaja Ranjit Singh, Sutherland had been living in Britain, spoke English rather than Punjabi, her mother was a half German, half Abyssinian Christian and Bamba had been brought up as a Christian.

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2 See http://www.sikhnet.com/news/how-sikhism-fits-jk-rowlings-new-book (accessed 25 June 2019). See also ‘Front Row’, BBC Radio 4 27 September 2012 http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01mx27g (accessed on 25 June 2019).
Perhaps more problematic is the basis for identifying women as Sikh in the women’s writing. Apart from accounts of wedding ceremonies and visiting the Golden Temple in Amritsar and other gurdwaras, there is no account of women’s specifically Sikh ritual activity and certainly no reference to their having been initiated into the Khalsa.

In general, the women’s religious identification as Sikh results from being the daughter, wife or mother of men who identified as Sikhs rather than from their articulating this identity themselves. Eva Bell provides an exception in World War 1 when:

> A widowed Sikh brought her all to the King—her only son . . . she gave her reasons very simply. ‘I am a Sikh,’ she said. (Imperial Publishing Co Khosla Brothers, p. 131)

Whereas European and north American travellers frequently noted the distinctive appearance of male Sikhs—in particular Akali warriors—they mentioned no distinctively Sikh aspect of women’s appearance. Emily Eden’s watercolour showing a distinctively accoutred and turban-wearing woman in an Akali family is the one exception.3 The sources informing the present article did not draw attention to any way in which Sikh women’s attire, jewellery or hair style differed from their Hindu or Muslim peers.

4. Western Women on Sikh Women’s Appearance

Sikh women’s appearance was, nonetheless, a recurrent theme. Fane and the Eden sisters described Ranjit Singh’s wives. For example, Emily Eden described Partap Singh’s mother: as ‘one of the prettiest little creatures I ever saw . . . with the longest almond-eyes in the world, and with hands like a little child’s’ (Eden 1997, p. 236) and in her sister Fanny’s words she was ‘really beautiful; very little, very fair, with enormous black eyes and a pretty, clever expression’ (Dunbar 1988, p. 198). By contrast, a second wife was ‘immensely fat, and rather ugly’ (Eden 1997, p. 236). Perhaps this was Kharak Singh’s mother whom, a year before, Fane had written off as ‘old, wizened, fat and hideous’ (Pemble 1985, p. 210).

Women’s hairstyles received attention, though far less so than the men’s. Thus, in the 1870s, Harriet Murray-Aynsley noted how ‘their women appear to wear their hair rolled up in a coil at one side of their head, though I could not see exactly how it was dressed, as a square veil of some bright coloured stuff, in many cases richly embroidered with coloured silks, enveloped the head and the greater part of the person’ (Murray-Aynsley 1879, p. 253). Clothes were described in detail, including their adaptation to the British climate (Login 1916, p. 213 on Jind Kaur’s remarkable adjustments in London and Scott (1971) on Punjabi mothers in a northern UK city). Western women observed, too, the spectacular jewellery of maharanis (Login 1916), the ‘large nose-jewel’, four necklaces and silver bangles on the arms and ankles of a Sikh sergeant’s wife in the Malay peninsula (Bird 1883, p. 370), and Sikh pupils’ love of jewellery in Britain (Scott 1971, p. 38). In Britain, a bride’s dress fascinated her teacher, Rachel Scott (Scott 1971, p. 181) and in Punjab a missionary, Agnes Hilhouse, described how the bride was completely covered and was ‘shuffled round’ and how she felt sorry for her having her hair pulled as the silver ornaments were fixed (Hilhouse 1903, p. 223).

5. Western Women on the Status of Sikh Women

As well as their appearance, the women’s status in relation to men and (rather less frequently) their personalities elicited comment. Frequently, the western women’s attitudes to the place of women in Sikh society are expressed via comparisons that highlight their approval or disapproval. Sometimes such comparisons are implicit in their comments on Sikh women, but in many cases the binaries are explicit in their contrasting of contemporary norms and the Gurus’ teachings; Sikh women and other

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3 Lahore Family of Akalis, Emily Eden, Trustees of the Victoria Memorial, Kolkata VM-EE-R.435 (120).
Indian women (of a different faith community or a different part of India); Sikh women and western women; or as compared with Sikh men.

Only occasionally did a western writer compare the Gurus’ teachings and reported actions with more recent treatment of women. Thus, Mrs Hervey wrote ‘Nânuk forbids the rite of Suttee, (i.e., the practice of women burning themselves with the bodies of their deceased husbands)’ (Hervey 1853, vol. 1, p. 424). This tendency to contrast an idealised Guru period with modernity still continues particularly in the writings of Sikh authors. Jakobsh has pointed to the tendency to contrast a lapsed present with the Gurus’ teachings, as in Sikh apologetics (Jakobsh 2003; Jakobsh and Nesbitt 2010, p. 19), and to present any such lapse as due to the other—whether Hindu or Muslim. Our women did not make this point, but, in commenting on Sikh women’s situation, they drew occasional comparisons with their Hindu and Muslim counterparts and with women from outside Punjab, although it needs to be stressed that the Punjabi women they mentioned were not always differentiated as Sikh, Hindu or Muslim.

Blavatsky cited one Hindu–Sikh difference as she recalled an Akali ‘explaining to them the advantages of the Sikh religion, and comparing it with the faith of the “devil-worshippers”, as he called the Brahmans and apparently contrasting Sikh practice with the “unconditioned civil death” awaiting Hindu widows, even if they were small children. Edith Baring-Gould mentioned the freedom of both Hindu and Sikh women to come out ‘not being shut up closely in zenanas’ and so to visit the Golden Temple (Baring-Gould 1901, p. 42). Here the unstated comparison was with Muslim women. Commenting on Sikh girls’ lack of freedom in the UK, Scott pointed out that ‘for centuries Sikh women have enjoyed greater freedom than their Muslim sisters’ (Scott 1971, p. 184).

On the subject of child marriage, the activist and Indian nationalist Annie Besant had contrasted Punjabi women with women of other parts of India, asking: ‘Can that be said, most of all, of Bengal, where child-marriage is at its worst, infant-marriage at its most terrible?’ (Besant 1913, p. 65; cf. Jakobsh 2003, pp. 72–74). Publishing in 1899 on the conditions of women in India, Steel challenged the belief of ‘nine-tenths of English women who manifest that somewhat over-sentimental interest in their Indian sisters’ that ‘every girl is married, not betrothed, before her teens’, while acknowledging that it was family interests and not the young woman’s that delayed the date of her marriage (Tuson 1995, p. 257). She wrote:

For their own convenience, the parents will delay this till sixteen; and among some agricultural tribes, notably the Jâts, it is no unusual thing for a forlorn husband to have to sue for the possession of a virgin wife out of her teens, some buxom lass whose services are valuable on the ancestral farm. (Tuson 1995, p. 258)

Similarly, the Theosophist and women’s rights activist, Annie Besant, praised ‘the Punjabis and Sikhs’ for their rejection of child marriage, a view that she stated was not shared by other regions of India:

Go up north among the Punjabis and Sikhs. They do not marry their girls for the most part until they reach 16 and 17 years of age. With what result? That there are no virgin widows, the most pitiful class of Indians . . . (Besant 1913, p. 65)

While Steel and Besant approvingly singled out Punjabis, including Sikhs, for the higher age at which young women married, others mentioned child brides’ ages without passing comment. Thus, Isabella Fane recorded non-committally that ‘[t]he bride is ten years old’ when recounting the wedding of Nau Nihal Singh in 1837 (Pemble 1985, p. 198).

As for comparisons with their male counterparts, Steel observed too that ‘in rural India the women do a lion’s share of outdoor work’ (Steel 1905, p. 162 cited in Sen 2002, p. 51). When Sikh families later

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4 For example, Nikky Singh comments: It is sad to see today that … [w]omen stay in the places ascribed to them in society and family by the male members . . . (Singh 1993, p. 254).
settled in England in the twentieth century, their local contacts were struck by how restricted girls’ lives were in comparison to their brothers’ lives, as well as in comparison to their English peers’. Local people probably did not realise the significance of izzat (family honour) in determining what female family members could do or, indeed, could be rumoured to be doing. Migration had not changed centuries-old values but had increased the challenges for the migrants. Mixing socially with unrelated males would not only prejudice a young woman’s own chances of marriage but also bring shame on her wider family. This is the context for Scott’s observations:

So strong were the conventions limiting the activities of women to the family circle that few older girls, whether Sikh or Muslim, had any chance of pursuing hobbies or interests outside the home . . . so much that to us seemed innocent enjoyment was regarded as sinful by their elders, that their lives continued to be almost as circumscribed as in their Punjabi village. Youth Clubs where both sexes met for dancing or amateur dramatics were absolutely taboo, since no respectable girl could ever make an exhibition of herself on stage, and dancing, except in private, was beyond the pale . . .

Yet boys were allowed out alone and late at night . . . (Scott 1971, p. 176)

Here ‘respectable’ is the key word and, as Scott realised, this code of behavior applied to Punjabis, regardless of their faith identity. Scott illustrated her commentary with the case of her Sikh pupil, Jagindro: as her father had thwarted her career aspirations, ‘Jagindro stayed at home and helped to look after the babies and cook chupattis until she was old enough to look after her own babies and cook her own chupattis’ (Scott 1971, p. 177).

At the same time, Scott detected signs that change was underway (again for the benefit of others rather than of the young women concerned), as some young women were now ‘going out to work in mills, factories and tailoring establishments before they marry’. She mused that centuries of prejudice might give way to men’s discovery that women could be a financial asset to the family (Scott 1971, p. 177).

In many cases, however, western women wrote approvingly both of Sikh women’s modest behaviour and of their subordinate status. The unsalaried missionary Charlotte Tucker’s reading of the Guru Granth Sahib persuaded her that ‘[w]oman seems to be given her proper place’ (Giberne 1895, p. 288). In Tucker’s view, woman’s ‘proper place’ by no means meant full equality with men, and certainly did not mean that a woman could be a Guru. Tucker had heard from a ‘native narrator’ that the third Guru, Amar Das, had been so moved by his daughter’s unflinching bravery and devotion as to present her with the Guruship. Much to Tucker’s relief, ‘the young Sikh shrank from the strange post of spiritual leadership to which her father’s love would have raised her . . . she cried ‘O true Guru, my father! Give this dignity to my husband!’ Tucker commented tartly ‘The offer tells more of parental affection than of wisdom, for a female Goru [sic] would have been somewhat analogous to a female Pope’ (Tucker n.d., pp. 73–74).

Dorothy Field’s strong interest in women’s rights, and her approval of Sikhism’s contribution, is evident in her 1914 monograph on the Sikh religion. She struck a different note from Tucker by emphasising ‘the emancipation of women’. Yet, the examples she provided of this ‘emancipation’ included women serving men. Under the heading ‘Position of women’, she explained:

but the most notable social improvement was the emancipation of women. Many women found salvation through the Guru’s teaching. A woman assisted at the inauguration of the Pahul and another was the only disciple who managed to enter the prison where Teg Bahadur was confined before his martyrdom. She brought him food and drink and otherwise ministered to him. Guru Amar Dās refused to receive a Ranee who had visited him while she

5 The reference to a woman who ministered to Teg Bahadur is obscure.
was closely veiled, and on more than one occasion the Guru protested against the tyranny of the *parda* [purdah or veil]. (Field 1914, p. 59)

What Field wrote echoed Macauliffe (1909) rather than being based on personal encounter with any Sikh women. However, western women who did interact with Sikh women similarly expressed approval of their ancillary role. For example, in India, in the early twentieth century, as Sen points out, the assertive Flora Annie Steel ‘projected the paradigm of the submissive and sacrificing Indian wife whom she described as the epitome of “the greatest amount of self-negation” (Steel 1923, p. 159), as the female role model for western women to emulate’ (Sen 2017, p. 74). Rather similarly, in the 1980s, Sarah Lloyd, an independent woman traveller, whose relationship with ‘Jungli’ flouted local Punjabi convention, nonetheless reported getting used to women being considered as ‘appendages of their men’: the question that people asked was ‘Whose is she; never who is she’ (Lloyd 2008, p. 208). She reflected on the norm of women eating only after their husbands and concluded:

> India taught me to be a woman. I discovered how much more simple, pleasurable and dignified life became when men and women had separate, and clearly defined roles.’ (Lloyd 2008, p. 210)

However, when a woman’s deference to her husband meant that she could not openly declare herself a Christian, a missionary was less impressed. Much as in western women’s own society, as Annie Besant experienced when her marriage to a clergyman ended for this very reason, wives were expected to defer to their husbands in matters of religious belief. Sarah Hewlett wrote of ‘a very strict Sikh woman’ who had eventually admitted:

> She could no longer believe in her own religion, but she *must* keep to it, as her husband is a kind of priest, and keeps near his house a little Temple in which is a copy of the Granth. (Hewlett 1886, p. 134)

### 6. Western Women on Infanticide and Suttee

Although Sen points out that ‘Social evils was a subject that white women, especially missionaries, wrote copiously on’ (Sen 2008, p. 125), the women in the present study seldom focused on ‘social evils’ in relation to Sikh women. That being said, suttee and son preference—to the extent of female infanticide—were mentioned by a number, though, as with child marriage, they generally wrote in a non-judgemental, matter of fact way.

Here, for example, is Mrs Hervey on the high incidence of female infanticide among Guru Nanak’s descendants living in Dera Baba Nanak, a phenomenon already noted by Herbert Edwardes in 1851. Historian Anshu Malhotra has pointed out the oddness of the British insistence on regarding Sikhs ‘as a community more inclined to treat their women well’, given their discovery of infanticide among the Bedi families of Dera Baba Nanak in 1851 (Malhotra 2010, p. 88). Hervey explained: ‘This family is considered so holy, that the daughters (not being permitted to intermarry) are stifled at their birth, as it would be considered highly derogatory to a female descendant of Baba Nānak to marry into any other family’ (Hervey 1853, vol. 2, p. 39). She showed none of Malhotra’s scepticism about the reasons (pride and poverty) that Sikh leaders fed to the British. Instead, Hervey is as unquestioning as the later administrator and ethnographer, Herbert Risley, who ‘went to great lengths to justify the practice among the Sikh Jats and Rajputs’ and ‘noted that the more “refined” type of infanticide was associated with a sense of honour … highly esteemed by Victorian values’ (Jakobsh 2003, p. 70). Female infanticide continued in the twentieth century and was similarly mentioned without comment by Carol Lake in her story of Ajit, whose aunt:

> had seven daughters. This was unusual in India in those days. Most people killed them after the first one or two, because they were an expense with nothing to show for it. (Lake 1989, p. 156)
Likewise, son preference was reported neutrally by Sarah Lloyd:

When a child was born, people rejoiced. If a girl came they weren’t so pleased. (Lloyd 2008, p. 81)

On the much rarer, but more public, practice of suttee, Flora Annie Steel reported that Emily Eden had ‘greatly disapproved’ of the immolation of Ranjit Singh’s wives and slaves, and Edward Thompson, in his annotation of Emily’s Up the Country, mentioned ‘the horror Miss Eden felt when the news came through’ (Eden 1997, p. 404). In her letter from Shimla, dated 2 July 1839, Emily wrote: ‘Two of his ranees have declared their determination to burn themselves with him; but as their stepson Kurruck has implored them not to do so, it is to be hoped they will give it up, if they are sure of kind treatment’ (Eden 1997, p. 309). The following day, she wrote, ‘Those poor dear ranees whom we visited and thought so beautiful and so merry, have actually burnt themselves’ (Eden 1997, p. 310). Stronger condemnation was expressed by the Edens’ contemporary, Julia Maitland, in her Letters from Madras to her mother. Maitland was outraged, not least at the non-intervention of the British Resident, and demanded:

Have you heard yet in England of the horrors that took place at the funeral of that wretched old RUNJEET SINGH? Four wives and seven slave-girls were burnt with him; and not a word even of remonstrance from the British Government! J- says there cannot be a doubt that a word of disapproval from the British Resident would have stopped it at once, for the whole power of the Punjab depends on our will, and they profess to follow our wishes in everything. Is it not shocking? (Maitland 1846, p. 134).

Helena Blavatsky reported that four of maharaja Ranjit Singh’s wives ‘voluntarily allowed themselves to be cremated alive’ but she did express the hope that the cremation of his female slaves had been ‘likewise voluntary’ (Blavatsky 1961, p. 38).

7. Western Women’s Characterisation of the Women

The children’s educational writer, Julia Corner, assessed Ranjit Singh’s mother as an ‘ambitious, unprincipled woman’ (Corner 1854) and Julia Stone, the US Consul’s wife, commented on her management of affairs during her son’s minority (Stone 1877, p. 496). One woman above all, Jind Kaur, maharaja Ranjit Singh’s youngest wife, roused strong reactions from Europeans. Lena Login recalled ‘stories told in those days of her beauty and fascination, as well as her talent for diplomacy and strength of will’ (Login 1916, p. 210). While her British contemporaries were damning, Helena Blavatsky wrote with admiration and sympathy, as well as considerable inaccuracy.

This slight, weak woman . . . , reared in luxury, passionately loved by the Old Lion of Panjab who caused England so much trouble, became on the death of her Maharaja a heroine whose courage dimmed all the heroic exploits of the Sikhs, Alone and surrounded by treachery she risked all for the sake of her son. Having induced a large following in Panjab to revolt against the projects of the East India Company, she placed herself at the head of her army and, it is said, fought no worse than the bravest among her Sikhs. (Blavatsky 1961, p. 39)

Jind Kaur’s subsequent plight drew this response from Lady Login, who met her in England in 1861, two years before her death:

It was with a sense of disillusionment and compassion that . . . I found myself in semi-darkness confronting an aged, half-blind woman, sitting huddled on a heap of cushions on the floor. (Login 1916, p. 211)

For the most part, individual Sikh women’s personalities are unrecorded, although Lloyd mentions the creative skill of Jungli’s mother (Lloyd 2008, p. 19) and Lake’s character, Ajit, too had artistic talent as a student in India and taught handicraft classes in the UK (Lake 1989, p. 162). Two strong female characters are the fictional Dr Parminder Jawanda depicted as ambitious, critical
and unloving, and her daughter, Sukhvinder, who was bullied, under-achieving and self-harming and then unhesitatingly heroic.

It was not only fiction writers, or women writing after India’s independence, who tried to imagine Sikh women’s lives. In 1838, Fanny Eden’s meeting with Ranjit Singh’s wives left her wondering how they spent their time:

We could not make out what their amusements are. I fancy they sleep away a great deal of their time. It does strike me, every time I see them, that their lives must be quite unbearable.

(Dunbar 1988, p. 196)

In summary, the ‘spectrum of gazes’ found Sikh women to be pitiable because of circumstances (the failing Jind Kaur) or because of their need of Christian salvation (Wauton 1907), as well as robust and hard-working. They were submissive (Hewlett 1886; Hooker 1989), and a UK schoolgirl could experience discrimination for being hairy (Rowling 2012). They were also courageous (Bell in Imperial Publishing Co Khosla Brothers; Rowling 2012), resourceful and creative (Lake 1989; Lloyd 2008) and adaptive (Login 1916, describing Jind Kaur’s adjustment of her dress to her British context; Scott 1971).

8. Women’s Reflections

The spectrum of gazes discloses change in individual women’s views at least as much as a shift in perspective over the two centuries. Thus, the Eden sisters see themselves through Sikh women’s eyes, Lady Login’s feeling towards Jind Kaur changes, Sarah Lloyd’s understanding of women’s roles alters and the schoolteacher Rachel Scott’s initial misgivings about arranged marriages disappear when she attends her pupil’s wedding: ‘I had entered the temple with thoughts full of sadness for Kulwant and this strange, loveless marriage but by the end of the ceremony my doubts were dispelled’ (Scott 1971, p. 183). Probably echoing her Sikh informants, Scott further commented: ‘That a girl will grow to love her husband is to them as natural, as self-evident as that a child will grow to love its parents, though in neither case has free choice entered into the matter’ (Scott 1971, pp. 179–80).

Unusually among the women, Scott reflected on the future.

I knew in my heart that for her all would be well, but for her children and her grandchildren, torn between the customs of East and West as they would surely be, I felt no such certainty. For them, a wedding might not be the happy, memorable occasion that this one, at least, had been for me. (Scott 1971, p. 183)

‘Only the children who are born here, who grow to maturity within the framework of our freer society, enjoying the benefits of our equal and liberal education, will find difficulty in accepting the age-old custom. (Scott 1971, p. 180)

Unusually too, Pat Hooker acknowledged that changing western ideals affected her assessment of an eighteen-year-old who had ‘admitted that: ‘with this cloistered background, she was quite incompetent to voice an opinion, much less make the choice of her future husband’. Hooker commented that ‘the girl is typical of many in her passive resignation. Her whole upbringing had been designed to mature in her the qualities of meekness, submissiveness and humility’ (Hooker 1989, p. 14). She then acknowledged Christian societies’ historical shift in attitude towards this as a quality ‘which used to be encouraged in young Christians and which we learn from the example of Christ’ but which was ‘popularly censured in the West today … ’ (Hooker 1989, p. 14).

Indrani Sen mentions colonial white women’s awareness of being rejected ‘on the grounds of caste, social customs and habits of female dress’ (Sen 2008, p. 277) and cites Flora Annie Steel’s ‘strategy of looking through “native” eyes as a means of controlling the Englishwoman’s public display of sexuality and policing her dress and conduct’ (Sen 2017, p. 74). The Bengali scholar and poet, Ketaki Kumari Dyon’s, assessment that ‘the English diary has been dominated, developed, and made highly self-conscious by women writers’ (Dyon 1978, p. 4) is borne out by, for example, Emily Eden’s
awareness of Indian women’s perceptions (Eden). As another Indian scholar, Indira Ghose, commented ‘The traveller was also, of course, the object of observance by the observed—a fact either effaced or registered with various emotions, ranging from detached amusement to rage and fear.’ Thus, we read that one of Sher Singh’s wives wanted to observe the Edens’ maids, Jones and Wright, more closely. On 19th December 1838: ‘After a long study of Jones, she told her bearers to carry her round to the other side of the elephant, and desired Wright to put up her veil, that she might have a good look at her (Eden 1997, pp. 221–22). The Edens knew how shocking their independence appeared to Sikhs.

Similarly, a century and a half later, Lloyd relays Sikh women’s horror at westerners kissing publicly etc. (Lloyd 2008) and, in the UK, Pat Hooker reported both on her Sikh students’ assumptions that tea at her house might involve alcohol and drugs (Hooker 1989, pp. 14–15) and on her Sikh neighbours’ view of westerners’ inappropriate behaviour in public places:

Many Sikh people look on what they perceive from television to be the norms of English family life with horror and contempt. Perhaps it is not surprising that when she [Gurdev] was asked whether there was anything that repelled her about what she knew of English life, Gurdev replied in a whisper of embarrassment, ‘Young people kissing in the street.’ (Hooker 1989, p. 14)

9. In Conclusions

Future studies are needed in order to explore further to what extent female accounts of Sikh womanhood differ from contemporary male accounts and also to examine in more detail individual women’s portrayals of Sikh women and womanhood.

While the commentary of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British women does indeed support the view that race outweighed gender, Blavatsky’s observations—not only on Jind Kaur but on, for example, the ridiculousness and the destructiveness of British rule—point to a key factor of British women’s race being not just whiteness or Europeanness but the fact of their country’s colonial power.

As regards the question whether 1947 was significant in relations between Sikh women and western women, certainly, over thirty years after the ending of the British raj, Sarah Lloyd’s experience of India was very different from her predecessors’. But profound changes in British social mores were probably a more decisive a factor in her relationship with the Sikh villager, ‘Jungli’, than India’s independence was. What is more striking is the resonance between western women’s approaches across the centuries. Thus, Rowling’s receptivity to what she learned of Sikhism as an ‘egalitarian’ faith was of a piece with the Dorothy Field’s enthusiastic endorsement of Sikhism’s ‘emancipation’ of women a century earlier (Field 1914, p. 59). Well before the raj, Fanny and Emily Eden had tried to imagine the lives of Sikh ranis and, post-raj, not only J.K. Rowling, but a teacher and a missionary were making similar efforts of sympathetic imagination. Moreover, the similarities between the CMS missionary, Emily Wauton’s, article (Wauton 1907) and Gidoomal and Wardell (1996), which both focused on tactics for converting Sikh women, demonstrate that, in the case of at least some Christians, neither the ending of colonial rule nor Sikh migration overseas changed their perception of Sikh women’s predicament as lost sheep in need of a salvation only available through Jesus Christ. Declining commitment to Christian observance in the West did however, outside missionary circles, result in a less overtly, or even implicitly, Christian framing of western women’s encounters throughout the twentieth century (Nesbitt 2018, 2019).

A key shift has been from simply observing Sikh women, or having fleeting encounters (hampered by having no shared language), to forging friendships. This is a matter of changed circumstance at least as much as being a matter of attitude. On the last day of 1838, after seeing Ranjeet Singh’s wives, Emily Eden wrote: ‘I should like to see some of these high-caste ladies several times . . . so as to hear their story, and their way of life, and their thoughts’ (Eden 1997, p. 237), but the Edens’ schedule did not give them this opportunity.

Emily’s statement suggests that class and ‘caste’ were elements in any feeling of affinity, whereas in fact actual instances of befriending between British and Sikh women often took place across class
lines—between middle-class Britshers and Punjab villagers. As well as the deliberate strategy of befriending that was practised by missionary women in the zenanas of Punjab, there was Eva Bell’s friendship with the village women of Harnal, that arose from their shared experience of bereavement (Travers 1918). Then, in the late twentieth century, Lake’s ‘Ajit’s Story’ and Scott’s A Wedding Man is Nicer than Cats, Miss are evidence of kindly disposed British residents stretching out the hand of friendship to needy immigrants, as too is Hooker’s call to ‘a ministry amongst people of other faiths’ (Hooker 1989, p. 4).

It is in their time spent with women—whether, albeit very briefly, in Ranjit Singh’s zenana, or in Punjab villages or British industrial cities—that the factor of gender most clearly differentiates women’s writing about women from men’s, as men could not have the same readily acceptable access. This was especially true given the culture of izzat which, as Scott’s and Hooker’s comments showed, survived strongly in diaspora Sikh society. The nature of the women’s relationships changes from a somewhat unequal befriending, with an agenda, to the friendship between J.K. Rowling and the young Sikh woman whose confident presentation of her faith led, many years later, to Rowling placing the Jawanda family, with its strong female Sikh characters, at the heart of The Casual Vacancy.

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