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An Interview With Author Kamla K. Kapur

APRIL 24, 2015

By Eliza Gale



Q: What is *The Singing Gurmehant*?

Q: What is *The Singing Guru* about?

A: It is about an unhappy man's journey from conflict to joy and peace. Mardana, who was historically the rababi, or rabab player (a medieval stringed instrument also called a *rebec*) of Guru Nanak, (1469-1539) the founding father of Sikhism, traveled with the master on his extensive journeys from India to other countries. Mardana's odyssey, full of many dangerous adventures, parallels his spiritual and psychic journey from the animal end of the human spectrum to a man in the process of transformation and liberation.

Mardana, in the Punjabi folk tradition, is utterly human, like us. His ego and his many appetites, for wealth, fame, sexual satisfaction, which he follows despite Guru Nanak's advice and his own better judgment, lead him into bondage. His lust turns him into a goat in which incarnation he stays for much of the book. Tied to a stake and awaiting death as a sacrifice to the sorceress Nur Shah, he recounts to the other goats the many dangerous straits his five demons (that Guru Nanak calls *kaam*, *krodh*, *lobh*, *moh*, *hankaar* — lust, anger, greed, attachment and pride) led him into.

Mardana is a contrast to Guru Nanak. He begins at the point where almost all of us begin — in an ignorance that is so arrogant it leaves no room for learning and growth unless we



Kamla K. Kapur is the author of *The Singing Guru: legends and adventures of Guru Nanak, the first Sikh*.

recognize and acknowledge it honestly and fearlessly, as Mardana does throughout and especially at the end of the book.

Guru Nanak's wealth is the crystalline lens of the awakened consciousness that is attained when we surrender ourselves to the Limitless One. This lens, Guru Nanak sings repeatedly, is richer than all the treasures of the world put together. When attained, all matter, all the richness of the sensual world, all forms in nature, become luminous and undying.

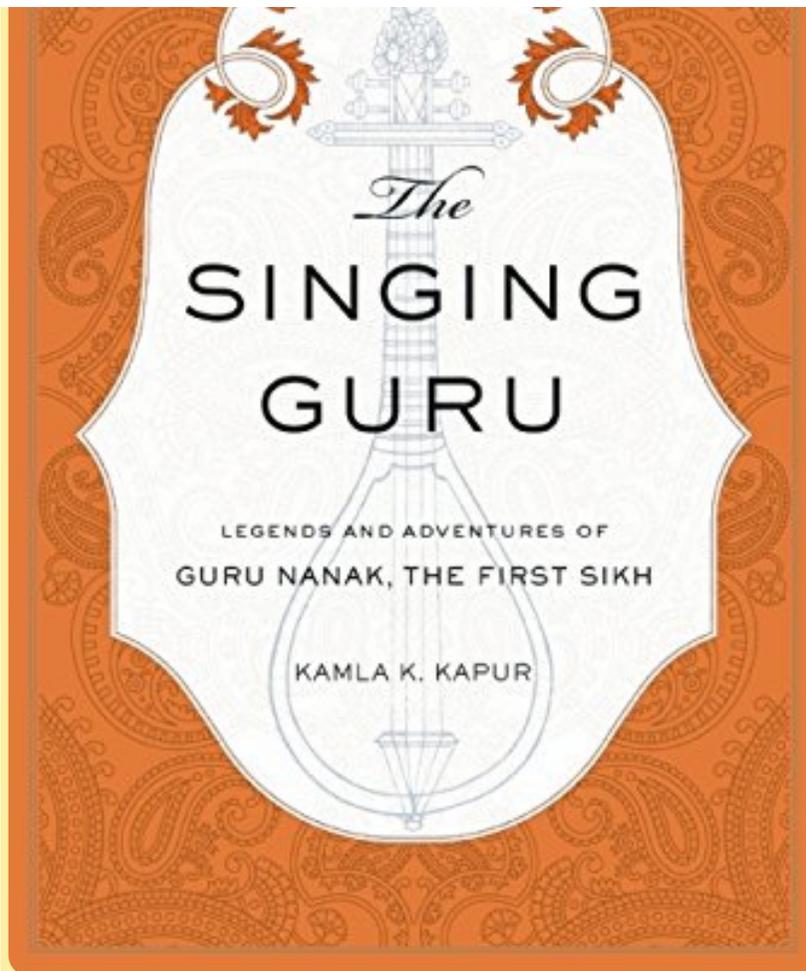
Mardana's greatness lies in having glimpses of some other way of living, the way of surrender and faith, of trust in the power that has made and that sustains him, the way of staying in the still point of the turning world, above the down and up of existence; in his realization that in his darkest hours he is guided by Guru Nanak's words and superior wisdom; that the name of the Beloved, insubstantial, invisible word made of air, is the ship that rescues him when he is floundering and crashing on the hard, jagged rocks of the fiery ocean of suffering that he casts himself into from time to time.

This realization invites Guru Nanak's intervention which plucks him out of the clutches of Nur Shah, turns him back into a blessed man again, a man given the rare gift of life in which he has the choice of placing himself on the path that Guru Nanak has advocated throughout the book, of becoming a man whose face is turned towards God instead of his own ego. As he learns the values of humility, patience, gratitude, praise, and surrender to the Cosmic Will, Mardana begins to grow into his full potential as a true, conscious, humble human being, a Sikh.



Q: What inspired you to write it?

A: My father always wanted me to write this book. I grew up in a fairly traditional Sikh family. My mother is one of the many sixteenth



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generation descendants of Guru Nanak and I heard a lot of the stories that are embedded in the larger narrative arc of the book.

I am eclectic about spiritual wisdom, and glean it from all sources. I have written two books from the Hindu and Muslim traditions: *Ganesha Goes to Lunch* (now reprinted in India as *Classics from Mystic India*) and *Rumi's Tales from the Silk Road* (published in India as *Pilgrimage to Paradise: Sufi Tales from Rumi*). This eclecticism and egalitarianism is an integral part of Sikhism. The Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy book, contains the songs of seven Sikh gurus, including Guru Nanak, who composed and sang, and the songs of fifteen Hindu and Sufi saints.

Guru Nanak's definition of a religious person is "one who looks on all as equal." Brotherhood and sisterhood of all on this planet is Sikhism's basic tenet; music is at its heart. What better subject to write about than one I resonate with?

Q: You have written several plays, what is the primary difference between writing for the stage and writing a novel?

A: I write in all genres – plays, poetry, essays, fiction. The subjects, ideas, feelings, characters that interest me, come with their own forms. The subjects with the most psychic or social conflict come to me as plays. Conflict lends itself well to dialogue because there are two or many more opposing points of view. This is not to say that plays are only

about disembodied opposing points of view. Characters, embodying the conflict, are central to what happens on the stage. Since plays progress through dialogue and action, and since their performance has a communal interface, they are pared down to something that can take place in a few hours. Plays are much more time-bound, dense, and compact.

Fiction, on the other hand, can ramble, something I like to do. They can include description, thoughts (which can also be expressed as soliloquies in plays), meditations, cogitations, philosophizing in addition to dialogue and character. Fiction is the most capacious of the genres and I love it for these reasons. But of course, you have to be careful not to abuse its freedom to the point of boring your readers. Art, above all, is the imposition of limits on nature, and you have to be aware of this if a project is to succeed – by which I mean, find its audience.

Matters of the heart and soul are best suited for Poetry, which goes deeper into the human spirit than the other genres. It is a soliloquy of the soul with itself.

Having said this, though I have never had to debate about whether a particular subject should be expressed in a play or fiction or poetry – like I said, they come clothed in their forms – I use the strengths of each genre in the others as well. Dialogue is an integral part of my fiction because dialogue, more than any other technique, propels the story into the present, makes it come alive in the Now. My last book of poems, *As a Fountain in a Garden*, is one long monologue, comprised of smaller ones, and is in the form of a dialogue between a woman and the ghost of her husband who committed suicide.

Q: What kind of educational background do you have?

A: My early education was mainly in what we in India call convent schools, run by nuns. My father was in the army and we traveled all over India, and convent schools were available in every station he was transferred to. For the last four years of my high schooling I was in a private boarding school with a British headmistress in Dehra Dun. I

got my Bachelor's from a Government College in the town my parents settled in after retirement, Chandigarh, after which I took my dowry money and got myself a Masters' degree in English and American Literature at Kent State University in Ohio. I was always a reluctant academic and ended up not getting a Ph.D. after two years of course work. Later, in the early nineties, I took some online classes from Iowa and USCD. They were mainly to get a hike in my salary instead of to learn anything. What I submitted for my course work in poetry and fiction were things I was already working on.

Q: What kind of research did you do for *The Singing Guru*?

A: My primary source was the electronic version of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy text, specifically Guru Nanak's 946 songs, called *Bani*, a holy utterance. Then, about five years ago a cousin mentioned Max Arthur MacCauliffe's six volumes called *The Sikh Religion, Its Guru, Sacred Writing and Authors*. Macauliffe's volumes have been the main source and inspiration for this and the subsequent books I have planned to write, The Sikh Saga series.

Though Macauliffe gives some details about the lives of the Sikh gurus, which are the underpinning of my book, they were not enough to bring alive the narrative. I read other books, but I had to rely mainly on my imagination to create the narrative.

Q: Who are some of your literary influences?

A: I have to admit I only read dead authors. My ego doesn't get involved and I don't find myself getting intimidated by the success of live ones! I read a lot, but since you ask only about my literary influences I have to mention Shakespeare on the top of my list. I think I have learned the most from him. As far as poetry goes, I have many favorites, Sappho, Yeats, Emily Dickenson, Hilda Dolittle (HD), Walt Whitman, Blake. I can't think of the others now since I haven't been reading poetry for many years.

Q: What kinds of day jobs have you had and how have they influenced you?

A: Being an untraditional Indian woman who did not marry for security's sake, I was always very conscious of making a living on my own. I did not want anything very demanding, and certainly not something that would consume all my time. I have been writing since my teens and it has been my primary passion. A 9 to 5 was out of the question. The only thing I could do without destroying my soul was teach. I taught on a fellowship at Kent State University, at Delhi University, at King Faisal University in Saudi Arabia, and many courses as a part time, adjunct professor at various colleges in San Diego before I was hired full time at Grossmont College in 1991, in which position I taught for 10 years full time and five years half time. I took an early retirement because my soul was crying out for release from grading papers and would not be consoled.

Teaching elicited my passion because I was very interested in the topics I taught: in addition to composition and grammar, I taught literature, play-writing, creative writing in all genres, women's literature, mythology. It elicited my passion because I learnt so much from what I taught. I was, in fact, a student of what I taught. Even from my least favorite topics, composition and grammar, I learned enormously. In addition, a sabbatical project for creative writing classes turned into a book of 32 essays on the creative process, called *The Writing Warrior*, which, when I have some time I will submit for publication. Once again I am getting interested in writing essays and I am aided in this task by techniques I found in text books and discovered for myself in the process of teaching my students how to write essays. So, all in all, I would say my day jobs influenced me enormously.

Q: How did you and your publisher find each other?

A: This answer takes off from the previous one. When my soul was crying out against the shackles of time and grading papers, I ignored it for many years. I was very hesitant to quit a tenured position in which my salary was increasing each year. For years I was in agonizing conflict over it. In retrospect it reminds me of the Indian monkey metaphor for

how one gets trapped in life. Monkey catchers in India put out narrow mouthed jars with nuts or grains in them in areas that monkeys visit. A monkey puts his empty hand in it, grabs a hand full, but when he tries to pull his hand out, discovers that the mouth of the jar is not large enough for his fist full of grain to come out. He is very reluctant to leave the grain, and sits with his hand in the jar till the catcher comes and ties a leash around his neck. This was my condition with my job.

But I must admit it wasn't just the money that kept me there. I wanted to quit in order to write full time, but the demon Lack of Confidence had me in chains, too. What makes you think you are good enough, he screamed silently in the depths of my soul. If you quit, you won't have money or success.

But finally this monkey got away and the demon was routed, but only at the point where I couldn't take it anymore. The week I turned in my resignation, my publisher, Raoul Goff, came through the door of our house and my husband, Payson Stevens, who has always supported me as a writer, handed him the proposal for *Ganesha Goes to Lunch*.

We met Raoul through our masseuse, Kelly Thompson, who always brought us gifts of beautiful books that his friend, Raoul, owner of Mandala Publishing, was putting into the world. One day he just brought him over when he was in San Diego, and my perceptive husband persuaded me to put together five of the stories on Indian mythology that were previously published in Parabola.

Raoul published my second book on Rumi, and now my third, *The Singing Guru*, and hopefully, the universe willing the sequels of the book, which are in the making. *The Singing Guru* is only Book 1 in the Sikh Saga series.

Q: How do you make Indian spirituality stories accessible to someone who did not grow up in that culture?

A: You will be surprised how much cross-cultural connection humans all over the planet have. This is what amazes and reassures me about the consanguinity of all when it comes to essential truths that we have all discovered, and sometimes, lost. Language itself is an indicator of this. Though there is Babel, there is also coherence. The fact that my books are bought and read in both India and the US is indication that they make sense to these widely (?) separated audience. It is because at the core we are similar. The mystical traditions of all religions – Gnosticism to Christianity, Sufism to Islam, Vedantic tradition to popular Hinduism – are all indications of this. That’s why I wrote the first two books, to show how paths do converge. Differences are superficial, though serious enough to cause wars.

Specifically, I make the stories accessible by writing long introductions, and in the case of *Ganesha Goes to Lunch*, my editor at Mandala, Mariah Bear, suggested I write one page intros to the dramatis personae of Indian mythology. I am told it is helpful to readers to get a clearer understanding of Indian mythology.

Q: What do you think people misunderstand about Indian spirituality?

A: What is misunderstood about Indian spirituality is what is misunderstood about nearly all religious practices. The primary misunderstanding that mankind is prone to is to take things too literally. In the case of Hinduism, for example, both Indian and Westerners tend to think it is about ritual, about pilgrimages, about a hundred thousand gods. In all religions there is some sensual representation of the Godhood because people, creatures of the senses, need solid representations of it. They need tangibles, statues, books, symbols and signs. They need prophets to worship. They tend to forget that these are all what Joseph Campbell calls the “masks of God,” not God himself or herself. This forgetting has, and continues to have, very serious consequences in the world. People kill and die for it.

But specifically, a lot of people in the west think that yoga equals Indian spirituality.

Though yoga is definitely one of India's gifts to mankind – I myself swear by it; no matter how I'm feeling, it makes me feel better – it is certainly not all of Indian spirituality. Also, Americans who tend towards Hindu practices and rituals need to understand that any practice can have too narrow a focus. Any practice that excludes or sets itself apart from others is destructive to the emerging global community that the internet has set into motion. It is high time that this world wide community becomes our conscious goal.

Q: How did you and your publisher find each other?

A Statement from Kamla K. Kapur

“This book (The Singing Guru) is not a history of Guru Nanak's life. It is a fictional rendering that includes some of the legends, folktales, and myths that have sprung up around him.... “These stories are fantastical. Fantasy is part of human reality, not only as an escape hatch from the pressures of the real world, but also because of its power to illuminate reality and reveal metaphysical and psychological truths.”

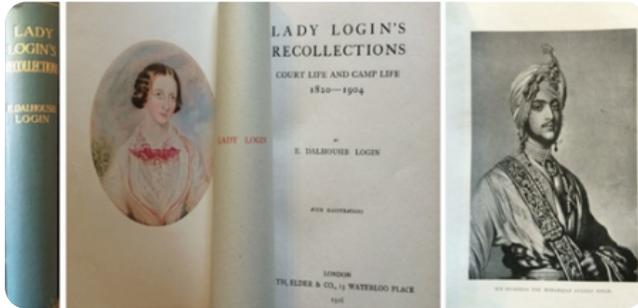
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