

**Shauna Singh Baldwin: Interfaith discussion by women who wear religious headcoverings. March 13, 2016 after Skylight Theatre Production of the gospel musical CROWNS.**

Thank you for your kind introduction. Speaking today as a representative of the The Sikh Religious Society of WI, I'd like to say we are glad to be included in this discussion of Crowns and other headcoverings. We appreciate the efforts of the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee's to expand the moral imagination of our community. As in the musical we just saw, we too, come together to sing in praise. You cannot be sad when you're singing, adding your unique sound to the whole.

In the Sikh faith, we are enjoined to remain as natural as possible. Our ideal is to keep all the hair on the body unshorn. Keeping your hair long embodies one aspect of a connection with the natural state of the creator's creation of us. The turban (*keski* or *dastar*) is required of men to keep their hair covered and neat. Turbans crown and shield our hair, identifying adherents who have pledged to being moral, just, disciplined and socially responsible.<sup>1</sup>

Wearing a chunni enables you to cover your head as a sign of respect in the presence of elders, and when entering sacred space. When you come to the Sikh temple in Brookfield or Oak Creek, you'll see women covering our heads with our chunnis, to enter the temple. We cover our heads, not from the acid tinge of fear, but from the heart of belief and closeness to mothers and grandmothers who did so before us.

Sikh women usually wear the chunni across the chest, and enjoy matching it to each outfit. You can use it to wipe away a child's tears or shield a baby from the elements. You can pull a chunni forward for anonymity and privacy. You can shield your hair from the rain with it. Knot a corner around your coins and notes and you can use it as a purse – or as a sling shot. It's a light shawl when you're cold, a bandage or hanky when you need one. Most of us would feel naked in public without a chunni, yet we shed it in private among friends, as we put down

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<sup>1</sup> Patheos.com

our handbags. Friends turn into sisters by exchanging chunnis, and little girls borrow chunnis from their mothers and sisters and aunties before they borrow clothes.

When a Sikh woman is married, her father's role is to tie her red wedding chunni to her husband's ceremonial one. In April, when we celebrate our new year Baisakhi, a Sikh woman might wear a mustard yellow chunni matching her salwar and kameez. Any time she goes to the gurdwara she will wear every hue of purple or pink, green and yellow, embroidered chunnis, chunnis of diaphanous chiffon or racy lace. We rely on the inventive artisans who weave, dye, and embroider our beautiful chunnis.

On St. Patrick's day next week, I'll wear a chunni embroidered with shamrocks. On July 4th, I'll wear one dyed red, white and blue. Celebrating the birthday of one of our ten gurus, I might wear a sequined chunni.

Our holy book, the *Guru Granth Sahib* says the female is in the male, and the male is in the female.<sup>2</sup> Today more Sikh girls and women are beginning to wear the turban in solidarity with our fathers, brothers, or husbands. Observant or not, turban-wearing or not, Sikh men and women find we need to be vigilant because Sikh boys and men in the US have become targets of bullying in school, harassment while traveling, and discrimination on the job. An uncouth act of racist hatred was directed against Sikhs at our Oak Creek temple, in 2012, when a neo-Nazi entered our temple, shot five Sikh men and one Sikh woman, then shot himself.

Sikh-American women join Sikh-American men, and a widening mass of Americans of all faiths in fighting for the right to be visually and religiously different in the land of the free. The United States of America is the home of the brave – and like the characters in CROWNS, real Sikh men and real Sikh women know we have to be very brave.

**Shauna Singh Baldwin**

**673 words**

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<sup>2</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib* (pg 879)

