Nilima Sheikh’s series “Each night put Kashmir in your dreams” reveals her continuing exploration of the historical fate of Kashmir through the past decade, through a set of nine scrolls (casein, tempera on canvas sized 10 by 6 feet each).

Her painted scrolls reveal an informed palimpsest presentation of material that one had come to associate with Sheikh’s work with all of Kashmir’s contradictory and multicultural histories erupting through the artist’s reverie about the land as Paradise. The magical and the marvelous, the mythic and the fabulous and ritual and fantasy pass through the photographic, the performative, the textual, the uttered and the art historical as well as through the artisanal habitual and the ecological. Multiple cultural sensibilities from all over the world from various strata of history make up the Kashmir of today. Textual references from Kalhana rub shoulder with the poetry of Lal Ded, folktales jostle with the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali or the prose of Salman Rushdie and the work of historian Chitralekha Zutshi while visual references range from pre-Renaissance Italian art to famed Persian master Bihzad to the magnificent demonography of the Siyah Qalam and Thangka art amongst others.

As evinced in Sheikh’s work, it is not a simple lament for the destruction of Paradise by political violence. Instead she unravels in various directions the multiple layers of forces of history at play in Kashmir today, the outcome of which is yet to be seen.*


* Geography Research Forum • Vol. 38 • 2018: 166-185.
Construction Site

Casein Tempera on canvas 120 x 72 inches, 2010
The country may be conquered by the force of spiritual merits, but not by forces of soldiers. Hence, its inhabitants are afraid only of the world beyond. There the rivers are free from dangers and aquatic monsters, provided with warm bath-houses for the winter, and furnished with comfortable embankments for descending into the water.

Out of respect, as it were, the sun does not burn fiercely during summer even, in that country which has been created by his father, Kayravas, as he knows that it might not be endured.

Learning, lofty houses, satisfying water and grapes: things that even in heaven are difficult to find, are common there.

Khalvav Pahlaviwani, Vol. 1
Translated and edited by F. G. Rawlinson

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Construction Site

The reason Lal Ded’s poetry is so essential for varieties of Kashmiri in self-evident from an examination of her verses. These are suffused with a sense of the fluidity of religious boundaries, and this has been interpreted as a manifestation of the Kashmiri ethos of tolerance.

Considered Lal Ded’s spiritual successor, Sheikh Nonnadin or Nand Rishi (1378), is another figure central to the memory and meaning of Kashmiriyyat. Again, both Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Muslims esteem him as their spiritual guide, the former referring to him as Shazamand Dzine who has attained ultimate truth and the latter calling his verses the Kashmir Quran.

Since Sheikh Nonnadin is more squarely placed in the Islamic tradition, his writings have had a significant impact on the discourse on Kashmiri Muslim identities.

Contradictions of Belonging

Casein Tempera on canvas 120 x 72 inches, 2010
Each night put Kashmir in your dreams

Casein Tempera on canvas 120 x 72 inches, 2007
Each night put Kashmir in your dreams

My son never asked me, 'Amaaji, can I go to Pakistan and become a militant?' He simply left. I wept. That is the fate of the mothers of Kashmir. When he crossed the border on his return he was caught and jailed for two years. When he was released the Hizbul militant group got after him because they felt he’d broken under torture. So he joined the Afzal to protect himself. Either way he was trapped. Like, basehra.

Don't tell my father I have died,' he says, and follow him through blood on the road and hundreds of pangs of shame, the memories left behind, as they ran from the funeral, victims of the firing. From windows we hear grieving mothers, and the sawr begins to fall on us, like ash, black on edges of flames, it can not extinguish the neighborhood, the houses set afire by midnight soldiers...

And it wasn't as if much was going to change by my going or not going. All this I knew. And yet, and yet, when the world is blowing up around you, it is hard to ask whether the smallest gesture of humanity makes any difference or not. I went to each of the two funerals and hugged forgiveness.

Sana offers

Mishal Sadiq Chaudhary and Arzu

One of the prettiest objects in the village is the gravestone, shrouded by the Ciclo flowers, and bright with fine, purple, white, pink sahib, and yellow magnolias, which the people plant over their departed relations.

I have seen the best companions in Kashmir, though perhaps the best—the Bhagats of Syed—died off in the famine of 1877, and men now sing, 'Once once farik,' and speak of their excellent acting. The Bhagat, priest village life is a most vivid drama. Their devotions and make-up are excellent, and they represent most faithfully the internal working of a village community. It is said that Maharaja Ghulam Singh acquired a very intimate knowledge of village administration from the Bhagat’s performances, and I have picked up some hints from them as to the methods of the patwari, the village accountant.

Waliya J. Lohani

The Village of Kashmir.

Casein Tempera on canvas 120 x 72 inches, 2007
Gathering Threads

Casein Tempera on canvas 120 x 72 inches, 2003
Gathering Threads

The Sisagar maps also point to the fact that very few of us are now likely to see the fourth example of the city it is housed in, because the multiform culture of Kashmir has become a war zone... The materiality and multiple competing stories of the shawls show us how in realpolitik, theories of hybridity offer no comfortable solution and debates on textual performance of shawls identities mask all kinds of suffering. At best we only ever have an uneasy symmetrical and there are forces that push to reverse every this into simple oppositions of tectonic uniformity. Agra Shaded Ami's poem (A History of Paisley, 1987) can be read against the text of the Duffield shawl, precisely the title of the place that helped create its status as a priceless object by deeming the craft production which gave shawls their fame.

You who will find the dark inside of paudye one afternoon on the peaks of Laharjan... Trader from an ancient market of the future, a list of chronology, that sale... embourderie of time... wasn’t that these are her footsteps from the day the world began... 

...I say, it is still the day the world begins... and the city rises, building its remains... As wooden beams already their own fire's prophets... And you, now touching sky, dote in her zubehar still entwining in the valley, dyed in the dyes and flax from soldiers into dead-end lanes.

Lush! Their feet blood, they have footsteps on the street, which will give up to faded; at dusk, a carpet you have found... you'll think... the first teardrop, grass that was noticed for a metaphor diaphanous into design...

...there men are disappearing, between signs of love, unfamiliar raccoon on the soil...

...one of them, alone and without, with snow and leaf bound for Egypt... It is dusk... The moon in terns, in weaver's tombs, gathers falling threads... Soon he will stitch the air.

Casein Tempera on canvas 120 x 72 inches, 2003
“Each night put Kashmir in your dreams” 173

Farewell

Casein Tempera on canvas 120 x 72 inches, 2004
Farewell

That failure of the subconscious was the burden: the line of control did not run through 250 kilometres of militarised mountains. It ran through our souls, our hearts, and our minds. It ran through everything. A Kashmiri, on Indian, and a Pakistani said, wrote, and did. It ran through the fingers of editors writing newspaper and magazine editorials. It ran through the eyes of reporters. It ran through the winds of Bollywood coming to life in dark theatres. It ran through conversations in coffee shops and TV screens showing cricket matches, it ran through families and dinner talk, it ran through the whispers of lovers. And it ran through our grief, our anger, our tears, and our silences.

The buses carrying the passengers from Murree to Srinagar travelled under a drizzling grey sky to Srinagar. It is a road that has been deserted after dusk for a decade and a half. I watched thousands of women, men, and children stand along the main deserted road, waving hands and umbrellas, welcoming the ones who had stepped across the line. There was no fear that evening. There were only hands reaching out of the bus windows, waving in the air, as if each wave would erase the lines of control. I raised my hand and waved.

Nasiruddin Peer

Interestingly, it was in the Afghan period that Kashmiri Pandits attained prominence in Persian and not only began to form part of the administration of the land, but, more significantly became an integral voice in the expression of a sense of longing for and belonging to the Kashmir homeland. One such Kashmiri Pandit poet, Daipram Pashkar (1443-1511), came from a family known for its scholarship in Persian and Sanskrit and for service as civil officials to the Afghans. Even as Kashtr held a number of civil positions with the Afghans, both in Srinagar and Kabul, he wrote politically in Persian, composing verses on Kashmir, its homeland, and introducing Hindu devotional themes to Persian poetry in Kashmir. Not only did Kashtr translate the Bhagavadgita into Persian, he also composed the Maaneri-i Kashmir, which he wrote in praise of his homeland while stationed in Kabul.

O Lord, bless the land of my hopes,
And show me spring in the garden of Kafrnag.
I gaze in separation from my home,
Not knowing why destiny cast me away.

Where is the fervor of these fountains,
Whose sighs, O Lord, are lifted to the heavens by the wind?

I cannot describe the state of my separations,
Fortitude is better, fortitude is better.

Sanaullah Kri (1796-1873), a devotional poet who wrote in both Persian and Kashmiri... composed the following verses:

Will you not go there,
Where the Prophet has eaten?
You will tell him my condition,
He in the medicine for our illnesses.
He in the beautiful one,
He is our well-wisher.
Will you not tell him,
That the Kashmiris have fallen?
They are helpless, unknown, and unworldly.

Without friends or helpers.

Deshnaski Zatayi
Languages of Kashmir

Casein Tempera on canvas 120 x 72 inches, 2004
“Each night put Kashmir in your dreams” 175

Dying Dreaming

Casein Tempera on canvas 120 x 72 inches, 2004
Dying Dreaming

Touched by the kindness of a Hindu girl named Bhavan, who would earn her livelihood by carrying water to a village perch on a hilltop and would spend all her earnings on feeding her birds, while she herself would starve, he dictated Narada Narayani Rama Naidu wrote in one of his verses:

The dumb girl in a small village
Who quenched the thirst of the thirsty
Flew in the high heavens with her pet birds
Bestow on me, my Lord, the same grace

In the subroutine it is said that one spring Sheikh Hamid, accompanied by some of his disciples, visited the Pir Punad on canvas 120 x 72 inches, 2004

He had reached a place at the foot of the mountain called Nazik Nair, now called Lal Ghatam, where a black deer was in the habit of seating passersby and eating them. The deer’s name was Dukhrana. In consequence of this the Sheikh’s disciples turned to him in great distress and besought him to deliver them. The Sheikh heard their petition, and taking hold of one of the ears of the deer threw him over the mountain. As soon as the body touched the ground on the other side, it was metamorphosed into a stone, which may be seen there, in the form of a man, to the present day...

Several of these stones, called in Kashmuri dialects, are to be seen about the valley. People think them to be old as the Pandavas, and believe they are the petrified bodies of wretched men, whom some god visited in earlier times cursed because they were treated by them near Hari Parbat, a hill in Sinjagar, are five or six of these stones, which people declare were formerly dival-tantal (sellers of matting), whom Laksheeni, the goddess, cursed because they would not sell same matting cheap.

Tradition says that Kashmir was once a tributary of China, and because there was not much money in the valley and cattle was difficult of transport, men and women were sent yearly as tribute to that country. When Zinna-Cabahan obtained possession of Kashmir he declared to pay the tribute, whereas the Shah-i-Chin sent a present, causing him, and swathing him that if he did not quickly comply with the customs of his predecessors in the valley he would make war on him and ruin him, and every one and everything belonging to him. Now Zinna-Cabahan had heard of the Chinese, of their vast numbers, and power and celerity, and therefore was somewhat frightened by these stern words... At that time there lived in Kashmir a very famous fairy by the name of Bahadur, who begged the king not to be disturbed, and promised to arrange the matter for him. This fairy, by virtue of his sanctity, flew over to China in the twinkling of an eye, and brought back the Shah-i-Chin lying on his bed to his own humble abode. In the morning, when the Shah awoke and found himself in a convalescent, he was very much surprised.

“O, holy man,” said he to the fairy. “Tell me, I pray you, why have you brought me here.”

“I have transported you better,” replied Bahadur, “in order that you might meet face to face with Zinna-Cabahan, and promise him that you will abolish this wicked custom...”

The Shah-i-Chin was so touched by these words, and cutting his finger so that the blood oozed out, he called for a pen and some paper, and at once wrote an order declaring Kashmir an independent state. Then Bahadur presented him with some jewels, apricots, walnuts, and other fruits, and caused him to arrive at his country again. When the Shah related to his people what had happened to him and what he had seen, his people would not believe him, but afterwards, when he showed them the different fruits that the fairy had given him, they were convinced, and applauded his deed.

J. HAMID MAHMOODI
Full Title of Kashmir

In the case of the rifles, aside, resplendent on wall or bookroom table, the self-preservation of the artwork: the overwhelming detail coupled with the dominating size of the piece—presents its map as a flat, totalized image. But the sheet can also be read as a map of stories, a palimpsest of changes and differences. It includes the tomb of Sultan Zain-ud-Din and the Shahzahanoya Hindu temple thus indicating the monastic traditions of Kashmir’s shows the fort Hari Parlak built by Emperor Akbar, who annexed the valley in 1648 and visited the same year, depicts the famous gardens constructed by emperor Jehangir, contains in its fabric memories of Rani Laxmi, who took Sinjagar in 1645 driving workers away to Lahore, Aurnitagar, Rayalpindi because of taxes and the British, who annexed it after the First Sikh war 1846 but said it to the Dogra Maharanji of Jammu. Golab Shah was the revenue from Kashmir, that this ruler divorced weavers couldn’t not leave unless they found a replacement to do their work.

Paul Sharred
Following the rain
“Each night put Kashmir in your dreams” 177

Going Away

Casein Tempera on canvas 120 x 72 inches, 2010
Not all men return from dust, disguised as roses.
What happens to the north forever? What becomes?
Adio Sheik All
After Death

Going Away
dirt from the garden of your heart.
Then perhaps the Narcissus garden will blossom.
When death you will be asked for the results of your life.
Sheik is after you like a tabi

In God. J Milton Keynes
Anniversary of the Rashtri Pravesh & Stage

Men go to mosques. We go to the sinatra, the shrines. There we weep together and-unburden
the load that sits heavily on the heart. We cannot face God on our own, so we ask the Pit
buried there to intercede on our behalf. I find great peace there. What are these men thinking
when they burn down our shrines?

Aliens, Sinagor

Casein Tempera on canvas 120 x 72 inches, 2010
"Each night put Kashmir in your dreams"

Son et Lumiere

Casein Tempera on canvas 120 x 72 inches, 2010
Son et Lumiere

Every educated Hindo and most Mussalmans in Kashmir believe that the valley was once a vast lake on which the goddess Parvati sailed in a pleasure-boat from her mountain home on Haramuk in the north to Khonurag lake in the south. In her honour the lake was known as Sattinar, the turn of the chaste woman. But there dwelt in the lake a cruel demon Jaba, whose patron was Brahma, and this demon destroyed all life on the shores and rendered the country waste. By chance Kashaf, a grandson of Brahma, found his way to the lake, and distressed at this sight, Kashaf gave himself up to religious exercises and then braved himself up for a struggle with Jaba, but the demon eluded him and hid under the water. Then Vishnu came to the help of Kashaf and struck the mountains at Baranamula with his trident, and the waters of the lake rushed out. But Jaba entrenched himself in low ground near the Hari-Parchat, and though the gods searched for him in the sun in one hand and the moon in the other the demon baffled them. But at last the goddess Parvati dropped a mountain on top of him, crushing his life out, and the mountain in now known as Hari Purhat, and it is a great obelisk in honour of Devi. After this the valley was known as Kashmar, the home of Kashaf, and it is now corrupted to Kashmir... When Jaba was crushed to death the smaller demons lost heart, and men began to visit the valley in the summer, as winter came on overwhelming to the warmer and drier regions of Kashmir and leaving Kashmir to the demons. But by chance an old Brahman, who was unable to walk, spent the winter in the valley and went to Manan, and the deity of the fountain gave him the Malarpad Puran. By studying the prophecies of the Puran the Brahman was enabled to read the demons, and Kashmar became permanently. The people paint a high pass in the south-west of the valley, and relate how the king, crossing the mountain with his army, was amused by the agnies and cries of an elephant which had fallen down a ravine.

Walter R. Lawrence. The Valley of Kashmir

In Kashmir there is plenty of water from streams and springs. By far the best is that of the Lar valley, which joins the Bhath in the village of Suhalu d-din-uz. This village is one of the celebrated places of Kashmir, and is on the Bhath. About a hundred plane-trees (shahani) of graceful form clustered together on one plot of ground, pleasant and green, join each other so as to shade the whole plot, and the whole surface of the ground is grass and trefoil, so much so that to lay a carpet on it would be superficial and in bad taste. The village was founded by Sultan Zin-i-shah, who for 52 years ruled Kashmir with absolute sway. They speak of him as the great Pashita. They tell you also of the roofs of Suhalu, and the walls of buildings in his is in Kashmir. One of those is in the midst of a lake called Wular, and of which the length and breadth are more than three of four kas. It is called Zen-lanka, and in making it they have exerted themselves greatly. The springs of this lake are very deep. The first time they brought a large quantity of stone in boats and poured it on the place where now the building stands it had no result. At last they sank some thousands of boats with stones, and with great labour recovered a place of ground 100 x 100 just out of the water, and made a terrace, and on one side thereof the Sultan exerted a temple for the worship of his supreme Lord. Then this there is no four place.

Tasfik-i Jalal'si or Memoirs of Jalal'si, trans. Alexander Rogers, ed. Henry Rawlinson

Most significant to later articulations of regional identities, however, was the establishment of the tradition of Kashmiri historiography in Persia. Akbar ordered the translation of the Rajatarangini into Persian, a task allotted to Mulla Ahmad Shahshahani. During Iqbal's time, Malik Heider and Naryan Kaul Aziz, were Kashmiri Muslims and the other a Kashmiri Pandit, wrote detailed histories of the Valley in Persian. It is also significant that one of the more prominent historians of the late Mughal period, Khawja Azam Daudnuri, was the first historian to revive the memory of Lal Ded in his famous Tawarkh-i-Kashmir (History of Kashmir, written in 1730. By the early eighteenth century, local Kashmiri historians had begun to play an important role in articulating a sense of homeland to Kashmiri by carrying forward the tradition of complaint to its logical conclusion, evident in the following verse by Khawja Muhammad Azam.

So great is the distress of the people of Kashmir. That it escapes even their own comprehension. When the people were weakened by famine. Ghens sprang up from towns to desert. He rice or grain can be found anywhere. Except in the wheat-embrowned beauty of the beloved. Bellies like eves are heated to the grilling point. Yearning for a piece of bread.

Written after the famine that hit the Valley in 1733, this verse clearly makes a plea for restitution to the Mughal court.

Chitrakote Zrali: Languages of Belonging

Casein Tempera on canvas 120 x 72 inches, 2010
The beautiful village of Pachigam still exists
The beautiful village of Pachigam still exists

What was that cry? Was it a man, a woman, an angel or a god? Who seemed thus, who howled just so? Could any human voice make such a desolate noise?

There was the earth and there were the planets. The earth was not a planet. The planets were the grabbers. They were called this because they could seize hold of the earth and bend its destiny to their will. The earth was never of their kind. The earth was the subject. The earth was the grabbed.

Pachigam was the earth, the grabber, helpless and powerful unerring planets stooped low, extended their celestial and merciless tentacles and grabbed.

Sabam Rustide
Shahidur the Clever

God wanted that blue-colored land
Should tire of wailing like the reed’s heart.

He gave its control to the Afghans,
He gave Jamshid’s garden to the demons.

Articulations of Kashmiri regional belonging that included and transcended religious, tribal, and other local affiliations became particularly insistent during Afghan rule (1753-1819). Despite the lack of patronage, Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits alike wrote prolifically, recording the mood of the times and their deep sense of resentment toward the new rulers, attempting to invoke ideas of good governance during the chaotic rule of both Afghans and, later, Sikhs.

Dhriti P. Zutshi
Languages of Belonging

Casein Tempera on canvas 120 x 72 inches, 2009
Valley

Casein Tempera on canvas 120 x 72 inches, 2003
Valley

This lake, even a mustard seed’s too large
To sink in it,
Yet everybody comes
to drink its water.

Deer, jackals, rhinos, about-elephants
Are born,
And barely born, fall back
Into its waters.

Bahe Me Darya was a raga from the Sufi period who had ties to the ruling dynasty and wrote primarily in Persian. His verse illuminates the interaction between region and religion as well as the particular and the universal.

The whole creation belongs to me.
Beyond the veil is my abode.
0 suppliants of time, listen attentively.
My banquet springs from Qaf to Qaf.
Know that the world of being is sought, the true word, he saa, belongs to me.
He whom you find to be without any knees is watching me at my gate.
I have solitude in Kashmir.
For this universe is my garden.

In his introduction to the Tajpanagat, Kishan Pandit says, “of the valley, it is a culture where the sun shines widely, being the place created by Kashepa as if for his glory. High school-educated, the suffered, lived-water and grapes, which are rare even in heaven, are common here. Kashepa is the best place in the three worlds, Himalaya the best part of Kashepa, and Kashepa the best place in Himalaya.”

Contrary to popular belief, it was not the isolation of the Kashmiri Valley that produced narratives of regional and religious belonging; rather, it was the Valley’s links with the world outside that helped reinforce the poetic discourse on identities in the mid-eighteenth to early-nineteenth centuries. Instead of seeing the Valley and its inhabitants as being patterned by the mountains that surround them into articulating an immutable, invariant identity, the poet’s voice geographic metaphor, that of the river, is more apt in discussing the political culture and discourse on identities in the region. The river is a river which has carved the Kashmiri Valley out of the mountains and defines its geographic boundaries, is in constant motion, changing its course through the rough and tumble of the Valley’s landscape, even as it continues to transform it. The articulation of identities by inhabitants of the Valley is a similar process of interaction, in this instance between socio-political factors, religious affiliations, and shifting geographic contexts.

There is no modest statement is the terming and populated detail of the shaw’s map, and its presentation multiple perspectives, that topography reproductions of landscape do not capture everything in their uniform and abstract art. The embellished map affirms the importance of historical and the richness of local detail.

Water, spring, rock, cave, tree, mountain; all these are honoured, held sacred in Kashmir by Pandit and Muslim alike and imbued with the moving spirit. In truth their differences are on the surface. Deeper down they are akin, faithfully following the traditions of their common ancestors. In Kashmir you can’t stop without walking into a shrine or temple built along a crevice, under a tree, over a spring. Great calms of peace in these turbulent times.

The mountains which surround Kashmir are never monotonous. Infinitely varied in form and colour, they are such as an artist might picture in his dreams.

Casein Tempera on canvas 120 x 72 inches, 2003
NILIMA SHEIKH was born in New Delhi in 1945 and after graduating in history, she studied painting at the MS University of Baroda (1965-71). She has exhibited her paintings since 1969, and in 2017 she participated in Documenta 14 in Kassel and Athens. Her solo exhibitions include Each night put Kashmir in your dreams at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2014. She has illustrated and designed children's books since 1986 and between 1989 and 2000 created the scenography and visual design for theater productions. She writes on art and has published essays in books, journals and artists’ catalogues.