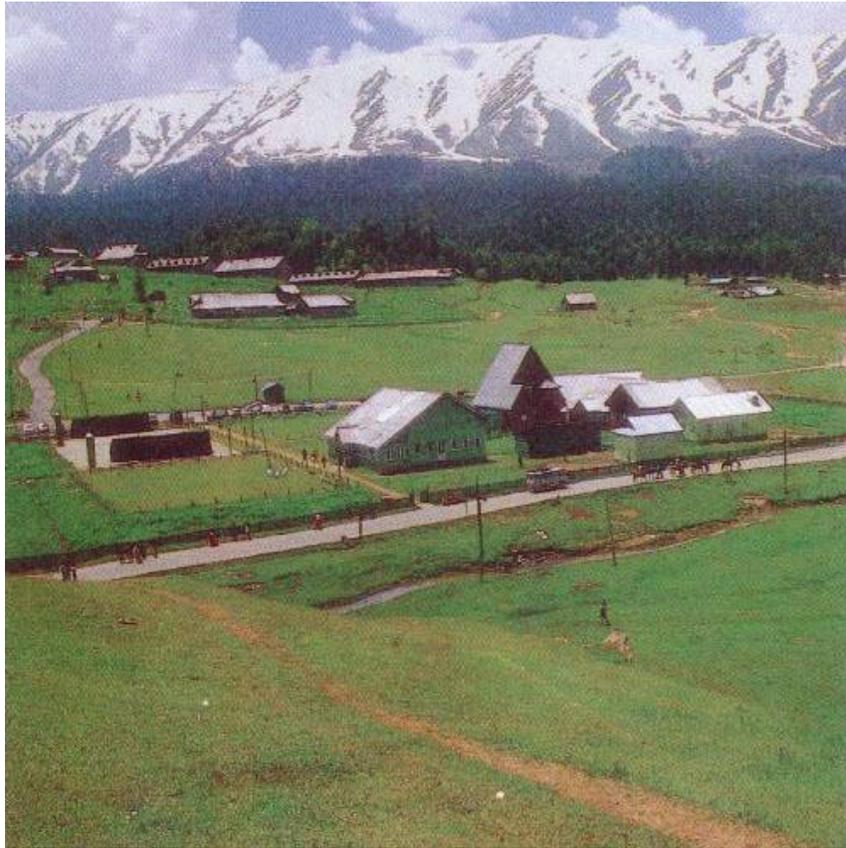




Sukeshi Has A Dream and Other Poems of Kashmir

by Lalita Pandit



SUKESHI HAS A DREAM

AND OTHER POEMS OF KASHMIR

BY LALITA PANDIT

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Sukeshi has a Dream and Other Poems of Kashmir is part of a larger poetry collection, about to be submitted to presses. The genesis of this volume has to do with Pandit's years of intense engagement with teaching literature and literary aesthetics in a cross cultural context, and her theoretical interest in the science of Aesthetics. Above all, this collection owes its existence to Pandit's strongly felt need for creative expression in the face of a violent erasure of the Past: Historical and Personal.

Poetic metaphor holds contradictory states of mind together. Poetic logic is paradoxical. Lyrical Poetry evokes the unspoken by inventing a speech pattern, a voice, a consciousness. It transforms the ordinary into something rare. Working on these poems has been an intensely joyful experience for Pandit, even when the content of many of these poems is sorrowful. Poetry converts sorrow into joy, loss into gain, past into present and future, history into myth, the private into the public.

2.0 LALITA PANDIT



Lalita Pandit

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Lalita Pandit is a Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin -La Crosse where she teaches courses in Shakespeare, Literary Theory, International Studies in Literature, and general writing and communication courses. Her published books include, *Criticism and Lacan: Essays and Dialogue on Language, Structure, and the Unconscious*, edited with Patrick Colm Hogan, published by the University of Georgia Press, 1990 ; *Literary India: Comparative Studies in Aesthetics, Colonialism, and Culture*, edited with Patrick Colm Hogan , State University of New York Press, 1995; *Comparative Poetics: Non-Western Traditions of Literary Theory*, edited with Patrick Colm Hogan, Special Issue of *College Literature*. 23. 1 Feb., 1996. Pandit is an associate editor of the journal *College Literature*.

Pandit is currently working on putting together a volume of essays, with Patrick Colm Hogan, on Rabindranath Tagore. It is based on papers presented at the International Conference on Tagore's work, *Home and the World: Rabindranath Tagore at the end of the Millennium*, that took place at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, September 18-22, 1998. Pandit was one of the organizers of this landmark conference that was mentioned in *India Abroad*.

Pandit's published essays and book chapters include "Dhvani and "the full word": Suggestion and Signification from Abhinavagupta to Jacques Lacan" (1996); "Non-Western Literary Theories and What do with Them" (1996); "Patriarchy and Paranoia: Imaginary Infidelity *Uttaramcarita* and *The Winter's Tale*" (1995); "An Interview with Anita Desai" (1995); "Caste, Race, and Nation: History and Dialectic in Rabindranath's *Gora*" (1995).

Four of Pandit's Hindi poems, "Devsar main Dhu:svapna," "Vismriti," "Vairagya," "Samay aur Surya," were published in *Vishva Viveka*, 7: 3, 1998 (an International Hindi Magazine From USA).

Over the years, Pandit has presented numerous papers at national and international conferences on subjects as diverse as Shakespeare, African Authors, various Indian Authors, and on theoretical subjects. She is currently working on a book manuscript titled "Comparative Dramaturgy: Indian Aesthetics and Shakespearean Drama." Pandit has been awarded a research grant and a sabbatic leave grant to complete this project.

At the coming year's conference of the Asian Studies Association of America, Pandit is planning to present a paper on Shankaracharya's and Lalleshvari's devotional poetry. At the Tagore Conference mentioned above, she presented a paper, "Romantic Love in *Gora*: Tagore's uses of Shringara, Bhavana, and Rasadhvani." Pandit is also currently working on a long overview essay on all the scholarly work done on Shakespeare's influence on James Joyce. This essay will be included in an Internet publication, an Overview of Influence Studies of James Joyce's Work. In addition, Pandit has an essay forthcoming, "Anti-Colonialist Agon and Fashioning of Female Identity in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*," in *Keepers of the Flame: Power, Myth and Cultural Consciousness in Ethnic Female Identity*, eds. Sondra O'neale and Cynthia Tompkins, Wayne State University Press, 1998.

Pandit's published work mentioned above has received numerous highly positive reviews in scholarly journals in the US, in France, and other places. For example, Martha Ann Selby, in a review in the *Journal of Asian Studies* (56: 2, May 1997), says about Pandit's authorial contributions to *Literary India*: "the volume's co-editor, Lalita Pandit, is the true star of the collection," "this is comparative literature at its very best." The same reviewer refers to Pandit's interview with Anita Desai as "a superb interview," and calls it "the very soul of the book." *Comparative Poetics: Non-Western Traditions in Literary Theory* was one of the three finalists for the Council of Editors of Learned Journals' Best Special Issue Award for 1996. One of the judges made special mention of the essays on Indian/Kashmiri (Abhinavagupta's and Anandavardhana's) aesthetics. He/she said, "this issue will certainly become an important scholarly resource in the future. I was especially impressed by contributions of Hogan, Pandit, and Heidinger" (Dec. 1996).

3.0 MY FATHER'S COUNTRY

The moon unreports deaths,
absences; she shines tonight
too, faint amid fog.
Embers blaze blue inside
bakeries, as oil soaked hands
mold hard dough into bread,
paper-thin.

Heavy thumps, furtive knocks.
A gloved hand searches safety
against boots, jeeps, whistles,
sovereignty's untired death-rattle.
Echoes of an undeclared war.
Democracy is Andromache;
the virtuous wife whom
a weather beaten Greek ship
leads away from home.
Achilles' son. Who else?
She will submit to his caresses
at night, as brave Hector's
grave grows still, damp with
her tears.

She had to give away
their first born, the six years
old Astynax, to be hurled
from battlements
of a city built by his ancestors.
Washed by the blood of his
many uncles.
Only today, in the noon sun
the city square was drenched
again in the virginal blood
of Polixena, Priam's daughter.
She sang at festivals; from her
chaste hands patron gods
received oblations. She, whom
Achilles loved and whose sacrifice
his ghost demanded. That is what
Odysseus said to the troops.
It is the city where Astynax
opened his eyes many times
to blood curdling prophecies
of Cassandra, his other aunt.
Apollo's high priestess.
The men who take him away
from Andromache's arms
are kind, one says he'll prepare
sandal wood.
Another's voice cracks when

he says he'll bring flowers,
wash the wounds in sacred waters.
Knit him together somehow
so his father will know him
in the other world, lift him up
in his arms. Kiss his brow.
My father's country is not ancient Troy
Just another place of force
where weather darkened timber
eves hide Ovid's red breasted swallow.
A war bird raves and rages.
As a tongue less Philomela turns, once again,
into a nightingale.
She waits for roses to bloom
in the city's gardens.
What city? What land lowered
flags lie muffled in sleep?

[© Lalita Pandit, July 21, 1996].

4.0 AZADI: 1989-1995

In November rain
I look for you,
shivering in a red coat,
holding back words.
Dried flowers pressed inside
an old book, perfumed
by whose hand?
Last leaves on bare branches
shudder to see me so young,
peering at names of houses,
odd and even numbers.
I thought that you lived here,
somewhere near *Sherbag*.
Fenced with ivy, the ancient
garden smells of death.
Rose beds are graves, fountains
speak of tear dried faces -
their unaccounted for grief.
The streets near *Sherbag*
used to be wider, sunnier.
Rows of ugly houses did not crowd
like they do now.
Twenty years ago, four *Chinar*
trees stood stout and solid
inside the high walled garden
of my school right around
the corner. We used to play a game.
Something to do with the distance
between the *Chinars*.
How we made triangles and crosses
getting from one to the other.
Why are the shops painted green?
Graffiti on the walls tells
me a bad story, a blackened tricolor.
Pakistan's banner installed in its place,
its half moon being kissed
by suppliant lips.
In those days too people had a vision
of the Land of the Pure.
They dreamt of what they called
Azadi, even then.
Yet, the police station was not
a dangerous place.
People sat around and talked
of *Azadi* as if she were
a woman in Persian legend.
Layla, perhaps.
The Mujahid was no sly,
self hating, masked killer,
but Majnu.

He who journeys
with the moon and the sun,
wild wind and black clouds
when stars hide their faces
in a vast desert, and the desert
runs ahead of him.

What nation
does not have a dream
like that?

*History is a nightmare
from which we cannot wake:
we cannot arise.*

I have heard of house to house
searches for young men with beautiful
hair who hide frightful weapons
in their sister's hope chests.

To the women who love them
they tell nothing except that
one day *Azadi* will arrive
at everyone's doorstep.

Life will become prettier, more
honorable, more pious.

Who are these men?

I would like to ask you.

I would like to know
why their dream of *Azadi*
excludes me, and my people.

Those who were born here,
but were not entirely free.

They did not dare to dream,
whisper, or scream.

You thought *Azadi*
could be courted, wooed, and wed,
without shedding blood.

You thought it could be made
to become a wife who does not stray;
never demands a price, a gift, a sacrifice.

[© Lalita Pandit, June 10, 1995].

5.0 THE YELLOW RIVER

A cobbled street
echoes my footfall.
Time dented stone
faces, dust dyed,
worn by rain
and ice,
frosts at midnight.
In dark, they listen
with lowered lids
cart loads reach the yellow
river. A mad man's song
for tomorrow's dead
seeps through feathery
quilts, into dreams
about the dead. Of graves
and caves that open
doors to the roaming beast.
Sometimes he yields his prey
to others better than him
at carnage.
In July, the river overflows
its banks leaving behind mud
mounds, washed white
to paint eyes, lips, hands.
Slipping, staggering feet
of those who died last week,
the week of terror before,
and a week before that.
Leaf shadows, silver
shimmer fish,
a small cherry blossom wound.
Mute contusions, grave blue
and purple.
Brave head that fell
in ambush.

[© Lalita Pandit, April 9, 1998].

6.0 FATHER

It is you
talking to me.
Who was in your
nightmare
when a midnight moon
became so terrified
and you walked
over to the kitchen,
made tea with milk.
You prayed.
You dreamt
of a blue and green van
which stopped near our door.
Someone knocked
three times.
You heard the van pull away.
Then, you wanted to check.
My head
limp, uncut hair, bloodied,
fell out. My crushed hands
and shoulders you could
not bear to see.
Tonight
I am home with you,
sleeping
in a room downstairs:
not my own room
next to yours.
Your soft step comes close,
it goes away till I can't hear.
In your own home, my father,
you cannot find the Door
within which is Mercy.
Outside is Death. I cannot Rise!

[© Lalita Pandit, March 15, 1997].

7.0 SUMMER RAIN

Rain in Wisconsin reminds
me of rain in Kashmir,
when my mother was young.
She made a special kind of rice cake.
July rain was good for crops,
for fruit, and the wild grasses
that grew behind our house
in an abandoned yard.
There were three weeping willows.
Their fingery leaves brushed against
amber waters at dawn,
at dusk my mother lit an oil lamp.
Set it on a ledge near
the west window, praying
to the setting sun.
It is repentance, she said,
not prayer. To brighten his path.
Perhaps it will lead someone's
wandering step away from error,
to home, to his wife.
The tiny cotton wick
was too small, weakly flickering
in the wind. What good would
it do? I thought.
When it was dark,
she removed the lamp.
Put it in front of an icon.
The light lit up eyes
of a goddess, blue black.
The bloodied skulls
she wore for a necklace,
her flame red tongue.
Thin hands with long fingers.
July rain still falls in Kashmir
gently like tears of a mother
whose daughters turned against her.
Whose sons forgot her

[© Lalita Pandit, July 18, 1997].

8.0 ANANTNAG

I took pride in your
natural springs,
your navigable river.
Every April we went
to Mattan, offered libations
to the dead: my father's dead
my mother's.
No dead of my own then,
life was eternal.
I could sense it when we
gathered blue lotuses
to lay at a gold plated
doorstep, bronze sun disk:
majestic, bedazzling.
Thirty years journeyed
past us, leaving behind
hoof taps on stone.
Spring and autumn skies
grew old, listening
to night ragas.
Un-chronicled silences
of a very cold moon.
Apple trees you planted
in the backyard are tired
of bearing fruit.
They no longer blossom
in early spring;
their leaves look pensive,
yellowed at the edges.
Whoever opens the front gate
will close it fast in my face,
without asking my name.
Still, my expatriate feet drag me
back to you.
Evening shadows stare at me
with blind eyes. Cool breezes
say: *may be, only may be,*
we knew you then.
What of that? Now you are
a stranger, an enemy.
Piles of garbage along
the hospital walls, broken bottles,
blood soaked bandages.
Black curtains on windows
tell me to go where I came
from. Children stare with
suspicion. They have learnt
to hate; they are afraid.
Hollow eyed ghosts
walk the streets

beneath a thin moon, muttering
curses, adding up the dead.
The hill looks like a camel's back.
It is haunted.

[© Lalita Pandit, August 7, 1996].

9.0 MOTHER'S DAY

[For Kashmiri Mothers]

A fringe of leaves
outside your window
casts intricate shadows.
You sit up in bed;
it is only the wind.
You remember
birth cries, the slime
of womb waters.
Clean hair afterwards,
like sepals of tulips.
First taste of milk on soured
lips, thin like sliced roses
seen through glass.
Dream brush of lashes
barely visible.
dimples on little feet,
pale plums of early summer.
Nails are so sharp already,
fists clench. Feet grow heavy,
descend down the stairs;
cave them in.
Year after year,
caravans pass you by.
Without regret, gold dust
settles on autumn leaves.
Your dream becomes
a distant house.
You reach it, a shadow
slips out of the door,
then another. A thousand
shadows gather around
and you scream.
You have nothing more
to say. Pursed lips
watch camp fires
in Jammu, in Udhampur,
in Pathankot. Your exile.
At home, in Kashmir,
you have learnt
to beat your breasts
like a madwoman
to keep out the hunter.
Your milk, my mother,
for sure, has turned bad.
The blood is still yours
to rage against, rage
My Lioness!

The fire of your womb
is in trees, lakes, rocks.

[© Lalita Pandit, May 10, 1998].

10.0 MAHTAB

Mahtab was a virtual
orphan my mother
took in. She put warm,
clove scented oil
on the welts, purple
and blue bruises.
She became Mahtab's
intermediary, sent
her home unwillingly.
One evening, the girl lost
a spatula: fine copper
with silver polish.
It was
late November.
Knee deep in water,
the girl
with a dark face
could not find
a spatula.
It was night already
and Mahtab lunged
after silvery fish.
They slipped from her
hands, the spatula must
have hidden behind
a heavy, moss covered
stone, sickly green.
How could Mahtab go home?
"Bhatanya Dedi," she said
to my mother, "they will
kill me."
Mahtab's tears were warm,
her hands cold like ice;
her hair took many full
buckets to get clean.
She became beautiful.
Fifteen years later,
my mother went back
to Mahtab's town
and wanted to see her.
The girl had died
in childbirth; there was
no grave, they said.
If there was one,
no one could find it.
"Bhatani! why
do you care so much?"
they said.
My mother is not
an ideologue.

In her dreams
Kashmir is Mahtab
whose grave
she cannot find.

[© Lalita Pandit, May 18, 1998].

11.0 BRIDE IN RED

Like a water drop
inside a flower,
the unsaid, ungiven
in held
between rites
of death and love.
Shame,
Misfortune,
Misery
remain unknown to him
whose name
tangles with the night
flower, drawn in henna.
Death wore the colors
of her wedding dress.
Look, how black it is now!
How the lilacs and roses
on her face wilted:
un-kissed unseen, unblest.
The groom was no more
than a young boy.
His mother strikes a blow;
her grief is a demon.
She blames
the bride in red.
She must not be wedded
to death; the fruit
of her womb will grow
in human nature.
The final fading of henna
on her palm will make
her weep for him.
She must live to tell
this unspeakable tale
to her granddaughter.
When rain clouds
gather over Doda hills,
in the eye of the storm
she will see his face once,
then a flash of lightening
will brighten the path
away from the shelter,
their baskets filled with
fruit, vegetable, firewood.

[© Lalita Pandit, June 25, 1998].

12.0 SEASONS

Summer breezes
part leaf-lips:
dark green,
bright green,
white sun, red sun.
Steel gray
afternoons.
Agony, ecstasy
of a mid-summer's
redwood tree.
Moon monopolizes
hypnotizes
pale green domes
of a mosque.
A girl in rose pink
silk and lace,
lit by a candle
waits
for her bridegroom.
He is to be taken
away soon after,
during dawn prayers.
Tarquin's stride
shall ravish
still sad beauty
of a bride,
when winds change.
War winds
not trade winds.
Trees will be bare.
Redwoods
flowerless,
bowerless
gardens, growing
random grasses.
Water without sound,
without a ripple.
A few last drops
fall on red,
red berries.
January snow
is hardly new.
It wears a solemn
grace, dry eyed,
lays out a corpse
without a face.

[© Lalita Pandit, June 30, 1997].

13.0 PRIYA

White nights have leafy
darknesses: inscrutable.
Pathways of her mind
stay silent like streets
during curfew hours.
Grief stricken avenues
shriek, become quite.
Priya watches people
cross a distant bridge.
She cannot hear voices,
only shadows pass.
Of daughters, wives,
grandmothers in green,
red and blue sarees.
Some wear black
burkhas, white cotton,
or reddish brown silk,
holding hands of small
children, bringing home
fresh fish and fruit.
They are the living.
She is in hell, watching
a pageant which had
place for her not so long
ago; she too had a home.
She is chained to stone.
In a nightmare words form,
lips are too dry to speak.
They bleed her tongue red.
If Priya were to jump,
people will watch her fall,
wearing a white *salwar*.
Her hair elongated eerily
like that of a sinful witch.
Someone will, no doubt,
go mad, screaming loud.
A crowd will gather
near the mosque, where
a fruit vendor arranges
apricots, cherries, plums
in high rise pyramids.
She might shatter them.

[© Lalita Pandit, April 27, 1997].

14.0 REFUGEE

It is midnight,
a fellow passenger
wakes me rudely.
I am already in Srinagar.
My suitcase is blue;
it looks purple.
Cars, tongas, people
who came to take
relatives home have left.
The courtyard
of the Tourist Reception
Center is bordered
by red, red rose bushes.
Wild flowers grow
along dank walls.
Screaming
fury of a night train
bearing a sweet name
brought me from
Delhi to Jammu.
A dingy, low roofed
J&K bus, a morgue
on wheels
dumped me here.
This is my home.
No one can stay
forever
in the valley
of mid-summer pleasure;
only I can.
*A hindu woman
in pale blue silk,
found dead underneath
a Chinara tree,
four kilometers from
the Tourist Reception Center.*
Strawberries
sown into silk
blink
at police lights,
clinging to hope.
A thin moon
wrings her hands,
leaning over
a weeping willow.
An earth gray
body bag
is flown quickly
to my pale faced
husband.

He alone can
do the last rites,
light a sacred
fire for me.
My soul
Ah! My soul
has freed itself.
Apples
almond blossoms
are
my bare shoulders.
Ripe cherries
and peach blossoms.
An inky river
is my hair,
my eyes a soft
black night.
My face parts
from the moon,
in blinding light
I fall, and rise.

[© Lalita Pandit, June 11, 1997].

15.0 MY DREAM

I shall never see his face.
Only hear a voice like
fine music, chanting of mantras
in ancient forest retreats.
My father's old country,
lost to me forever, and ever,
amid the mid west bounty
of summer, becomes my dream.
I hear a footstep near
the red rosebush; the shadows
it casts on moonlit nights
are a bride's downcast eyes.
The pale white robed
Pundarika, the ascetic hero
of an old, old story is
so chaste, pure like a waterfall
that roars sonorous amid
wooded hills, majestic boulders
of Himalaya. Magical pathways
bring me to it: unawares.
Sheltered by leaves
of an ashoka tree, my dream
wakes and sleeps
with the sun and the moon.
Falls on its face
like a toddler of legend,
wearing gold anklets.
Lotus petals are his
shapely lips, morning breezes
stir them slightly, holding
back a wave, a storm, a torrent.
What might be said
gets tangled
in half finished thoughts.
My deep sleep enchants
light step of the bluejay,
red throated squeak
of a cardinal in midsummer.
Egrets step on white sand,
five fathoms of the Atlantic.
Do they still turn bones
into coral, eyes into pearls?

II

Does my father's country
have a dream, a plan,
a safety net, a strategy
to retrieve the banished native.

He lives in a refugee camp in Udhampur,
becomes a mid summer guest
where he should be a host.
After three days, he boards
a dark blue van; it will take him
back to the camp.
His face is blackened
by a sorrow that has no name.
No legitimacy; it is so like him.
Can someone tell this man:
"stay, don't go." Pull out your keys
open jammed locks of your house
in Vanpooch, the river town in the south.
See if the squirrel
your twelve year old used to feed
has her nest where it used to be.
If the burnt down temple near your
house can be mended enough
to let a deity return in gentle peace?
My dream is maya, and this man's
refugee camp, his no-home,
his comings and goings are too.
Perhaps a sorrow will pass.

[© Lalita Pandit, July 4, 1998].

16.0 THE CITY OF DREAD

Yes, they say, it is everywhere.
In courtyards children play
muffled Mujahids and uniformed
men. The local policeman,
played by the whiny, snot-nosed,
thinnest legged kid,
perhaps the poorest among them,
gets killed while watching
the antics of the slayer
and the slain.
Kings and king makers play dice,
bet on their mother, not the wife.
And, the sly one, who created
a seamless, timeless web only
watches this time.
There is nothing in it for him.
He does not work for free;
he has a fee. In the City of Dread,
they still bake the same bread.
It is poisoned, and the wine
goblet, or the cup of peach blossom
tea is not what it looks like!
Who is the betrayer?
Who will fight the duel?
Who will say: "this is
too much for me. I shall drown
myself in despair."
When she does, her blue
lotus robe will haul her up.
Weeds and black thorns
in her hair will point a finger?

II

In a poet's dream
a rare light cleans up the smog,
as he sights his father
crossing a mountain river.
They say it removes sorrow,
eases hurts of timeless parting.
The city comes alive then,
lithe, fragrant, sun drenched.
He sees ivy
creeping along the red brick
wall of his house, his austere home.
The secrets of life are syllables
of the day, the month, and the year:
the sacred, scientific codes
of the Vedas the poet's
grandfather read, and his father.

Fire altars of Rigveda are
a long lost language.
The poet believes in it, and the spoken
word, performed ritual, remembrance
that cannot die. He has
to be reckoned with, years
speak to him, constellations say:
"we are here, chained to stone.
You will free us."

[© Lalita Pandit, May 30, 1998].

17.0 KASHMIR TODAY

Koshur Samachar, Feb'98 issue

*It's bitter cold.
And I'm sick at heart.
Who is there?
Soldiers stand guard.
One relieves the other,
stepping on thin ice.
Army boots always
scared him. He wore
soft soled shoes
Whenever he went
to Srinagar
to visit his eldest son.
Wooden sandals
with cloth straps
adorned his beautiful
feet at home.
He is barefoot now,
treads softly on ice.
It is like glass
strewn on Mahatma
Gandhi's path
when he led the Salt March.
He is an apparition,
my grandfather.
He is asking a question.
National Rifles men
at Anantnag's Lal Chowk
do not know who he is.
He is Aftab Ram
of Kulgam, a village
medicine man whom
everyone used to know.
Their show of violence
scares him away.
He lurks in corners.
It is you, my father,
he wishes to speak
to you. Visit his
village, his house;
lend ear to his story.
Believe it.
He is no ghost,
not thin as air.
His white robe
is real.
Not a shadow warrior
in a Samurai film,
he has been violated.*

A newspaper bearing
his name, *Aftab*, or
Srinagar Sun
reports horrors he can
not come to terms with.
A Muslim woman named
Khadija appeals
to the Party of God
asking for her
disappeared husband.
She says: "*I am your
sister. What have
you done to my husband?
My two years old son
misses his father
His name is Abdul Hamid
Daar. He is twenty five,
five foot seven, dark
curly hair, fair complexioned.
What have you done to him?*"
A Hindu man's father
has died, has been killed.
Drowned in Jhelum
waters when he was
praying to the morning sun
on Makar Sankranti.
This man, Pandit Shiv Nath,
appeals to the Party
of God's area commanders:
*permit me to cremate
my father. Please do not
force me to bury him.
That won't do.
I am Hindu. Won't you
issue me a travel permit
so I can go to Haridwar, to
immerse my father's
ashes in the Ganges.*
My grandfather reads,
listens, shrugs
his shoulders, walks on.
He finds out Khadija's
husband did not return.
Her son became a mute.
Sweet syllables
of Kashmiri prattle
crashed against
a blind wall as he
fled in terror.
She had been hanged,
hands tied behind
her back. He was
brought in to see.

In Pandit Shiv Nath's
courtyard snow roses
and stars shielded
a frail, work-worn body
all winter. Spring
winds rotted it away.
Aftab Ram's shadow
grows taller, thinner.
It falls on blood
splattered walls,
as he reads, listens.
He is a shrewd
unsentimental man.
He does not weep.
He is Kashmir Today
He will wait, wait
for my father, my uncle.
He will wait for me
across the river.

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18.0 SUKESHI HAS A DREAM

It is early spring
of 1995, Sukeshi
has a dream.
In her dream,
emptied, illegally occupied Hindu
houses in Kashmir have
not been burnt down.
The windows, doors are intact,
locks on them
slightly rusted, outer walls
still bear imprints of foliage.
Flowers painted for weddings.
Names of brides and grooms.
A lot has been washed out.
In the dream, Sukeshi
feels she has
to look up all her kin
in Kashmir's
two hundred tree lined
hamlets.
The Umanagari house
displays marigold garlands,
red peppers in a string,
tiny, cookie like pieces
of bitter melon, thinner slices
of purple brinjal.
The strings hang on nails.
How they battle with
winter winds, summer rain!
In the courtyard
she finds worn out bits of brocade,
an old muslin saree torn to pieces.
Home-dyed many times, after
the original dye has
worn off. Some Jigri, or some Babhi,
or some Mami, or Masi of hers.
There were always
so many when they visited
from Delhi, Suki could never
remember names, or who was
whose daughter-in-law?
They all had nice hair, beautiful
bright eyes without make up.
Suki wonders what the original color
of this saree might have been?
Who might have worn it?
Discarded it impatiently at night
to find rest in the loving
arms of her husband.

II

Sukeshi wanders alone
but it does not scare her.
It seems right that she
should make this journey.
See how things are?
After all, this home
is hers; and these are her
properties, homesteads.
She has a mission.
It is Amavasya,
perhaps the month of kartik.
In the dark she can still see
the temple of goddess Uma
in her grandfather's beautiful
village.
The blue spring
with lotus stems
undulating
in a gentle peace.
Suki remembers
the summer
when she was three.
Devi Uma had come
to her in a dream.
She told no one.
Devi Uma had said
nothing, given
her nothing, only
a beatific smile played
for a moment.
Lit up the green silk
with decorative fringes;
the goddess's vesture.
Her eyes, arms, weapons,
and peacock feathers.
A woman's tears
over a sick child at her feet.
The goddess can not heal.
That evening
Sukeshi went to the temple
holding her grandfather's hand,
offered a full bloomed lotus
with seed pods and the petals.
Devi Uma's lips, eyebrows stirred
she thought, just a little bit.
Shadow of a magnolia
caught in morning breezes.
Did the goddess
have something to tell?

III

In 1998

Sukeshi's dream changes.

She sees the crazed woman

Amrita, a close relative's abused wife
who drowned herself in Vitasta

a long, long time ago.

Amrita's twisted, long hair trails
with the wind; she is bent low
and moaning, face covered
in mud and soot.

Seeing Sukeshi, Amrita
runs wildly through muddy streets,
village after village,
dirt roads strewn with bramble,
small wooden bridges.

Vegetable gardens fenced
by mud walls, covered with
thorny brush and hay.

Ivy creeping on them,
or a star eyed jasmine
here and there.

Chinar, willow, popular,
apricot and walnut trees.

So many rivers.

They've come to a place
of sorrow. Long, deep wails rise from
a cluster of houses, near where
there is a public courtyard,
a mosque, an Islamic school.

Moonlight falls on cobbled stone,
an octagonal natural spring,
and ten devdar trees.

Suki no longer knows where
she and Amrita are; it is some village.

And the weeping grows.

It is not like Amrita's moaning,
not like mourning for the dead.

It is more like groaning,
mad anguish, low, quiet, relentless
through the night.

Someone is watching
someone

else being hacked
to death, someone they love.

A first born son is being shot
in front of his father
who is tied to a tree.

Amrita is screaming, but no sounds
come out of her mouth. She wants
someone to see this, to know this.

A woman's husband
is dragged out of his sick bed,

taken to prison
without his glasses, or his pills.
The same woman's brother
is shot dead near
the river; he is an informer.

IV

Amrita's eye lashes have become
pine needles. Her lilac face
is trampled and bloodied.
She is weeping for everyone.
Even the dogs
she thinks are weeping;
they don't bark anymore.
Now she has reached
a center, some village
in the Liddar Valley. Sukeshi
follows her closely, keeps an eye on her.
Amrita climbs the top of a hill.
From here she sees lights
go on in every empty house.
The valley glimmers.
Houses of all sizes
and shapes have clustered
together like a Las Vegas
playscape, lit at night.
No one draws a curtain,
or shuts a window pane.
No one asks a child to pick up
one last piece of laundry
from the clothesline.
Light fills
Sukeshi's dream, and
it dissolves.

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19.0 AUTUMN RAIN

Rice grains
are yellow gold,
autumn rain
can do no harm.
It will wash off
dust.
Sun will warm again
the sweet, hardened
kernels.
Saffron flowers
have been
harvested, rain soaks
dumb roots.
Hits hard
at stray seeds,
waking memories,
forgotten pain
of creating, destroying.
I dream
of a house in Anantnag.
It's walls, hallways,
doorknobs,
window sills, latches,
hinges, bricks
are hallowed by time, memory,
war, blood, arson.
I want to buy it, I say
and my mother looks at me
plaintively.
She is young.
Weaving a basket of bright
gold new hay, soaked
in sprays of cold water.
She sticks dried marigold
stems into tiny holes
and turns to me: *Do you
have the money?*
Father walks in;
he too is young.
He wipes his shoes
with care:
It is raining, he says,
ruefully.

II

This is no house,
no mother, no father,
but time grown old.
Unmoving like stone,
earth, iron ore.

It was all water once.
An earthquake made
the water recede.
Out came majestic
Himalayan tor ridges,
roaring, laughing
waterfalls
or Kaunsarnag, Aharbal.
They had no names then.
It was summer, hills
were laden with foliage
and fruit, a verdant valley
had waited
a billion, billion years
for the ardent eye
of the Beloved.
Drowned in her own
salt tears,
she fasted and prayed
for a rose tipped dawn.
In her infancy
the valley prattled.
Her milk teeth
were stolen by deer.
As a young woman
she was courted by many
kings, empires;
her motherhood brought
joys of a different kind.
Sorrow came later.
What she has to see
and hear makes
her pray for a deluge.
The Beloved
is a dead poet
whom no one reads.
His eye has dimmed;
his mind is vacant.
No image rises
in the dark for him,
no sweet throated song
is sung in his honor.
Soon her sorrow
will become a deluge,
raw-red rain water of July.
It will drown the crops,
cover them with thick
red and black mud.
Cows and calves who graze
during summer months
on high pastures
will drown.

Their cries disappearing
behind crashing branches
of oak, pine, and Chinar,
before death waters
cut off all breath
and the reddish brown
throats, white lilies
on them wilt.
Tree trunks
will uproot and crash,
brush will glut waters
around footbridges.
Sink them in the middle,
as water levels rise,
and people watch
held up in a trance.
Mud houses, roofed
with tree bark
and sticky red soil
growing idle daisies
and dandelions
will crumble at last.
Children's cries
will be heard in the dark,
as they gather underneath
one gray wool blanket.
Their feet stagger,
teeth chatter,
words of a mantra
grow numb,
and they too are carried
away by this red,
red sea's dance of death.
Neptune's wrath will reign
for many, many years.
When winds die, severed heads
of white horses, floating
like witnesses to a great crime,
a great sin, and vengeance,
will be seen by no human eye.
Brown and white cows,
beautiful eyed deer, forest
fawn, household goods,
sheets of pale white
Kashmir silk,
muddied flowers and foliage
will relate this story
to no one.
It will take years
for the waters to clean up,
to become a mirror
for sensual summer foliage,
proud autumn leaves.

Months
for glacier heads
to rise in meditative grace
near Panchtarani.
The destroyer god will
be tranquil then.
Mother goddess's heart,
having lost all her
other limbs
will live in Him.
He shall shed
new blue
tears
for billion, billion years.

[© Lalita Pandit, August 6, 1997].

20.0 THE STORY OF GANESHA

Ancient mountain home
of many snows,
caves of ice and the Yati.
It was here,
the daughter of Himalaya
turned away from mother
and father,
put away her playthings
to win Shiva
with her service,
her slenderness
and youthful beauty.
When his wrath burnt
the arrow like body
of Kama,
the god of love -
with tearless eyes,
the young girl
watched as Kama's young
bride mourned.
Scorched by the blue
flame of Shiva's
pitiless eye: phoenix
and the turtle dove.
Parvati,
the mountain born,
sheared her hair,
smeared ash
on her firm breasts,
turned deaf ear
to mother's love
father's tears,
wise counsel
of female friends.
In *tapas*, she wished
to burn all that clung
to the soul, made it heavy.
Her body's beauty was
not enough, she would
have to win him another way.
The one who wore snakes
around his blue neck.
He slept with
half burnt corpses,
dressed in mortal ash:
the eternal, the undying
forming kinship
with death
in bone strewn
cremation grounds

by sacred rivers, whistling
of night winds among
pine and wild chestnut
grooves, burnt out patches
of blue grass.
Shiva, the mendicant,
the one without a home
and hearth, without means
of sustenance.
At the end of her penance,
he came to her.
First in disguise,
to test her.
She knew him and he kissed
her ruby lips,
took her in his arms
when no one was looking.
She married him, bore him
the warrior son, Kartikeya
of matchless beauty. He
whom all women desire
but none can have.
Parvati created another son.
All her own, mother's keeper.
He told stories
when vagrant father
was not home
and mother was sad.
Mostly, he watched
the door when she invited
to her home Gandarva men.
Played water sports,
thinking only of Shiva
who wandered the earth.
He came to her, not when
she needed him,
but when he needed her.
One such afternoon,
Shiva arrived, covered all over
in dust, grime and ashes.
His red eyes burnt with
a great hunger of which
little Ganesha could
not have known for he was
not a father-born.
Himalaya's grandson
blocked the door.
Hissed and pointed
a fist and the beggar
took out
his long thin knife.
A death cry reached where
there was music and incense.

Flowers turned red.
In silence, Girija's weeping
settled in with a dark night,
a lifeless head in her arms.
The divine father waited till
dawn, hiding underneath
a cherry tree.
Then he lunged the same knife
into the pale-green body
of a young elephant, adorned
with marigolds, lilacs
and amaranth braids.
Dressed for a festival, perhaps.
The severed head clung to
Ganesha's bleeding trunk
as his own.
Mother-born, reconstructed
by Father's wrath.
Father's new love, and he became
a scholar, a scribe:
a cheerful, merciful god,
born of a woman only.

[© Lalita Pandit, April 20, 1995].

21.0 WASHER WOMAN

It is midday,
she beats white sheets
on stone.
Shapely calves tighten,
knee deep in water,
feet firmly settled
around pebbles
grown over with moss.
Water is her mirror,
unstained, clean blue
mountain stream
in Northeast Kashmir.
A hamlet where smoke
rises in columns,
evening sun stretches
languidly, yawns,
throws itself upon her.
A day is ending,
she carries her load
on a horse drawn cart.
The sun disk lingers,
a giant embryo
that has not formed
all its limbs.
A martyr's heart
that has lost all its
limbs, staying
on the warpath, making
a stake.
Water reflects
ripeness of the sun,
unveiled shyness
of the moon:
an impossible union.
Rhythmic sound
of motion, grinding,
mingles with echoes
of sweet little bells
on the horse's neck,
as his sleek body
plunges into night:
hoof taps on a dirt road,
ten thousand years old.

[© Lalita Pandit, July 16, 1997].

22.0 THE EVER NEW POET OF KASHMIR

The garden was silent.
An old woman
dressed in a scarlet robe,
gold earrings wearing down
her ears, she sat on a green mound.
She was quiet, like a picture.
One daughter-in-law brought
peach blossom tea, the other
came out to see to miles of rice
laid out to dry in the courtyard.
They looked at the poet's receding
figure, that was all that happened
on an afternoon when the clouds
were white, sky was blue.
Time flattened its wings
like a dead bird on the dirt road.
Autumn leaves of a weeping willow
fell like flowers on his path.
Some day this memory
will become one
with blind oblivion of a city
grated: turned to dust.
Ghosts will rise
from woeful *Vyeth*, in winter
when the moon is bright.
Only they will remember
us, the lost ones, banished followers
of Abhinavagupta, those
who accompanied the poet into
the darkest pine woods
in the hour
of his death he sang
to Shiva. One last song
and we remember.

[© Lalita Pandit, May 20, 1997].

23.0 THE YOGI

They say a Yogi has
to wear ocher,
matted locks, walk barefoot
on Himalayan ice.
An American teacher
says this to a child.
He comes home without
having eaten his lunch.
His little, comely face
is drawn; he fingers his
food, raises his sea blue
eyes, "is your father
a yogi?" I know he
is thinking about
the photograph of my father
with a saffron-paste tilak
on his brow. What can I say?
A yogi should be the young
man next door, with his iron
strong muscles, and gold hue.
He has become a mendicant,
a beggar in his own
country: a laughing stock.
Who will explain
to this child
that a yogi can be a warrior,
a charioteer's son.
The one who drove the chariot,
and the one who sat inside:
petrified by fear.
A yogi will know particle physics,
computer science, decipher
manuscripts on parchment.
He can always read the handwriting
on the wall.

II

I do not have the red, dazzling
steed of *Surya* to guide me.
In the middle of a shoreless sea,
I row a small boat
tied to raw cotton thread.
Behind me is a fortress
of blinding dark.
Columns of radioactive
smoke rise in front.
I lack sleep.
The sleep of *tamas*.
Of destruction
before my resurrection.

The yogi is here!
He does not sleep.
Eternal, ever awake,
watches for *ushas*,
the deity of dawn.

[© Lalita Pandit, June 17, 1998].

24.0 THE RISHI

The world stretches like a dream
in which you weave words
and rhythms, in which you speak
of lost love; the courtyard
of a house around the bend
waits for you.

Ships sail out to vast seas.
You cross them to find work,
and happiness. Temple
bells ring in your absence.
They ring for you even now
when forms, shapes, habitats
are erased. You wake from
dreams of long ago,
ancestral vaults in the sky.
Fold of paper and cloth
unwrap before you in scrolls.
Do you wish to become
immortal?

Do you wish to float lights
placed in earthen bowls --
decorated with marigold knots,
in the river that fell from
the high heavens. Was held
in check by the matted locks
of a blue throated god.
He swallowed the poison.
More is left in the cup.
Do you want to be a Rishi?
The pale faced *Dadichi*, he
who brought to earth
the river of immortality so that
men could live.
Do you wish
to fashion a new creation?

[© Lalita Pandit, August 8, 1998].

25.0 MY DEATH

It is Thursday
afternoon, spring trees
are trying to tell
me something. What is it?
Time is a trickster,
dressed in rags:
blue, orange, sea green.
Oily dust polishes
what might have been
pockets; they are empty.
A dead river is still
a river. Do you remember
how we walked all around it?
In circles, straight lines,
not having to wet our feet
at the crossings.
The moon is my mother.
She makes greening buds
look like flowers.

II

My life will endure,
live in time again
its oceanic solitudes,
black stone silences.
And the terror that lurks
so close; cuts through
the blinds like a vampire,
bandaged all over, masked,
lies beside me. I wakes me
when night winds bend
with an implacable force
necks, arms, wrists
of trees, making them squirm.
In death, and rebirth,
I shall become the earth,
air, water, fire, ether
and sound again.
There will
be no skin peeling
from my bones, no worms
feeding upon me.
Not a relic, no remembrance
or earthly love
shall linger anywhere near me.

III

Let no one say, "she has
become a restless ghost."

When all her work is done,
let her become the light
that falls between
two tendrils
of flowers, shapely
hollows between foliage.
She shall be the fragrance
of a lilac when
its petals are parted
by the night wind.
Soft tread of a footstep
falling like moonlight
into bitter, feverish dreams
of the newly bereaved.
She shall be the sleep
that makes him
beautiful like a Hindu god.

[© Lalita Pandit, June 11, 1998].

26.0 SELF SPECTRE

A ghost among ghosts,
I prize a baby's first
birthday candle
shaped into figure one.
Place it beside
an earthenware vase:
dark blue green
lit by a split moon.
Mournful strains
of Rabindra Sangeet
light up a face
behind veils of darkness.
A whispering night
wind brushes against
door knobs, buttresses:
shadows of stained glass:
shapes, angles, figures.
Gentle "yes" and "no"
of souls on wheels of fire,
those who chose to die.
Like Kadambari Devi,
Tagore's close kin, lone
childhood companion:
a poet hidden
in the heart of a poet.
Or, mighty Bhishma
who could die naturally
whenever he desired.
Jude, the Obscure.
He became thin like a sheet
of bleached paper before he
died asking for water
when no one near.
Jude had loved.
Madri, the mother-wife
who died
on the funeral pyre
of Pandu, the exiled king.
Yudhishtira, Kunti's son.
A king who knew *Dharma*,
walked with his dog to
heaven and hell.

II

Cold rain in October
conjures a mirage in
halogen lights.
Rain falls like gentle grace
on actors' speaking bodies
wedded to Method,

rhythms of speech on blacktone
stone slabs.

It is midnight
in Spring Green, Wisconsin.

Laced ends of hoop skirts
drink up light reflecting
puddles.

Stone has such fire in it,
it makes vapors rise,
dry up the stage.

Like ghosts, the actors
cast no shadows,
don't slip, don't fall.

What is my relation to this,
and where is my nation?

What is my relation to leaves
that curled up early this year.

I wear a bright green sheen
with an "American Players
Theatre" logo.

It clashes with seasonal yellow
and red. Put out the light:
to bed! to bed! to bed!

[© Lalita Pandit, October 5, 1998].

27.0 AUTUMN SONG: KARTIK POSH

When leaves gather
in fiery red
underneath wild Cherry
and Chinar, I return
to these woods.
In mud walled hamlets
hearth fires blazed
once; farmers' wives
made afternoon tea.
They went
to the blue river,
filled their pitchers
at dusk. Temple
bells echoed
through the hills.
Each village
had its own forest,
meadow, and garden:
its dreams and sleep.

II
How many years
passed?
By my reckoning
it might be a hundred.
I am this country's ghost
bound to return,
gather food offerings
in late autumn weeks
of Remembrance.
Rice grains mingled
with marigold petals, violets,
smoke rising from oblations
take me back in time
to the Shivaratri evening
when I was seventeen.
Spring flowers
had just begun to show
near patches
of disappearing snow
and ice.
I think I saw you.
The fire of stars in your eyes,
hair like the wings
of a blackbird.
With slivers of floating ice,
the river was cold
but you waded fearless
far into midstream.

Flecks of rose light
got caught in water drops
sad-still on your lips.
I knew your mother
in the village,
your wife, and child.
But you seemed not
of this time,
of that, not from here.

III

Another autumn rain
fell on leaf-strewn pathways,
a war torn village, its burnt
down houses, land mines
where rice fields used to be.
I asked for death
to sever the tie forever.
Look, how my feet get caught
in hedges as I stray.
Alien thorns bleed
my soles,
and I am Nothing.
My ashes have made
the bushes red. Forty days
and nights of fever,
delirium, cold sweat
of the End.
Love
became a flower;
fire cannot burn it
water cannot drench.
Man cannot give;
a hand cannot hold.

[© Lalita Pandit, October, 20, 1998].