

**LOCATING KASHMIR IN LAL DED:  
COMMUNICATING IDENTITY AND MEANING THROUGH  
NARRATIVE**

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## **Locating Kashmir in Lal Ded:**

### **Communicating Identity and Meaning through Narrative**

By Diane Fereig

#### **Abstract**

The fourteenth century Kashmiri saint Lal Ded, also known as Lalla, has had a profound effect on the people of Kashmir. To this day, her sayings are an everyday occurrence, and have been passed down through the generations orally, revered by all Kashmiris. Many say Lalla is synonymous with Kashmir. Her legends, lore, and her *vaks* (the oral sayings) have become an integral part of all things Kashmiri – so much so, that as we move into the twenty-first century, and identities are shifting and changing faster than one can imagine, so too are the identities of Kashmiris spread all over the globe, and along with them, Lalla is changing too.

How she changes and how Kashmiri identity changes is reflected in her narratives told by Kashmiris to each other, to friends, written in books and on the internet, told in stories, sung in songs, enacted in films and portrayed in media. These narratives form a bond not only between Kashmiris as a cultural group, but also between Lalla and identity as a Kashmiri.

This thesis explores the nature of narrative by utilizing the works of Peter Gottschalk and Jordan Peterson to form a framework of analysis, and apply said framework to the narratives of Lalla's story. In doing so, a multi-layered form of communication and identity is revealed – a communication that can speak both literally and figuratively of the multiple layers of identity all human beings navigate.

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-- *Al-`ishq nār tahriqū mā siwa Allah* --

*Tsālani chay vuzamal ta traṭay*

*Tsālun chu maṇḍiñan gaṭakār*

*Tsālun chu pān-panun kaḍun graṭay*

*Heti māli santūsh vāti pānay*

One must bear the lightning flashes and thunderbolts

One must bear with the night at noon

Endure the grinding of the millstones (ridding you of your chaff)

Contentment and peace will most certainly attend you.

*Lalleshwari 14<sup>th</sup> c.*

For the one who brought me the lightning:

THANK-YOU

for changing the course of my boat, and setting its keel aright.

You cannot be forgotten for you are Love itself.

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## Introduction

### Lalla and Her Stories

*Growing up in Kashmir, I have memories of spectacular Himalayan mountains, magnificent lakes and countless rivers snaking through the valley, and accompanying all is the echoing on festive occasions of the melodious singing of Lalla's verse-sayings, popularly known as Lalla-Vākh. Her outpourings are timeless and people of all faiths have treasured them.*

*Jaishree Kak<sup>1</sup>*

For many Kashmiris, the name of Lal-Ded, also known as Lalla, is synonymous with Kashmir. A fourteenth century female saint, loved by all Kashmiris, Hindu and Muslim alike, Lalla left behind a collection of short verses known as *vakhs*, and a narrative that far surpasses the historical person. Along with the collection of verses and stories, she has collected a number of epithets: Lalla, Lal-Ded, Lalla 'Arifa, Rabia Ath-thani, Lalleshwari, and many others. Her reputation has become that of a saint who challenged the status quo, and spoke openly against the stagnation and dogma of the prevailing ritual and doctrine of the times. Despite her apparent unorthodoxy, she has survived centuries through oral tradition, her sayings and her lore being passed from generation to generation. Something about her has caused a tight bond to be cast; she is synonymous with the culture and there seems to be no possibility of removing her from it. Perhaps this bond is made through the telling of her stories. What kind of narrative has made Lalla's story so compelling? Why does it seem that Lalla's name is on every Kashmiri's lips?

In the beginning of the twentieth century, the British officials Grierson and Temple made every attempt to accurately record the *vakhs* (sayings) of Lalla, but gave little attention to

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<sup>1</sup> Jaishree Kak, *Mystical Verses of Lalla: A Journey of Self-Realization* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass 2007), ix.

her legends and lore, marking them as trivial and of little import. But in fact it seems that the very survival of her wonderful verses has been dependent upon the narratives woven around her and into the fabric of Kashmir, which has ensured they would become of key importance in Kashmiri culture. Indeed, not only have Lalla's sayings survived, she has become an integral part of Kashmiri identity, or "*Kashmiriyyat*" as it is referred to by the Kashmiris themselves.

Both Peter Gottschalk and Jordan Peterson point to the necessity of narrative in the formation of communal identity in their work. There are both overt, obvious reasons, and what Peterson calls "invisible reasons" for the existence of particular narratives that seem to continue unabated for centuries. Narrative creates an instantaneous connection that simultaneously allows the narrator to express their own identity and connect to the group as a whole through demonstrated identity. Peterson's work also emphasizes the connections we instinctively make to familiar, archetypal elements that inform us and propel us to act in ways that further our own place in society.

My intention is to explore the nature of narrative and how that narrative continuously shapes the identity of a community, while simultaneously passing along these invisible lines of communication other levels of identity, which create an impetus or perhaps compel the listener to hear the story again and tell it to others and successive generations, demonstrating the importance of both of these aspects for the interdependent continuation of the narrative and the group.

In discussing the complexities of a village, Peter Gottschalk quotes from fiction writer Mudra Rakshasa's novel *The Hunted*, where journalist Kanchan is perplexed by the complexity of identities found in the village: not in the people – that is a whole other layer of



identity – but in the village itself. He writes, “A village is like the first civilizations buried in the ground ages ago, for which we need a scientifically organized dig in order to find out who these people were, who performed sacrifices and whose civilization slipped, and who were those who fought against the sacrificers.” And as Gottschalk points out in reference to both the fictional village and the one in eastern India where he carried out his research, there is an “unusual, undefinable history”<sup>2</sup> that is the village.

Likewise, with Lalla, who is a reflection of the complex world of identities and histories in the region of Kashmir, it is beyond my scope to determine *how* she has become an integral part of Kashmiri culture, within a complexity of “unusual and undefinable history.” Yet we can look at her narrated footsteps, and trace the shifting identities of her narrators in the images and tales they have woven around her.

The narratives themselves have been recorded since the mid-seventeenth century, providing us with snapshots of the hagiographers who chose to write about her. From the seventeenth century we move into the twentieth and twenty-first century, where the narratives come from a variety of sources, such as Kashmiri scholars, British officials, Western scholars, journalists, internet bloggers and Kashmiris living in a diversity of locales such as Oman, South India and North America. A wide range of religious backgrounds are also represented in this cross-section, including Hindu and Muslims from Kashmir, India and Pakistan, Christians, Buddhists and other spiritual seekers.

For both Jordan Peterson and Peter Gottschalk narrative has an essential role in creating identity, and provides something that is necessary for the function of the individual

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu and Muslim: Multiple Identity in Narratives From Village India* (New York: Oxford University Press 2000), 66 and 68.

and the community. Thus, it is from these two writers that I derive my theoretical framework for this thesis.

Jordan Peterson's work primarily draws from the psychology of archetypes and their influence on the human mind. He utilizes psychological and scientific studies, as well as religious and mythological studies in his volume entitled *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*. Peterson considers the ideas that are communicated through storytelling and enactment, whether they are communicated through religious ritual, oral narrative, or media (drama, music, cinema and other media), emphasizing that the purpose is the same – a communication of levels of meaning that consist of layers of information, including identity, from the prosaic to the sublime. He believes that these types of communication are necessary for the survival of human beings. The landscapes of the known and the unknown that we encounter are charted and navigated on various levels through narrative. Regional stories carry with them maps of the area and its culture through locating the characters in familiar surroundings. They communicate the past and the present on a number of levels, and Peterson feels can also communicate levels of meaning beyond the mundane into deeper aspects of the unknown.

Lalla is a great candidate to put Peterson's ideas to the test. She has numerous stories that have been told and retold for centuries, and there are familiar archetypal characters in many of them. Furthermore, she is said to be an enlightened being, a saint of the region who has a deeper understanding of the nature of reality, which may be just what Peterson is pointing to, when he talks of accessing the invisible layers of meaning.

*Beyond Hindu and Muslim: Multiple Identity in Narratives From Village India*, by Peter Gottschalk, provides a second source of theoretical support. Gottschalk notes that every

individual in the village that he studied has multiple layers of identity. Some layers intersect while others may be at odds with each other. Due to the nature of the village where he did his research, where both Hindus and Muslims were engaged in daily interaction with each other, negotiating identities and boundaries, we have an opportunity to do some comparative analysis with his findings in a similar community to that of Kashmir with its mixed religious population of Hindus and Muslims.

Gottschalk's work explores the interactions within a community and how identities are expressed through narratives of the past. He notes how every individual has a unique set of identities which intersect and overlap with others' identities. These collections of identities form both the personal and the group identities. Through exploring the recent scholarship on group memory, Gottschalk is able to arrive at conclusions about how identities interact and co-exist simultaneously despite potential conflict, providing us with observations of how narratives, rituals, identities, and communities are interdependent within a specific context.

Thus Gottschalk provides us with additional findings for our framework of analysis to be applied to the narratives entwined around Lalla, bringing us more intimately in touch with the paradigms unique to South Asia, and providing more examples of the nature and function of narrative.

The first chapter of this thesis will offer an introduction to Lalla, and place her in the contexts of past and present Kashmir.

The second chapter will examine in detail the layers of meaning and identity that can be communicated through narrative through a review of Gottschalk and Peterson's work, and set a framework for examining some of Lalla's most commonly told stories.

Chapters three and four will present two of the stories about Lalla, each with several different narratives from oral and written tellings. The intention here is to present an active model of the theoretical framework I have formed based on Peterson's, Gottschalk's and my own observations, and examine the complexity of the narrative that develops as each individual narrator navigates their own layers of meaning while simultaneously utilizing the lore to communicate particular identities as most meaningful through the unique nature of their telling.

The final chapter of the thesis will gather together my conclusions and reflections.

## Chapter One

### Placing Lalla – becoming Lal Ded, Lalleshwari and Lalla Arifa.

*There are few countries in which so many wise saws and proverbial sayings are current as in Kashmīr, and none of these have greater repute than those attributed by universal consent to Lal Ded or 'Granny Lal', as she is called nowadays. There is not a Kāshmīrī, Hindū or Musalmān, who has not some of these ready on the tip of his tongue, and who does not reverence her memory.*

*Sir George Grierson 1920<sup>3</sup>*

In the case of Lalla, where legends, lore and facts are so mixed – we have very little definite knowledge of her life. The personality of Lalla, who is also known as Lal Ded (Granny Lal), Lalleshwari (Goddess Lalla) and Lalla `Arifa (Lalla the Wise), amongst other epithets, can only be placed roughly at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century CE with any accuracy.

The actual date of her birth is unknown, and is given variously between 1300 and 1320. Scholars have attempted to establish her dates by reference to other historical figures, such as Saiyyid `Ali Hamadani and the dates cited in the Persian chronicles that mention her,<sup>4</sup> but the difficulty remains as there is presently no known literature that mentions her by name until the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup>

What we do know from her *vaks* [oral sayings in verse] and the lore that has been passed down for generations, is that she was a practicing Yogini from the Kashmiri Śaiva tradition, who lived in the region. According to legend, Lalla was born just outside of

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<sup>3</sup> George Grierson and Lionell D. Barnett, *Lalla-vakyani or the Wise Sayings of Lal-Ded: A Mystic Poetess of Ancient Kashmir*, (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1920), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Jaishree Kak, *Mystical*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Jayalal Kaul, *Lal-Ded*, (New Delhi, India: Sahitya Akademi, 1973), 2.

Srinagar to the southwest in a city called Paramapore. She may have been born to a pious Śaiva family well schooled in the textual traditions, but it is not certain this is the case. Some legends claim that her family were practicing Śaivas while others additionally state she was born into a highly educated household of Tantric practitioners. Suffice it to say, we do not know the exact nature of her family of origin, except that from her *vakṣ* we do know she had astute knowledge of the core practices and philosophies of the Kashmiri Śaiva tradition.

During the fourteenth century, Kashmir was to witness a number of shifts and changes in political and religious power. At the turn of the century, the tumultuous end of the three-hundred year old Lohara dynasty occurred. Riddled with political intrigue and threatened invasions from neighbouring regions, the ruling class shifted from Hindu to Muslim, setting the stage for the advent of Sultanate rule which would last two centuries.<sup>6</sup>

If the legends are correct, it was during this transitional period that Lalla was married to a young man in a neighbouring village at a young age, perhaps around twelve years old, and was subject to a large amount of abuse from her mother-in-law, and some say her husband as well. These sufferings at the hands of her in-laws ultimately led her to deeper spiritual realizations and release from the family she was bound to. There are many legends surrounding Lalla and her mother-in-law that narrate how this came about. One of the most popular stories concerns a miracle connected with a water-pitcher broken by her angry husband when Lalla returned home from the river after doing her morning spiritual practices at the local temple and fetching water for the day. The pitcher broke, but the water did not spill. In chapter three we will examine this narrative in detail.

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<sup>6</sup> Jaishree Kak, *Mystical*, 3-4.

After this incident, Lalla's life changed directions, and she became a wandering ascetic. It is during this next phase of her life we start to hear of her connections with other saints and saints-to-be, such as Nuruddin Rishi, also known as Nund Rishi, the founding Sheikh of the Kashmiri Sufi order known as the Rishis, and Saiyyid 'Ali Hamadani of the Kubrawiyya Sufi order. In chapter four, we will be exploring some of the narratives that connect Lalla to Hamadani. As for Nund Rishi, he and Lalla are so intertwined in Kashmiri memory that there are identical sayings attributed to both of them.<sup>7</sup> She is said to be an inspiration to Nund Rishi and in some narratives also his teacher.

It is unknown how Lalla managed daily living after leaving her marital home, nor where she lived and how she died. The narratives indicate she remained in the region, but there is no indication of anything else. Her life is couched in so much mystery that we cannot even say with any accuracy whether her death rites were that of a Muslim or a Hindu, nor the date of her death. We have no concrete markers of her life. There are no shrines, no temples, no gravestones, only the oral memories of the Kashmiris themselves.<sup>8</sup> There is however, reference to a pond called *Laltrag*, which was the remainder of the water Lalla threw in the yard after the water pitcher incident, which has apparently dried up, but was still around at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Other than this, there is little to nothing that is tangible physical evidence of Lalla's life in Kashmir.

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<sup>7</sup>Jayalal Kaul, *Lal Ded*, 32-33.

<sup>8</sup> These memories interestingly include multiple locations of her grave throughout the region without any consensus concerning the veracity of each potential grave site. Each village seems to have a local grave that is Lalla's but then upon further inquiry, it is attributed to another saint.

<sup>9</sup> B.N. Parimoo, *The Ascent of Self: A Reinterpretation of the Mystical Poetry of Lalla Ded*, (New Delhi: South Asian Books, 1978), 31

In comparison to other saints, this is an unusual aspect to Lalla's story – a lack of temporal or geographical relics to connect Lalla to the region. Yet, as we shall see this absence does not detract from her implication in Kashmiri culture, and seems in some cases to actually deepen her connection as it creates a character with the unique ability to shift and change according to the needs of her narrators in many more ways than would be possible if she had concrete geographical relics linking her to any specific region of the Kashmir Valley.

This aspect of ambiguity is an interesting thing about Lalla. She seems both pervasive and nonexistent. She does not completely exist in the Hindu traditions of Kashmir, nor does she fully exist in the Muslim traditions. She is abstractly tangible, yet not concretely so. She in effect embodies many characteristics of the region just by being who she is.

The first written accounts we have of Lalla, as mentioned above, occur in the seventeenth century. The earliest appears to be in a Sufi hagiographical work in Persian entitled *Asrār ul-Abrār*, written in 1654CE by Bābā Dāwūd Mishkāti.<sup>10</sup> He tells the narrative of the water pitcher and mentions Lalla's pond as a geographical marker related to the narrative. After this text we see Lalla more frequently mentioned during the eighteenth century in works like Khwāja Muhammad `Azam Dedamari's *Wāqī `āti Kashmir* in 1746CE where he mentions her as a high saint and lists her birth and death in the fourteenth century during the reign of Sultan Alau-ud-Din (1344-55) and Sultan Shihāb-ud-Din (1355-73) respectively.<sup>11</sup> She is mentioned again in the chronicle *Tarīkhi Shāyiq*, written between 1754-62CE by Abdul Wahāb Shāyiq and Muhammad Aslam Abu-al-Qāsim's *Gauhari ālam* written

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<sup>10</sup> Jayalal Kaul, *Lal Ded*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* 4



in 1785CE. In fact, all of the written evidence of her existence up until the mid-eighteenth century appears in Persian documents, the majority seemingly from the Sufi and Islamic traditions. Around the mid-eighteenth century, the Kashmiri saint Rupa Bhavani, speaks of Lalla as a teacher who embodied knowledge, purity and tranquility,<sup>12</sup> and Paṇḍit Rājānaka Bhāskara's translation of Lalla's *vaks* and commentary in Sanskrit appears.<sup>13</sup>

There is much speculation amongst scholars why Lalla is not found in Hindu literature between the fifteenth and seventeenth century. Many identify the Islamicization process as the reason, and some like M. I. Khan claim she was publicly against the Brahmins which caused them to ostracize her, but no scholar takes notice that all of the writers in this period mention Lalla with high praise, equating her with established saints of the Islamic tradition, a good indication that the local people had already established her in a position of veneration, and her lore was in wide circulation orally. Her notoriety within the community was high enough that in order to support the increasing local interest in the Islamic tradition, it was necessary to acknowledge her presence as a saint of the region, incorporating her into the Islamic fold. This process would result in a certain level of Islamicization of Lalla, by those who are narrating, and in fact this is what occurs, as we will discuss further in chapter four.

There have been a few attempts to explain the lack of Lalla's presence in the texts of the Kashmiri Śaivas. Jayalal Kaul attributes this to the fact "she spoke of the secret doctrine in the vulgar tongue of the unlettered masses,"<sup>14</sup> which is quite plausible, considering the

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<sup>12</sup> Jaishree Kak, *To The Other Shore: Lalla's Life and Poetry*, (New Delhi: Vitasta, 1999), x.

<sup>13</sup> Rājānaka Bhāskara, *Lalleśvarvākyaṇi*, trans. from Kashmiri to Sanskrit, (Srinagar, India: Kashmir Series of Texts & Studies, 1919).

<sup>14</sup> Jayalal Kaul, *Lal Ded*, 3.

esoteric content in some of her *vak*s. Another reason as mentioned above, is the fact that she spoke openly against the rituals of Brahmanism, and broke all the rules of conventional Brahman households. Because of this, they refused to acknowledge her wisdom and accept her as a member of the society.<sup>15</sup> It seems that this idea is a contemporary speculation projected onto the past; that somehow the silence is due to a conflict that lasted a few centuries, and not remotely possible to confirm. It is highly unlikely that this is the sole reason behind her obscurity in the first few centuries, and more likely that Kaul has touched on some aspect of the truth coupled with the fact her oral lore was so prevalent there was no thought of a need to write it down. We see after two centuries that she is written about with the highest praise, demonstrating her established presence and acceptance in the community. Furthermore, there are other examples of this phenomena. Peter Gottschalk also discovered a saint in the village where he did his research called Shastri Brahm, who has no extant literature but is widely known and venerated amongst the local inhabitants. At the time of his research, according to the local inhabitants, he had lived approximately two hundred years before. Yet none of the texts on the history of the region mentioned the saint. Gottschalk attributed the lack of Shastri Brahm's presence in the literature to Western notions of what is authentic history having an influence on determining what is authentic and that through this lens much folklore is considered to be without veracity. Because Shastri Brahm has existed through oral folklore and the legendary tales of miracles around him, the strong community presence of the saint is not enough to get him into the books, for his exaggerated or miraculous life events keep him from being rationally believable, and

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<sup>15</sup> M. Ishaq Khan, *Kashmir's Transition to Islam : The Role of Muslim Rishis, Fifteenth to Eighteenth Century*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 1994), 1. Khan in fact argues that Lalla is one of the main impetuses of the shift from Hinduism to Islam in several of his publications.

thus recorded as part of the region's history. It is another possible reason Lalla's presence also goes unmentioned.

In the nineteenth century Bīrbal Kācru mentions Lalla in the *Majmu`a-al-Tawārikh* as a “saintly, chaste and pure-of-heart woman from the community of Hindus,” and Pīr Ghulām Hasan calls her Lalla `Arifa and the second Rabia in his *Tārikhī Hasan*. Hāji Mohi-ud-dīn Miskin also relies on these epithets to describe her in his *Tārikhī Kabir* at the turn of the century in 1909CE.<sup>16</sup>

The first modern writings of the twentieth century on Lalla appear during the colonial period of British rule, when Knowles' *Dictionary of Kashmiri Proverbs* published in 1885 provides a number of *vaks* attributed to Lalla along with a few narratives. Inspired by Aurel Stein, Grierson and Barnett, then later Temple, collect her *vaks* in writing and translate them into English, publishing them in the 1920's. This seems to be the beginning of serious interest in Lalla as something authentic about Kashmiri culture. It is during this period we begin to see more writing on Lalla from the Kashmiri community, starting with scholar Anand Koul who published in the journal *Indian Antiquary* between 1921 and 1933. There also appear to be publications in Urdu as listed in Jayalal Kaul's bibliography: *Kālāmī Lalla `Arifa* by Qāzi Nizam ud-Dīn, and *Bībī Lalla `Arifa* by Hāfiz Muhammad `Ināyat ullah, for which he does not list publication dates.<sup>17</sup>

It should be duly noted that this scholarly interest in Lalla started well before Partition in 1947 and the ensuing political crisis that splintered the community. The impetus to pay more attention to Lalla, may have come from the establishment of higher education

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<sup>16</sup> Jayalal Kaul, *Lal Ded*, 4-5.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* 135-37.

colleges in the region around the turn of the century by the Kashmiri government.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, it has been suggested by a few Kashmiri acquaintances that this period may have been the beginnings of the modern *Kashmiriyyat* movement, most likely nurtured by the increased access to higher education in the region. Exploring the lives of local saints and their connections to Kashmiri identity and culture seems like a natural progression when both are considered.

Publications about Lalla continued to appear after Partition, and included Gopi Nath Raina's *Lālla Vākya* in 1959, and J.L. Kaul and N.L. Kaul Talib's *Lal Ded* in 1961, both translations into Urdu. Lalla now appears in Kashmiri history books like G.M.D. Sufi's two-volume *Kashīr*, published in 1949, and P.N.K. Bamzai's *A History of Kashmir* published in 1962. In 1973, Jayalal Kaul's book *Lal Ded* is published, bringing into consideration the Persian sources and the noted discrepancies amongst his contemporary scholars concerning Lalla's *vaks*, narratives and biography. This publication sets the bar for further scholarship, as Kaul's in-depth research into the available sources, including many Persian manuscripts, is the first to appear in print, and widely available. In the previous year, Abdul Qaiyum Rafiqi published *Sufism in Kashmir: from the Fourteenth to the Sixteenth Century*, mentioning Lalla, several of her narratives, and her relationship with Nuruddin Rishi of the Kashmiri Sufi order the Rishis, showing that Lalla still has attention from both traditions. B.N. Parimoo publishes his work in 1978, *Ascent to Self: A Reinterpretation of the Mystical Poetry of Lal Ded*, providing unique detailed narratives of several of her legends. In 1981, Swami Muktananda's *Lalleshwari: Spiritual Poems by a Great Siddha Yogini* is published by the SYDA Foundation. This particular publication introduced many Western spiritual seekers to Lalla.

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<sup>18</sup> Sri Pratap College in Srinagar, Kashmir was established in 1905 by the state ruler, Sri Maharaja Pratap Singh.

After the mass exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from their homeland beginning in the late 1980's, and continuing into the next few decades,<sup>19</sup> we see another wave of increasing interest in Lalla on the internet and amongst scholarly works written by Kashmiris. In 1987, *Lalleshwari*, B.N. Parimoo's second book dedicated to the exploration of Lalla is published, and two years later Nil Kanth Kotru's book, *Lal Ded: Her Life and Her Sayings* appears. A decade later in 1999, we see Jaishree Kak's *To The Other Shore* and R.N. Kaul's *Kashmiri's Mystic Poetess: Lalla Ded alias Lalla Arifa*. During this time a conference on Lalla is arranged in Delhi and the resulting collection of papers is published in an edited volume by S.S. Toshkhani entitled, *Lal Ded: The Great Kashmiri Poetess*. It seems as more scholars in the diaspora are actively working on Kashmir, the more Lalla is appearing as integral part of the Kashmiri identity. It is also around this time my own interest in Kashmir began, due to my travel and experiences in my South Asian Studies undergraduate program.

Wherever I have lived, I have enjoyed listening to oral narratives from locals and international friends. From the time I started to travel in 1999, I had the great luck to meet Kashmiris in nearly every place I lived or visited, including places such as Oman, Jordan, South India, Delhi, California, Texas, Montreal, and British Columbia. Each time I have almost always been told a story of Lalla without any need to prompt. This interaction prompted my initial interest in Lalla and her stories. The Kashmiris telling me these stories live and work outside of Kashmir, yet they fondly recollect stories with such verve, it is clear Lalla is an important aspect of the culture. All of these encounters occurred in informal

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<sup>19</sup> According to Zutshi, twenty percent of the Hindu Pandits exited the Valley by 1950 due to the land reforms that occurred after Partition and the uncomfortable accession of Kashmir to India (318). Additional threats to the Kashmiri Pandits, due to the escalating political tensions and consequent violence between 1987-1990 caused a second exodus that has been estimated to be the majority of the Pandit population (Rai 2004, 2011). Furthermore, there have been reports on Kashmiri forums of Pandits who were still in the Valley until recently being threatened. One individual reported in 2007 that his Muslim friends kept urging him to go visit family outside of Kashmir, and once he arrived there they met with him to tell him his life was in danger, and not to return.

settings, and many times narratives were told to emphasize a point in our conversation. While attending an exchange program at university in South India in 2000, I befriended a number of Kashmiri classmates at the local cafe, who sparked my interest in their culture. After a semester of interaction my appetite was roused, and I grabbed any chance I could to learn more from the Kashmiris. After returning to Canada, it was my interest in learning more that drew me onto the internet.

The first instance of Lalla's presence on the internet I personally noted, would be that of Omkar Koul (et al.), a linguist I met at the Central Institute of Indian Languages in Mysore, in 2000. He and some fellow Kashmiri Pandits were in the process of creating a website to teach Kashmiri language and culture and showcase any work done by scholars in Kashmiri linguistics at the time.<sup>20</sup> This was my first introduction to Lalla's *vaks* which Professor Koul had used as a teaching tool for learning Kashmiri. One note of import to me at the time, was the fact these scholars had taken the time to reproduce the *vaks* in both Sharada and Devanagari script, but had neglected to use the Arab-Persian script currently in use in Kashmir, and in use in their previously published textbooks, which I had in my possession, published only a decade earlier. This was a bold but subtle statement on the nature of the experiences the community was undergoing, and their perceptions of them.

On another interrelated site, the "ikashmir.net" website a year later in 2001, Lalla's presence was noted in the sections on language, culture, proverbs, poets, and under religion

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<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, I have no record of the original website he directed me to. However, much of his work and that of his colleagues appears on ikashmir.net, koshur.org and the Kashmiri Overseas Association's site: koausa.org. The Kashmiri Pandit community has created a strong presence on the internet through these sites which are all interrelated. For example, links on ikashmir.net will redirect to koausa's site and vice versa.

as “Lalla vakhs”.<sup>21</sup> Lalla’s importance to Kashmiri identity and the role she plays in forming it was very clear.

Around this time I did a search for Lalla and came across a website that showcased Lalla as “Lalla ‘Arifa.” This website claims that Lalla converted to Islam and was buried a Muslim. This site has remained unchanged over the past decade, presenting a snapshot of the Muslim view of Lalla at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Other examples of websites are ones that attempt to show how Lalla in fact unifies all religious traditions in the Kashmiri culture. More and more of these types of sites are popping up. The original site I first encountered contained writings of scholar Yoginder Sikand, around 2001 who advocated for tolerance and understanding amongst Kashmiris of all creeds.

With the increase in technology’s availability we see more and more interaction online amongst Kashmiris. A brief survey uncovered a number of forums which had postings for discussion on Lalla, some of them nostalgic posting older media in various forms such as old film clips and mp3 audio clips, while others spotlighted a new generation of non-resident Kashmiris who are being inculcated with the culture of Lal Ded and Kashmir by their elders,<sup>22</sup> while others were introducing newer understandings of the culture through self-made “documentaries” that told the story of Kashmir. One of these productions in particular caught my eye as the creator went to the trouble of providing

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<sup>21</sup> Confirmed using the Wayback Machine at: <http://web.archive.org>, and entering <http://ikashmir.net>. August 15, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Posted on YouTube by ‘Koshur Bata’ on June 13, 2009. Last accessed August 29, 2012. Kashmiri Pandit boy of Toronto, ON reciting and promoting Kashmiri culture. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ACkepFNoms&feature=share&list=PL2A48C5CA0B16FD93>

several different versions with subtitles in English, Hindi, Urdu and Panjabi.<sup>23</sup> His message was simple: he played Sufiyana Kalam music<sup>24</sup> whose lyrics were Lalla's *vaks*, translated them into whichever language he was subtitling, and then posted photos of Kashmiris praying at mosques, temples and Buddhist *gompas*, celebrating festivals, interspersed with photos of the blood-shed of the past decade that has occurred due to the ongoing political tensions. Here Lalla is a great vehicle used to emphasize *Kashmiriyyat* and state the oneness of that community, beyond religious differences and protest the brutality Kashmiris have witnessed.

This new medium of the internet enhances Lalla's continuing relevance. Jaishree Kak (now Kak Odin) in her book *Hypertext and the Female Imaginary*, notes how the internet has become a venue for a new type of narrative, which is vastly similar to oral narrative in its ability to shift and change with the tides of the moment. This is an important aspect to consider, for as we see from the small sampling of changes covered in our review, the potential for examining narrative expands drastically with the incorporation of internet culture as a living narrative offering its unique presentation of Kashmiri culture.

Today, Lalla is no longer the sole possession of Kashmiris, she has become a global phenomenon, and this is evident by a number of changes. First, we see her *vaks* being rendered and presented by popular authors such as Coleman Barks, well-known for his poetic renditions of the works of thirteenth century Persian Sufi Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Posted on YouTube by 'Sarhvhah' on September 25, 2011. Last accessed on August 29, 2012. Montage of photos from Kashmir set to Lalla *vaks*.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drYhMkZ8He8&feature=share&list=PL2A48C5CA0B16FD93>

<sup>24</sup> Sufiyana Kalam is the name of the traditional music of Kashmir which frequently uses words of Lalla's *vaks* for their lyrics.

<sup>25</sup> Coleman Barks, *I Want Burning: The Ecstatic World of Rumi, Hafiz and Lalla*, (Boulder, CO: Sounds True Recordings, 2001). audio CD.

Also: Barks and Lalla, *Naked Song*. Translated by Coleman Barks. (Athens, GA: Maypop, 1992).



Second, we see her appearing in popular magazines such as *Yoga Journal*.<sup>26</sup> Third, we see people emulating her, as in the case of Tejaswini Yogini, whose video on YouTube presents her ‘channelling’ Lalleshwari.<sup>27</sup> Lastly, she has become a topic for exploration amongst Western academics, such as scholar N.A. Khan who invokes her in the title of her article, *The Land of Lalla-Ded: Politicization of Kashmir and construction of the Kashmiri woman*,<sup>28</sup> highlighting both the feminine and Kashmiri nature of the topic at hand. While an altogether different type of scholar, Michelle Voss Roberts, chooses to compare Lalla’s awakening with that of the Christian mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg,<sup>29</sup> creating a cross-cultural narrative, while demonstrating the universal appeal of Lalla’s lore.

Each narrative adds to the contemporary shape of Lalla and contributes to her identity, and *perceived* identity, while also shaping and creating a perception of what it means to be a Kashmiri. As Lalla becomes part of the ‘Global Cyber-village’, we see her brought into other narratives that she would never have imagined being part of. As the exploration and re-shaping of Lalla’s identity occurs so too does the identity of Kashmiris. Yet underlying it all, there are unchanging elements of each story bringing her universal appeal into the twenty-first century. As we will see below, it is the universal elements that keep her story in circulation, while the surface elements and details reflect the present moment for the narrator, the audience, and the culture.

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<sup>26</sup> Shiva Rea, “Living Yoga - Poetry in Motion: The simple words of ancient poets provide divine inspiration for your yoga practice.” *Yoga Journal*. (Berkeley, CA: Active Interest Media Inc. Sept/Oct: 2001).

<sup>27</sup> Shankara, Teja. *Teja Shankara Transmits Lalla Poetry*. On YouTube. Uploaded January 7, 2011. Last accessed on August 28, 2012.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9joAzzLm9c&feature=share&list=PL2A48C5CA0B16FD93>

<sup>28</sup> Nyla Ali Khan, “The Land of Lalla-Ded: Politicization of Kashmir and Construction of the Kashmiri Woman,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 9, no. 1 (2007): 22-41, <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol9/iss1/2>

<sup>29</sup> Michele Voss Roberts. Two articles published in 2007 and 2008 and a book in 2010. See bibliography for details.

## Chapter Two

### **One Story: Many Layers = Many Meanings = Many Identities**

*...a girl in the audience asked about the turtle and the earth. If the earth was on the back of a turtle, what was below the turtle? Another turtle, the storyteller told her. And below that turtle? Another turtle. And below that? Another turtle.*

*The girl began to laugh, enjoying the game, I imagine.*

*Thomas King<sup>30</sup>*

In Thomas King's work on the narrative traditions of Aboriginal people of North America, he consistently points to the importance of the story to identity. As he says, "it's all we have."<sup>31</sup> One story can be told an infinite number of ways, each story teller giving their own unique twists and flavours to its auralty and reception. He illustrates this beautifully in his book, *The Truth About Stories* where every chapter begins the same: "There is a story I know. It's about the earth and how it floats in space on the back of a turtle. I've heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story it changes. Sometimes the change is simply in the voice of the storyteller. Sometimes the change is in the details. Sometimes in the order of events."<sup>32</sup> However as the story continues, there are slight twists in each chapter, as each one is initiated by a new storyteller telling the same narrative to a different audience in a different location.

Much like King's descriptions, I have also observed that not only are there are an infinite number of ways to tell Lalla's story, there are also countless ways to examine the

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories : A Native Narrative*, CBC Massey Lectures Series. (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

narratives of Lal Ded and their role within Kashmiri society. In this chapter, I will present the ideas of two scholars whose work helps in understanding the significance of the narratives that circulate around Lalla.

Because Lalla is a saint, there is an element of spiritual discovery that features in her stories and more so in the poetry she left behind. For this aspect, I turned to Jordan Peterson's work. The narratives we are exploring come primarily from written accounts, including several scholarly works in which we might not expect any display of the narrator's spiritual and religious leanings. Yet, what is revealed in some cases is a depth of reverence for what Lalla represents for the narrator. In other cases, Lalla serves the narrator's agendas, as they try to further establish their own spiritual perspectives. Peterson's treatment of the spiritual nature of humanity sheds light on these qualities of Lalla's lore. Another reason that Peterson's work is relevant is with respect to the lasting nature of narratives; his ideas on the universality of story help us tease out of the narratives the elements that impel these narratives to continue.

Kashmiris no longer have a tight community in one corner of the globe. They are now spread throughout the world due to the conflicts in Kashmir over the past century. Yet, it is quite clear from any Kashmiri I speak to in any part of the world, there is still a vibrant sense of community, which in part depends upon the shared aspects of Kashmiri culture that serve as touchstones to keep this community connected. Of course Lalla has a role to play in making this connection, and it is for this reason I turn to Peter Gottschalk's work on the interactions through narrative that both navigate and transcend the tensions between Hindus and Muslims in the Arampur community in Bihar in Eastern India.

Gottschalk also treats the question of the longevity and survival of narratives, helpful to our understanding of why Lalla's lore continues.

## **Jordan Peterson Maps of Meaning: The Story Beyond the Story**

*We have spent hundreds of thousands of years watching ourselves act and telling stories about how we act. A good story has a universal quality, which means that it speaks a language we all understand. Any universally comprehensible language must have universal referents, and this means that a good story must speak to us about those aspects of experience that we all share. But what is it that every human being shares, regardless of place and time of birth? Is it reasonable to posit that anything might remain constant, for example, across the centuries that separate us from our Stone Age ancestors; across the ideological and religious barriers that divide the inhabitants of our modern nations?*

*Jordan Peterson<sup>33</sup>*

Jordan Peterson's work is partly theoretical, partly philosophical and partly scientific. As both a clinical practitioner and scholar of psychology he utilizes the knowledge and research from his own field and also dives into knowledge from religious, cultural and mythological sources. Additionally, he adds his personal experiential perspective<sup>34</sup> as a jumping-off point for the explorations of Western concepts of mind, consciousness and its psychology.

For Peterson, lasting stories have a universal appeal. There is something about them that is compelling to a wide range of individuals, it draws them in to the story and makes the details memorable. Myths and stories contain three elements of human experience: the known, the unknown and the knower – the same three elements which govern the world of

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<sup>33</sup> Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning: Architecture of Belief*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 94.

<sup>34</sup> The first section of Peterson's book narrates his own psycho-spiritual journey to 'realization.'

experience.<sup>35</sup> This provides us with grounds for the universal quality that potentially appeals to any audience. Within Lalla's stories we do indeed have all three of these elements. Lalla is the knower or the experiencer, while the known and the unknown appear in multiple forms depending on the narrative we are examining. For example, in the Baker legend we will explore in chapter four, the butcher's and baker's shops are the known, and the appearance of Hamadani in the same story is the unknown. It is the unknown that requires a map, some understanding of what it is, how it works, how we should act, and how it affects us and those around us. One of Peterson's primary arguments is for the necessity of narrative to communicate these maps of the unknown, and that it is through the process of this communication that a community understands its own identity, those of others and what is potentially dangerous or lifesaving.<sup>36</sup>

A second requirement for a compelling narrative is that the story speaks a language we all understand in a both literal and figurative sense. In the case of Lalla, one of the consistent remarks amongst Kashmiri writers is that her legends and sayings are preserved in the vernacular – she spoke the language of the common people, not a liturgical language nor a scholarly one.<sup>37</sup> This makes her accessible to a larger audience and creates a sense of appreciation for the wisdom passed along through plainly spoken language. Additionally, the metaphors found in Lalla's poetry are easily understood by the ordinary people from the community. She refers to actions such as worship and devotion through simile like that of paying the ferryman to get across the lake, or obtaining two bits of cloth from a merchant in

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<sup>35</sup> Jordan Peterson, *Maps*, 99.

<sup>36</sup> Peterson presents clinical research that supports this view, and the idea that maps of the unknown are passed on to subsequent generations. He argues it is human nature to be unsure of or downright terrified of the unknown, and through creating maps of narrative that define these previously unencountered territories, we pass along to the next generation information on how to navigate through them.

<sup>37</sup> An example of this is in R.N. Kaul's Introduction of *Kashmir's Mystic*.

the market to weigh insults and praises. Although her sayings may refer to a specific religious affiliation, often they do not, and focus more on the human desire for realization through love, devotion and dedication to self-refinement. This creates a second appeal in that a universal element that goes beyond religious identity or any other concrete identity, speaks directly to the human condition through imagery and symbolism and thus speaks to a wider audience – a language that all of those who are receptive can understand.

A third requirement is that there contains a universal referent – a common human experience. Within Lalla's stories, there are easily identifiable characters, ones that exist in all cultures – nasty mothers-in-law, clueless husbands, foreigners with new ideas (like Saiyyid `Ali Hamadani), prodigal sons (Nuruddin Rishi), and respected teachers. These readily identifiable characters make it easier for the listener to understand the symbolism contained in the story and identify with Lalla's experiences. In Peterson's work, he investigates in detail the nature of these universal characters and what they represent both for communal identity and individual identity, as well as the hidden truths these characters communicate about the human experience.

A final requirement is that there are multiple levels of "Truth" communicated to the receiver. These truths can be defined as a communication of how we act in the world around us. They may be explicit behaviours or more implicit ones – at times something that is only communicable by metaphor and symbolism. They may be a universal form of action applicable to all of humanity or more closely identified with particular behaviours associated with the cultural identities of the characters. As Peterson writes, adults are responsible for embodying "the behavioural wisdom of their culture for their children." Even if they are a poor representative, the learning continues through other venues available in the culture,

such as ritual, drama, literature, and myth.<sup>38</sup> Stories of heroes, or in our case heroines such as Lalla, communicate the most valued behavior of the culture. From Peterson's perspective, the hero transcends both personal and cultural identity to embody something beyond the world of action to something more whole, yet still able to act in the world in the most moral way. Lalla is frequently given applause either by fellow saints or by contemporary writers for her divinity. For example Nuruddin is quoted as saying, "That Lalla of Parampore, Oh Lord, make me like her!"<sup>39</sup> Additionally, she is praised by successive generations, through the venue of Sufi hagiographies and oral narration, to the point of creating what Richard Eaton calls a "mythico-historical figure."<sup>40</sup> Thus, the epitome of Peterson's archetypal idea of the hero is embodied in the character of Lalla. Her ability to act within the community and her outspokenness against the ritual stagnation of the local Hindu tradition and its lack of vision beyond rote imitation of previous generations,<sup>41</sup> supports further successive generations' admiration of her ability to act from a place that transcends the local mores and conditionings.

Lastly, I would like to call to attention Peterson's ideas on the nature of human interaction and its necessity to our very survival. He takes great lengths in his work to illustrate this with a variety of empirical studies along with observations in mythical and religious structures. What these observations lead to as a conclusion, is the necessity of the

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<sup>38</sup> Jordan Peterson, *Maps*, 93.

<sup>39</sup> Vinayak Razdan, *Kashmiriyat in Codex*, December 1, 2011, <http://www.searchkashmir.org/2011/12/kashmiriyat-in-codex.html>. Last accessed January 21, 2013. This portion of a poem attributed to Nuruddin Rishi is frequently quoted and can be found in many books and on many websites.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760*. Vol. 17, Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 207-08.

<sup>41</sup> Most scholars, either Muslim or Hindu state some form of appreciation for Lalla's challenge to the status quo of her period. However, there is an element of identity here that could be explored further. For example, how this appreciation is then manipulated to justify a particular perspective of the narrator into supporting his/her view of cultural identity.

group: one that is formed through interactions, resulting in a cohesive identity we call culture, as a manner of protection - as a survival mechanism. Peterson calls culture “the Great Father – the protector of the unknown.” The group, he says, “is the historical structure that humanity has erected between the individual and the terrible unknown.”<sup>42</sup> The group functions to create a predictable barrier between its members and the unknown by creating a structure of beliefs, behaviours and factors that inform each individual’s mode of being. Peterson defines groups thus:

Groups are individuals, uniform in their acceptance of a collective historically determined behavioral pattern and schema of value. Internalization of this pattern, and the description thereof (the myths – and philosophies, in more abstracted cultures – which accompany it), simultaneously produces ability to act in a given (social) environment, to predict the outcomes of such action, and to determine the meaning of general events (meaning inextricably associated with behavioral outcome). Such internalization culminates in the erection of implicit procedural and explicit declarable structures of “personality,” which are more or less isomorphic in nature, which simultaneously constitute habit and moral knowledge. Habit is a way of being, a general strategy for “redemption” in the “natural” and “cultural” spheres, shaped by the social exchange of affect-laden information, mastered to the point of “unconscious” automaticity.<sup>43</sup>

Yet, these group structures are not static. They require constant revision as new information and changing environments force restructuring of the cultural paradigm. These anomalies, events that fall outside of the established norm for the culture, “have the capacity to threaten the integrity of the known, to disrupt the familiar and explored”<sup>44</sup> to cause a shift in the established paradigm. Peterson narrows these type of events down to four: rapid environmental shifts; contact with a heretofore isolated foreign culture; application of novel (revolutionary) linguistically or episodically mediated critical skill; or a consequence of

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<sup>42</sup> Jordan Peterson, *Maps*, 226.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Jordan Peterson, *Maps*, 245.



revolutionary heroic activity.<sup>45</sup> Of his four categories, Lalla's narratives reflect the second and third categories, and possibly the fourth. We will keep these in mind and discuss them further as we encounter them in the coming sections below.

## **Peter Gottschalk: Hindus, Muslims and Identity Beyond Religion**

Peter Gottschalk's *Beyond Hindu and Muslim* stems from his doctoral field work done in a small village called Arampur in the state of Bihar, India. His main premise is that narrative forms the network of identity – creating, reshaping, and deconstructing personal and group identities within the community.

Gottschalk observes that scholars of South Asian religions have consistently attempted to categorize religions and their communities as concrete traditions with impenetrable boundaries, yet his own experiences have revealed a different picture; the village community is full of a multitude of layers of identities, some which overlap and others that are in tension with each other. These multitudes of identities inform and interact with each other, providing caste, gender, class and religious forms – rules of engagement that are ignored in some cases and followed to the letter in others. Religious identity is but one identity that both informs and is informed by the other identities. Because of these continuous interactions, there are everyday narratives and annual events that help solidify the community identity above the religious identity while simultaneously making room for the religious interactions that occur.

These religious interactions, as part of each individual's identity and as part of different neighbourhood identities, serve to bolster some communities while marginalizing

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<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

others, to create an identity amongst peers or within the community at large, to perpetuate traditional hierarchical authorities or transcend them, and serve to create unifying or dividing rituals within the community. Thus Gottschalk notes several examples of how one individual's identity can change according to where they are, what time of year it is, and who is present in the audience of listeners, sometimes mid-sentence!<sup>46</sup>

Like Peterson, Gottschalk determined that the functionality and cohesion of the community rests upon the narratives they tell, and the interactions said narratives provide and promote. These narratives allow the community members to identify other members with similar identities and learn about others in the community with dissimilar identities. Each interaction is an opportunity to renegotiate the territory of identity on group and individual levels, giving a chance to reshape, reassert, or renew any given belief or identity structure. Thus the identities of individuals and the community are in essence living entities that are continually changing with every negotiation, every interaction, every narrative.

We find Lalla identified and revered by both Hindu and Muslim religious traditions, despite her Hindu heritage. Perhaps this is due to the temporal placement of her life, for she lived at a time when the presence of Islam was growing in the valley, and the recognition of her by the Sufis and those who recorded local lore and hagiographies further solidified her presence in both religious traditions. This boundary-crossing character of Lalla allows her to be easily reshaped, reasserted or renewed by the narrator at will. The identity of a Kashmiri individual may shape Lalla's narratives to promote any number of identities, including class, caste, gender, religion and community. For instance, one Kashmiri Hindu woman I spoke to

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<sup>46</sup> Peter Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu*, 94. One young man he was speaking to had radically different views concerning religious beliefs and the lore of the local saints. Yet when his elder walked in the room and joined the conversation, he deferred to his elder male relative as the authority.

included details about her family's interactions with her Muslim neighbours by including them in her narrative about Lalla and her mother-in-law.<sup>47</sup>

Another interesting point Gottschalk brings to our attention is the ability of a group with conflicting narratives and identities to arrive at a mutually agreed upon identity through group dialogue. Gottschalk noted how an observed discussion amongst male peers would bring forth various conflicting views, yet through dialogue there would be an outcome of an agreed upon acceptable version of the narrative to present to the listener.<sup>48</sup> This point is important in our examinations as we consider how the oral narratives of Lalla's life are told to listeners or written out by scholars and other Lalla devotees for others. A phrase I frequently encountered while reading about Lalla, that "scholars agree" or "scholars cannot agree" on the authenticity of various aspects of Lalla's story, indicates this aspect of group 'discussion' is still occurring even as her story moves through the various forms available of oral, written, and digital media.

Gottschalk devotes some of his discussion to the importance that foreign and scholarly observations are given to confirm the veracity of narratives. If it is written and observed by someone else, it must be true. He observed that many of his informants pointed to books or referred to scholars, foreign travelers and highly educated locals as having the highest authority and thus able to confirm the veracity and authenticity of a narrative, even when locally-elaborated histories were more personally relevant and meaningful.<sup>49</sup> I feel that the impulse toward legitimation within the framework of "official" history may be one of the reasons why Lalla has suddenly become a figure of key interest for

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<sup>47</sup> Conversation at Mount Madonna Centre, Watsonville, CA USA. February 2012.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu*, 115-16.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.* 92. (one example of many).

many Kashmiri scholars in the past century. The first scholarly accounts of Lalla, originating from British colonialists, Temple and Grierson in the early part of the twentieth century, provide some form of scholarly legitimacy to her existence and indicate her worthiness of further study. Additional scholarly attention from Lalla's fellow Kashmiri Pandits also reclaims her as one of their own, reasserting her connections with the Kashmiri Śaiva tradition, and her identity as one. Similarly, we see works like that of M.I. Khan that bring out her associations with various Sufi personalities which bolster her Muslim identity.

A final issue relating to narrative and identity that Gottschalk presents concerns the charisma that surrounds particular personalities or is attributed to them. Two prominent saints in the Bihari village had places of worship and extensive lore known by the majority of people in the village. According to Gottschalk's observations it is the lore and the attributes given to these characters that create their power and charisma. Interestingly, the annual rituals and daily activities surrounding these local saints tended to bring together Hindus and Muslims regardless of their religious identity or that of the local saint. He calls this "the uniting power of charismatic dead people." Like Peterson, he observes the uniting power of rituals to preserve identities in numerous contexts. The uniting factor is not in words but in actions. For instance, the yearly attendance of Hindu families at the local Sufi shrine where they perform Islamic ritual prayers to express their gratitude for the Sufi saint's kindness to a deceased ancestor, or a Muslim family's annual participation in Hindu rituals at a local temple for similar reasons.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Lalla serves as a uniting force that transcends religious identity in favour of community identity, bringing Kashmiris together in their love

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<sup>50</sup> Peter Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu*, 49-50. However, Gottschalk notes that there is some influence lately of the idea of Islamic exclusivity. Some Muslims either participated, but were reluctant to admit they were present, or openly voiced their new perspectives, labeling the Hindu shrine as "anti-Islamic". A personal discussion with colleague Umberto Cicchetti revealed similar tendencies in Kashmir that he observed during his trip.

of Lalla and her story. But in contrast to the local saints of Alampur that Gottschalk discusses, there is no one geographic location in Kashmir around which devotion to Lalla centers. Perhaps this works in her favour, as my colleague observed during his 2011 visit to Kashmir. Wherever he went, he would ask about Lal Ded, and he would always be directed to where she lay buried, only to find that again and again it was not really her shrine. He said with both wonder and exasperation, “It is like she was everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. Not one Kashmiri I spoke to did not know who she was, yet she was an enigma, I was unable to touch proof of her at any [physical] source.”<sup>51</sup>

This may be one of the keys to Lalla’s survival over the centuries. Lalla has become so present in the everyday lives of Kashmiris, that she resides in their hearts and minds and is a portable icon of Kashmir. Although there is lore passed down stating she has places in the community, none seem to be more palpable than the glimmer in the eye of the Kashmiri telling you with pride another story of their beloved Lalla.

## **A Framework for examining Lalla’s story**

Based on the issues and insights that Peterson and Gottschalk have provided, I have devised a framework for examining Lalla’s stories. I have divided the framework into four sections, for ease of understanding.

### **Spiritual and Religious Meanings**

The first theme is that of the spiritual and religious aspects that are communicated through a narrative. This can be viewed in terms of Peterson’s ideas about how stories

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<sup>51</sup> Umberto Cicchetti. Personal discussion Fall of 2011.

express deep truths, passing on cultural, spiritual and religious identities, and the cultivation of reverence for something greater than oneself, yet still identifiable as a part of the community identity. Gottschalk's ideas on preservation or promotion of particular identities also can be included within this theme. I have noticed a consistent pattern in stories about Lalla wherein the narrator/writer attributes desirable spiritual and religious qualities to her. These qualities can be ideals of the narrator, or ideals of those around the narrator absorbed from family and culture.

Questions that can be explored from this perspective include:

- Are religious qualities, identity markers, or beliefs communicated?
- What are the deeper truths of the culture or of humanity that are communicated in the narrative?
- Is there an agenda for the narrator to preserve or promote a specific religious identity or viewpoint?
- Does the narrator express awe or reverence for figures – like Lalla – in the story? If so, can we identify what aspects of the narrative create that awe for that narrator?

### **Longevity of a Story**

The second theme to explore is the idea of longevity. I do not believe I can fully answer the question of what makes Lalla's stories continue, but I do feel we can bring out points in each narration that indicate possibilities as to why she continues to have a place in the hearts of Kashmiris. Peterson's ideas on the necessity of narrative to promote knowledge of the other, and his description of elements that make a universally appealing

narrative are a part of this theme. Additionally, the constantly changing environments within which these narratives live, serves to illustrate the potentiality of their longevity.

Questions that can be explored from this perspective include:

- Does the narrative have universal qualities?
- Does it serve a purpose? For example, does it unite or divide community, or inform the listener about the qualities of others?
- Will it continue to survive? Are there elements that make it obvious it will continue? Are there elements in the environments where it is told that threaten the survival of the story?
- Where are the sites/locales for the retelling of the narrative? Are these sites conducive to ongoing adaptation and transmission of the story?

### **Community and Group Identities**

The third theme to be explored is one of the central issues treated by Gottschalk, and one that is dealt with at length by Peterson. It is here, I believe, where we find one of the key reasons for the continued flourishing of Lalla's stories, as they help to preserve past memories which solidify group identity, in the midst of rapid change. She is a touchstone to remind Kashmiris of who they are, and where they come from. She serves to continue the deeply established identity of the culture among successive generations.

Questions that can be explored from this perspective include:

- Does the narrative communicate cultural norms and mores?
- Does it serve as a uniting or dividing tool for the community?

- Does it preserve local memories, history, temporal and geographically important aspects of cultural and regional identity?
- Does it allow for multiple identities to surface or does it serve the changing awareness of the past and of one's identity?

### **Mythico-Historical Characters**

The final theme to be explored is the idea of historical characters that become larger than life. Both Peterson and Gottschalk observe this as an important phenomenon amongst communities. Peterson takes us deeper into the levels of mythological representations of particular archetypal characters that communicate universal human truths, an aspect that crosses over with our first theme, while Gottschalk provides us with observations of two living mythico-historical characters that serve to communicate these ideals. There is no doubt that Lalla is indeed one of these mythico-historical figures, as many stories I have read and been told include acts of heroism, magical miracles, and metaphors for something greater than what Lalla the historical figure could have been.

Questions that can be explored in this area include:

- Do one or more characters of the narrative appear larger than life, yet have some factual existence?
- Is there a level of discussion regarding the authenticity of the narrative, its veracity, its historicity?
- Are there exaggerated qualities, claims of power?
- Are there changes over time in the context of narration, with shifts in political or religious power?



These four themes serve as a base of our explorations that will follow in the subsequent chapters. However, because each aspect is rarely an entity unto itself, overlapping and intertwining with others, in actual examination of the narrative we will not be delineating the discussion into such concrete sections.

Below we will explore two of Lalla's narratives. I have chosen these because of their popularity in the lore and because of the readily accessible multitudes of versions available. Various versions of each narrative will help to illustrate how a narrative is never the same twice as each one communicates multiple levels of meaning.

The stories are arranged roughly chronologically according to Lalla's life. The first story is her marriage and eventual emancipation from it, and the second is Lalla's encounter with Saiyyid `Ali Hamadani of the Kubrawiyya Sufi order.

## Chapter Three

### Lalla's married life and liberation

#### The birth of a Saint: Lalla and her Mother-in-law

*...popularly told narratives simultaneously reflect and construct the multiple group affiliations of those who tell them.*

*Peter Gottschalk<sup>52</sup>*

“A good story portrays a large expanse of valid territory.”<sup>53</sup> So says Jordan Peterson in his examination of what makes particular stories and myths last in a culture. Peterson reminds us that stories only last if they have something to tell us. Something about our collective identity as a group or something that teaches us through an “invisible wordless communication.” Our first story is a story with layers of meaning and potential multitudes of interpretations.

The most interesting thing about this story is the vast variety of versions that I have heard and read. These tellings span in length from one version of the story by Parimoo that takes six pages<sup>54</sup> to tell because of the author's interpolations made to be sure the reader is fully aware of Lalla's “Kashmiriness” and her “Hinduness,” to the briefest of retellings in casual conversations with Kashmiris. But despite the wide variety of retellings, the essential elements of the story tend to remain intact, allowing for the deeper layers of meaning to be communicated in a meaningful way to each particular audience. Furthermore, this story

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<sup>52</sup> Peter Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu*, 69.

<sup>53</sup> Jordan Peterson, *Maps*, 102.

<sup>54</sup> B.N. Parimoo, *Lalleshwari*, 10-16.

provides an excellent example of how identity and myth truly are intertwined on multiple levels, as we shall see below.

The basic outline of the story is this: a young woman by the name of Lalla leaves her family home as a young bride and goes to live with her husband's family as the new daughter-in-law, only to be confronted by an ill-tempered angry mother-in-law. Lalla's mother-in-law does everything in her power to humiliate Lalla, making her suffer and communicating to her that she is really nothing and not deserving of even a full plate of food.

Lalla endures her mother-in-law's behaviour with austere acceptance, as her mother-in-law tries to destroy her marriage, continually telling her son what a horrible daughter-in-law Lalla is, and that she is cheating on him with another lover, and is not a good wife.

The mother-in-law serves Lalla what looks like a plate of food, but what is really a stone covered with a veneer of rice. Lalla plays along with the ruse, making the guests think Lalla is treated like a queen, and dutifully (the word frequently used) washes the stone at the end of the meal, placing it back on its shelf each time.

One day, the mother-in-law finally succeeds in casting enough doubt into the mind of her son, that he decides to follow Lalla as she goes about her morning chores and her daily visit to the temple where she performs her *sādhana*.<sup>55</sup> (It is here where many differences in the story occur – sometimes she is at a temple, or a riverside, or a well; sometimes alone

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<sup>55</sup> Sādhana is the Sanskrit word for daily spiritual exercises and/or practices. Apte's *Sanskrit English Dictionary* defines the word as conjuring, accomplishing, effecting, performing, completion, worship, adoration, conciliation and propitiation. (p1666)

or other times with other women, sometimes she is followed disappearing into white light, while others she is encountered in deep trance by the river).

Her husband, convinced that she was going to meet a lover, lay in wait armed with a large stick for when she returned. Walking with a pot of water on her head, Lalla enters her home to be immediately assaulted by her husband, who comes upon her and strikes the pot on her head with the stick. The pot shatters to the floor, but the water remains intact. Lalla calmly goes about finishing her chores, dumping the excess water outside, as her husband and mother-in-law sit with mouths agape (Here as well, there are many variations, including subsequent conversations with women at the well, and a pond springing up where she dumped the remaining water). As a result of this drama, Lalla has the opportunity to leave her wifely duties, and begins the life of a wandering ascetic, who many times is depicted as naked or semi-nude. (Another version of this story is that the miracle of the water pitcher makes her so famous that she is forced to leave her marital home).

The story takes on different hues for each teller of the story; everything affects its shape – the teller, the act of telling and the one being told. The narrative is shaped into something compelling for *that* particular orator and *that* particular audience. It has *personal meaning* that speaks to both the larger group identity and the smaller identities of those immediately present at the telling, while communicating aspects of the speaker's individual identity.

Gottschalk observed one news story changing drastically depending on who told him the story. He noticed changes in the emphasis on religious identity, community identity and family identity, matching the identities of the narrator and the listeners. Similarly, I have observed the depiction of Lalla and her environment changes depending on the identities of

the narrator, and note that displaced Kashmiris seem to give more emphasis to particular ‘Kashmiri’ aspects of Lalla’s identity. Among diaspora communities, there is a tendency to latch onto cultural details of identity, such as religion, local lore, and dress. These aspects that serve the foundation of the created identities of the individual and the group are what displacement, and foreign environments bring to the fore of consciousness.

Peterson notes that stories serve multiple levels, one of symbolism, one of deeper identity, and one of personal identity (which can include beliefs, religion, culture, etc). From his perspective it is the core of the story that communicates the deeper identity and the symbolism that leads to its discovery, while the changing details are the ones that keep the story alive from generation to generation, preserving details of the local identity and culture or changing them when necessary as the community evolves. They tell the listener information about acting in the world.

The deeper level of meaning contained within this story begins with the two characters of Lalla and her mother-in-law. This pair exemplifies what Peterson calls the “hostile brothers,”<sup>56</sup> in which Lalla is the virtuous side of the equation. Lalla is frequently described by her narrators as the perfect daughter-in-law, doing her chores to perfection and representing the epitome of the ideal Kashmiri woman. This is the character of the divine daughter, at least one half of her, the mother-in-law being her other half. She “faces the unknown with presumption of its benevolence – with the (unprovable) attitude that

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<sup>56</sup> Jordan Peterson, *Maps*, 307 – 469. This section discusses at length this recurring theme, including the various manifestations it takes in the realm of narrative.

confrontation with the unknown will bring renewal and redemption.”<sup>57</sup> She voluntarily enters into creative union with the unknown. On this Peterson says,

The hero’s voluntary contact with the unknown transforms it into something benevolent – into the eternal source, in fact, of strength and ability. Development of such strength – attendant upon faith in the conditions of experience – enables him (her) to stand outside the group, when necessary, and to use it as a tool, rather than as armor. The hero rejects identification with the group as the ideal of life, preferring to follow the dictates of his(her) conscience and his(her) heart. His(Her) identification with meaning – and his(her) refusal to sacrifice meaning for security – renders existence acceptable, despite its tragedy.<sup>58</sup>

Above is a perfect description of our beloved Lalla; she has come to embody all of these qualities in her lore. We have the perpetual hero accepting life as it is, while her mother-in-law continues to argue with life and its challenges, projecting her angers and frustrations onto Lalla, and doing everything she can to keep her from existing in any manner that betrays a hint of Creative presence.

The mother-in-law is the second half of this duo, horrified by her limited understanding of the conditions of existence and “shrinking from contact with everything she does not understand, weakening her personality and no longer nourishing it with *the water of life*, making her rigid and authoritarian, clinging to the familiar and stable(emphasis mine).”<sup>59</sup> As a result of this we find her acting against Lalla, and many a narrator has referred to her as “evil” for the treatment she has doled out to her daughter-in-law. She represents all that is dark within the human psyche, what is frequently labeled “evil.” Yet, evil is not necessarily something we want to be fully rid of. To explore this further, let us examine Peterson’s definition of evil:

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<sup>57</sup> *ibid.* 307.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.* 308.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.* 307.

Evil is the rejection of and sworn opposition to the process of creative exploration. Evil is proud repudiation of the unknown, and willful failure to understand, transcend and transform the social world. Evil is, in addition - and in consequence - hatred of the virtuous and courageous, precisely on account of their virtue and courage. Evil is the desire to disseminate darkness, for the love of darkness, where there could be light. The spirit of evil underlies all actions that speed along the decrepitude of the world, that foster God's desire to inundate and destroy everything that exists.<sup>60</sup>

God, Peterson says – *God's desire to destroy* – pointing to the ultimate paradox wrestled with over millennia in this world of opposites, implying that evil is indeed an aspect of God. Lalla and her mother-in-law are indeed part of this one same aspect. The mother-in-law is not the evil twin, but the evil within Lalla herself, as all beings have wicked and virtuous qualities within themselves. All the darker aspects of her psyche are embodied as her alter ego, the complement to her virtue. For if Lalla is good and virtuous, by default, her mother-in-law must be evil. Human beings want to focus on the heroic, and the virtuous, which is evident in this instance in the emphasis in narratives on the great virtuous qualities of Lalla, and villainizing or downplaying of the darkness. But as Peterson says, "...the heroic tendency...is a central and permanent aspect of the human being. The same is true, precisely, of the adversarial tendency...the desire to make everything suffer for the outrage of its existence, (it) is an ineradicable intrapsychic element of the individual."<sup>61</sup>

Indeed, some tellers of Lalla's stories treat the figure of the mother-in-law with sympathy. In one of Parimoo's renditions of this story, for example, he goes to great lengths to defend the mother-in-law,<sup>62</sup> describing how confusing it must have been for her, a worldly

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<sup>60</sup> Jordan Peterson, *Maps*, 311.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Parimoo is not the only one defending the mother-in-law. M.K. Kaw's blog entry of 2011 discusses the very same issue, where he brings up further 'evidence' of the mistreatment of the mother-in-law through the *naks* she has reportedly composed as a retort to Lalla. Additionally, he adds another symbolic element to the stone, which he says is a blue stone on Lalla's plate creating a deeper metaphor in relationship to the friction between

woman, to understand the ways of the deeply spiritual daughter-in-law who had come into her home:

But that is, *prima facie*, a lopsided assessment...Mothers-in-law have always been maligned. Nobody pays heed to their version of the case, to their tale of woe...Very often the woe of mothers-in-law springs out of sheer misunderstanding of things...It is quite probable that Lalla's foible was her other-worldly demeanour. That did not fit in with the exclusively 'this worldly' material view of the folk around her...her endurance with the stone in the bowl; and a thousand shades of difference between the approach to life of the two, may have set her mother-in-law at her wit's end, much the same way as was the case with the shrewish wife of Socrates. Sages and mystics are often misunderstood.<sup>63</sup>

Parimoo has put his finger directly on the deeper layers of meaning that Peterson has described. Through his defense of the mother-in-law's actions, we see his own understanding of a reaction to the unknown, quite possibly in himself, and that these reactions stem from willful ignorance and a desire to destroy that which she does not understand. Yet he knows, as seen from his comparison with Socrates, she is a necessary part of Lalla's transformation of herself and of her own inherent darker qualities; a transformation that occurs and is symbolized in the water pitcher.

Water is considered a feminine element, it is frequently equated with the emotions; it is also purifying and life-giving. Thus Lalla's transformation is embodied in her ability to carry the *water of life* that Peterson has mentioned as quoted above.<sup>64</sup> The fact that Lalla is able to nourish her household with that water without reacting or responding to the torrent of raging emotions from her in-laws is symbolic proof that she has achieved a higher level of

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Lalla and her mother-in-law and the liberation achieved at her hands. The blue stone is a symbol frequently found in Sufi lore. <http://www.mkkaw.com/post/4836451925/the-much-maligned-mother-in-law>

<sup>63</sup> B.N. Parimoo, *Ascent*, 8-9.

<sup>64</sup> Jordan Peterson, *Maps*, 307.



transformation; the emotional waters are no longer turbulent, but are under her complete control.<sup>65</sup>

Jaishree Kak responds in a similar way to the water imagery, as Parimoo has to the mother-in-law. She puts into words the exact nature of the water pitcher's symbolism stating, "instead of taking them (elements of the story) as literal truths, a deeper meaning can be gleaned from them..." and then further down the page says, "this incident represents a turning point in Lalla's life..." However, she attributes this to being fed up with the violence meted out by her husband, rather than exploring the full symbolism behind the "shining water, shaped like a pitcher on top of Lalla's head."<sup>66</sup> It is a water pitcher full of symbolism that taps into age-old symbols present in the lore of the traditions within the region, such as Sufism, and Hinduism. For here is a culmination of the friction meted out by the mother-in-law and the final act of breaking the pitcher of the ego, freeing the waters to flow where it wills, yet Lalla's firmly developed will allows her to continue to nurture humanity and remain "pure" despite the turbulence, which truly frees her from bondage of the ego, and not just the unfortunate marriage.

A few pages later, Kak clearly lays out the function of the story by relating a number of *vaks* attributed to Lalla, discussing the necessity of transcendence of duality and the transcendence of the other through the subjective and objective paradigm, interestingly using these words: "The male-centered notion of subjectivity which Lalla exemplifies (aka "the

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<sup>65</sup> Elaine Craddock mentions in her article "Reconstructing the Split Goddess" (in T. Pintchman ed. *Seeking Mahadevi*, p.144), another story about Renuka who is able to carry water without a pitcher, but loses her ability when she is distracted by a beautiful *gandbarva* flying over the water. When she returns home unable to carry water as she usually does, her husband is enraged by her obvious lack of chastity, and demands that his son Parasurama kill her. He asks for a boon in return for committing the deed, to which his father agrees. Immediately after killing her he asks for his boon, restoring his mother to life.

<sup>66</sup> Jaishree Kak, *To The Other*, 28.

hero”) is based on setting the other as the opposite against which the self has to guard itself so that it does not crack the brittle boundaries in which it finds itself enclosed.”<sup>67</sup> She does not seem to recognize the shattering pitcher as that freedom from these boundaries.

The second symbolic element of this story that I wish to examine occurs after Lalla’s emancipation, when she chooses to wander naked. This is a very controversial issue among authors who have written about Lalla. Many writers have difficulty trying to reconcile their awe and reverence for Lalla with the problematic image of a naked woman. That she took up this mode of life seems to be supported by one of her *vaks*:

My guru gave me only one advice –  
From outside transfer the attention within  
That became my initiation  
That is why I began to wander naked (Jaishree Kak translation)<sup>68</sup>

OR...

My Guru gave me but one precept;  
“From without withdraw your gaze within,  
And fix it on the Inmost Self.”  
I, Lalla, took to heart this one precept,  
And therefore naked I began to dance (Jayalal Kaul’s translation)<sup>69</sup>

Kak provides us with a commentary that considers the deeper meaning of the naked figure of Lalla. She writes, “Aside from the concrete fact that freezing Kashmiri winters are hardly conducive to wandering in a nude state, my own interpretation of this verse is based on considering it within the context of her other verses. Lalla’s wandering in a nude state

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<sup>67</sup> Jaishree Kak, *To The Other*, 31.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.* 35.

<sup>69</sup> Jayalal Kaul, *Lal-Ded*, 12. Note that the difference in the translation is due to a particular Kashmiri word *natsun* which can mean to dance or to wander.

could refer to her divesting or derobing herself of all worldly attachments, including her family, friends, and the comfort of a home.”<sup>70</sup>

Nakedness expresses vulnerability and humility, but it can also be inherently freeing, like that of a naked child at play, innocent of the shame or danger that adults’ experiences impose upon the state. While Kak sees Lalla’s nakedness in purely symbolic terms, another female scholar, Neerja Mattoo considers her nudity as literal and offers the following interpretation: “...it is not out of a desire to shock, nor in a mood of self-mortification...It is just in her ‘fine madness’ she had become completely unselfconscious...”<sup>71</sup>

Mattoo is not the only one who attributes Lalla’s nude wanderings to her “God-madness.” On a website called *Sufi Shrines in the Indian Sub-Continent*, S. Yasir Kazmi writes on Lalla’s nudity, “To mention here the practice of Lalla shall not be out of place that in a state of extreme ecstasy and wonderment that she roamed about the forest and human habitations naked. Once she was going through a bazaar, she saw a saint, was terrified and exclaimed, “Here is a man, I should cover myself.” She ran to a baker’s shop and jumped into the blazing oven. People raised a hue and cry that Lalla had been burnt. The saint also came and asked her to come out. Lalla Arifa came out, dressed in, a long shirt with a beautiful, coloured shawl on her shoulder. (sic)”<sup>72</sup>

In another defense of Lalla’s nakedness, Dwarka Nath Munshi writes, after Lalla’s realization: “She is then made out to have cast away her apparel to go about dancing in the nude. Some scholars have, no doubt, disputed or rejected this interpretation. Lal Ded was

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<sup>70</sup> Jaishree Kak, *To The Other*, 35.

<sup>71</sup> Neerja Mattoo, *Lal-Ded the poet who gave a voice to women*. In Toshkhani 2000. p. 36

<sup>72</sup> Kazmi, S. Yasir. 2010. *Shama-e-Kashmir Lalla Arifa*. On the website Sufi Shrines <http://www.myasa.net/sufindia/shrines/2010/12/shama-e-kashmir-lalla-arifa/>

too serene and knowing a *yogini* to have taken such a frivolous meaning of a profound expression. When one analyses it in the context of the profundity of both the Guru and the disciple Lalla, it most likely was meant for her to recognize that the external world is only an illusion of no value.”<sup>73</sup> Munshi realizes there is more to the nudity, tapping into the same symbolism as Kak, yet he also ensures that the reader understands Lalla’s high saintly status, equating this with a level of consciousness that would prevent her from wandering naked, fully revealing his own discomfort with the idea of someone attributed such high status breaking such a cardinal social rule.

Similarly, R.N. Kaul also argues it is not possible that Lalla could be wandering in such a state for, “if Lalla Ded were moving naked in the streets how could she have incarnated herself as the Muse of knowledge (Saraswati) and more precisely speaking as the Muse of Poetry? If true, the legend<sup>74</sup> confirms her miraculous powers.”<sup>75</sup>

Various elements that we have observed previously are evident in these narratives as well, such as Munshi’s use of historicity and scholarly veracity to support the supposed inauthentic claims of Lalla’s nude state. Kaul relies on the high regard and reverence for Lalla as a saint to argue that it is not possible that a goddess incarnate can break such a moral boundary of society, and reconfirms her saintly status, in the slight chance it *is* true, through the use of another legend that keeps her modesty intact. Meanwhile, Mattoo and Kazmi both attribute the nudity to her high spiritual state, thus divesting her of any blame. Each of these writers struggles with the dilemma of Lalla’s legends and *vaks* that support her wandering nude by different means. Yet each writer equally demonstrates their own

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<sup>73</sup> D.N. Munshi, *Lalleshwari the Liberator*. In Toshkhani 2000. p.54.

<sup>74</sup> This is in reference to the lore that Lalla’s belly grew down to sag and cover her private parts.

<sup>75</sup> R.N. Kaul, *Kashmir’s Mystic*, 13.

discomfort and its source in doing so. For instance, Kaul has Lalla on a pedestal equal in status with the goddess Saraswati, and his own ideas of what that means leaves him in a quandary of how to handle the supposed evidence that is before him, and both Kak and Munshi utilize the symbolism of the nude state to rationalize its presence in the lore.

This brings us to a consideration of the religious and spiritual aspects that are part of the telling of Lalla's stories. In the oral narrations I heard, the speakers always spoke with a passion or gleam in their eye, a sense of pride in their voice, as they related to me the story at hand. In the many versions of Lalla's marriage story that I have heard, there was invariably an element of reverence for her history, regardless of other tensions and concerns that were expressed. In this story, among the elements that seemed to spark such a response of awe and admiration were Lalla's dedication to daily spiritual discipline despite the demands of her family life; her ability to remain calm and accepting in the face of adversity; and the transformation of the heroine.

In addition to demonstrating the narrator's perceptions of Lalla's saintliness, some stories emphasize her embodiment of a feminine ideal worthy of reverence. Parimoo, for example, goes to great lengths to describe Lalla's lifestyle and daily activities. While one could consider that this is due to his desire to show how a Kashmiri woman is supposed to be, I would argue that it is not overtly this agenda that Parimoo has but his expression of love for the feminine principles Lalla embodies. He describes Lalla in the most romantic terms, as one of the most ideal representations of the Kashmiri woman. His description is what he knows, informed by his own life experience, so his narrative is a distillation of the most ideal of circumstances and character traits around him, a notion of perfection which he transfers onto the persona of Lalla. Of course, a modern Kashmiri woman like Jaishree Kak

will not consider it possible or even desirable to live up to such ideals put forward by Parimoo who is at least one if not two generations preceding her, creating and even necessitating a difference in their narratives.

Parimoo's description of Lalla is not only of the ideal woman but also serves to communicate what the ideal Kashmiri Hindu woman is like. He emphasizes those aspects of her personality that make her uniquely a Kashmiri Hindu, and his narration communicates this to all others who hear his rendition, thus conveying to the next generation of listeners what it was like for Kashmiri women, and what is to be admired and emulated in their qualities. However, I feel this particular way of telling Lalla's story, which is unique to Parimoo, is not a version that can survive. It is communicating an older way of being for Kashmiri women, and as we see in Kak's critique of female oppression and her retellings of Lalla's stories, this particular type of ideal Kashmiri woman is no longer acceptable to the majority of living and breathing Kashmiri women. Thus Kak's recounting of this narrative focuses on the abusive treatment of Lalla and her final retribution as the mother-in-law sits agape at the pitcherless pitcher of water upon Lalla's head. It is Lalla's power and strength to overcome an oppressive situation that is emphasized and not her passive acceptance, tolerance and endurance.

Such striking differences among the narratives give us a strong indicator of the shifting identities amongst Kashmiri women and the roles they play in the society. Kak's mode of telling the story is very widespread in the versions of the narrative posted by Kashmiris on internet sites. It would be interesting to know whether such "modern" versions of the narrative are developing amongst Kashmiris still living in the region, as much as they are within the Kashmiri diaspora communities around the globe.

In other versions of this tale, elements are incorporated to communicate geographic markers of the region, such as the temple *Natekeshwar Bhairav* in Zinyapor.<sup>76</sup> I have not been able to locate this place on maps of Kashmir, nor could any Kashmiri I know personally tell me where this temple might be.

When I asked a fellow academic from Kashmir about this particular temple, his first response was “there is no Natekeshwar form of Bhairav that I know, let me ask around to find out.”<sup>77</sup> This is a wonderful illustration of the importance of narrative – for my colleague’s first response was to speak to others in the community about the location of this temple recorded in Lalla’s narrative, not to categorically dismiss its existence altogether. This means there is an implicit understanding that valid information can be passed along the channels of narration.

The importance given to knowledge amongst community members that is passed through narrative is also noted by Gottshchalk. For instance, in the village his study takes place, a local man who was known as knowledgeable was frequently queried concerning matters of local knowledge and lore, consistently reinforcing the connections within the community and the value of direct knowledge obtained through wise community members.

Narratives function to communicate various levels of information. This can and often does include particular views on the tensions that exist in the community, and may also provide specific information directly related to the family of the narrator. In one version of the story that I heard from a Kashmiri Pandit woman, I was told that Lalla’s husband’s

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<sup>76</sup> Jaishree Kak and Jayalal Kaul both refer to this temple in their narrations. Kak refers to it as *Natta Keshava Bhairava* shrine in Zinpura (*To the Other Shore*, p.28) and Kaul refers to it as *Naṭa Keshava Bhairava* shrine in Zinyapor. (*Lal Ded*, p.11).

<sup>77</sup> Email correspondence with Mrinal Kaul dated August 14, 2012.

suspicions about her chastity were initially aroused because the Muslims had prevented Lalla from doing her chores, causing her to return empty handed, without water for the day. This narrator was also eager to make sure I understood that both Lalla's family and that of her husband Nica Bhat belonged to different Śaiva Tantric sects that were at odds with each other, and that this was another source of tension for poor Lalla. Additionally, she gave details about the temple Lalla would frequent and its connections to her own family heritage, proudly stating that her family had gone to this temple for generations. Thus, her narrative not only created a personal connection with Lalla, but communicated her family's experience as Hindus experiencing communal conflict, while acknowledging the tensions within her own religious community.

In contrast, the version of the story told to me in California by a Kashmiri Muslim man emphasizes how horribly daughters-in-law are treated in Hindu households,<sup>78</sup> being sure to note to me that Muslim wives are **not** treated that way. Meanwhile, another Kashmiri Muslim man – a carpet seller in Oman,<sup>79</sup> spoke of the difficult circumstances Lalla found herself in, at her husband's home, but insisted that there is no difference between Hindu or Muslim, that all Kashmiris must endure the same familial patterns.

These three examples come from oral retellings of the story, yet in the written narrations, it is clear we find similar differential patterns. Each writer uses Lalla's narrative as a means to further their own hidden and overt agendas. For example Mohibbul Hasan, in his book *Kashmir Under the Sultans*, mentions Lalla a total of three times. At first he mentions

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<sup>78</sup> Casual conversation with a Kashmiri Muslim man at a South Asian restaurant in Santa Cruz, CA October, 2008.

<sup>79</sup> Casual conversation with a man named Irshad whom I spoke with on a regular weekly basis during the time I worked in Oman from 2003-2005. He told me the story to emphasize the point of how daughter-in-laws are treated in Kashmiri households.



her merely to note her as a medieval period saint with surviving literature, but further on he states that during the fourteenth century Hindus and Muslims got along and participated in each others' rituals and festivities, and that there was even inter-marriage. "Muslim saints mixed freely with Hindu Yogis and held discussions with them"<sup>80</sup> and the "mystic songs of Lalla-Ded and Nurudin stirred souls of Hindus and Muslims alike." Evidently he wants to be sure his readers understand the spirit of tolerance and exchange that existed in the 'happy valley'. Yet further on, he claims Lalla as being highly influenced by Sufism, and claims that her use of the vernacular language as a teaching tool was learned directly from the Sufis and that she "imbibed the Doctrine of Love."<sup>81</sup> For Hasan, there is an evident tension between wanting to communicate the unifying elements of Kashmiri culture and outlook through Lalla and wanting to remain loyal to his own religious tradition of Islam and Sufism. Thus, in his treatment of Lalla, he highlights the influence of Sufism while simultaneously depicting her as a central figure in Kashmir's diverse spiritual culture, characterized by mutual tolerance.

The earliest written narratives concerning Lalla are produced by Muslim authors. One of these, by Baba Dawud Mishkātī, mentions the water pitcher legend although the figure of the mother-in-law is absent.<sup>82</sup> At the end of the story, we see a how Lalla is Islamicized in his narrative: "Since many such incidents became known, she set her foot in the *deserts* and began wandering in the wildernesses (emph. mine)."<sup>83</sup> Because there are no deserts in Kashmir, it seems clear that in Lalla's tale he is using the model of the stories of

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<sup>80</sup> Mohibbul Hasan, *Kashmir Under the Sultans*, (Delhi: Aakar Books, 1959 *reprinted* 2005), 249.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.* p.254

<sup>82</sup> Jayalal Kaul, *Lal-Ded*, 2. This leads one to wonder if he purposely omitted it or it is a later addition in the oral narrative.

<sup>83</sup>*ibid.*

Sufi saints that have come to the region through Persian Sufi thought, drawing lines of connection between Lalla and other revered saints in the Sufi tradition.

To summarize, the story of Lalla's marriage, cruel treatment from her mother-in-law and emancipation from that family bond, provides a deeper symbolism of the process of transformation the willing hero undergoes in order to unite with the unknown creative forces. These universal qualities and the metaphors that communicate them provide a foundation for the story that continues to feed the deeper psyche of the individuals in the community, and keeps the story alive. Yet this foundation serves just as that, a foundation to communicate cultural behaviours, beliefs and experiences that shape the continuously changing landscape of the Kashmiri identity. Lalla's larger-than-life persona allows her reputation to precede her, while her heroic tales keep her in the hearts of her people. Each Kashmiri has a unique view of Lalla that reflects their own unique position within the community and the world at large. It is through their narratives we see how personal identity intertwines with cultural identity, providing layers of meaning.

In the next chapter, the exploration continues in another guise investigating the encounter with a foreigner, and its incorporation into the narrative of Lalla's deeper transformations.

## Chapter Four

### Lalla meets Hamadani - The Baker story

*The very prefix Lal Ded reminded me of the rich heritage of interface between religions, intertwined hazily with the world of mystique – the concept of Sufism, which is still very much alive in the Valley today. Was Lal Ded- Laleshwari of Pandrethan, the woman used and abused by her society, really walking naked on these very streets until she met the person whom she called “the man” – the Syed of Syeds – the great Shah-i-Hamadan?*

*Dr. Gulzar Mufti*<sup>84</sup>

This is one of the first Lal Ded stories I encountered with piqued curiosity. Here we have a tale of a yogini meeting a staid Sufi on the roadside and the ensuing transformation of the two. Whether you look at the symbolism around the baker’s oven Lalla runs into, the fact that the pivotal moment of Hamadani’s arrival in Kashmir is met by its foremost saint Lal Ded, or the twists and turns this tale makes in order to accommodate the Sufi and the Yogini, who appear to be opposites, there is so much to explore. It is amazing how many times it is retold with a difference, including in the field of academia.

While in the previous chapter we considered the narrative of the birth of Lalla the saint, in this narrative we are meeting her as an established saint of Kashmir. Interestingly there are no other major stories that place Hamadani in direct contact with her. Other stories about Lalla explore her encounters with Nund Rishi, a major Sufi figure of Kashmir and younger contemporary, and her lessons for him; her dialogues and games with her *guru*; and her encounters with contemporary saints, and the people of the community. One

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<sup>84</sup> Dr. Gulzar Mufti. “A Journey from Heaven to Hell II.” Greater Kashmir News. July 16, 2007. Accessed January 1, 2013. <http://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/2007/Jul/16/a-journey-from-heaven-to-hell-ii-8.asp>. Dr. Mufti is a surgeon of Kashmiri origin, living in the United Kingdom, who regularly returns to Kashmir for visits.

question that comes to mind is why is this particular story retold so frequently? Below we will explore some possibilities.

In this story Lalla is now a saint in her own right meeting another saint on the path, yet he is a foreigner from a foreign land. It is illustrative of J. Peterson's ideas of encountering the dangerous foreigner that occurs frequently in folklore and myth. There is no doubt a transformation is about to occur when the stranger appears. Perhaps the transformation takes place not only in Lalla but in Kashmir as well.

The theme of the other as something suspicious and dangerous is common both in lore and everyday narrative. Strangers are viewed with suspicion for the change they bring, which is not always welcome. Depending on who is telling the narrative, we find a variety of views projected onto the 'other' manifest in the stranger.<sup>85</sup>

When looking at this narrative we encounter all of these varieties. There are narratives that assert that Sufism and Islam were already present in the Valley before Hamadani arrived, and that his "foreign" influence was not necessarily a welcome change, seeing him specifically as a foreigner who affected Kashmiri culture negatively, and there are narratives that see him as a saving grace to the people of Kashmir. Each version expresses a different view of the ideas that came along with Hamadani.

The story begins with Lalla, who has taken to roaming naked, claiming "there are no 'real' men here so why should I wear clothes?" One day, she is sitting along the roadside, one of the main roads into town, and who should happen along the road, but Hamadani on

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<sup>85</sup> Peter Gottschalk also looks at this when he observes his community speaking about the foreign other within the community. Gottschalk notes in his work that on occasion there were narrators who presented any Muslim as a foreigner, due to the religious creed they followed. However, there were also Indian Muslims encountering the foreign Muslim other. These two groups were often held to be different by both Indian Muslims and Hindus.

his way to Srinagar. Lalla looks up and shrieks “I’ve seen a man! I’ve seen a man!” and runs for cover. In some stories she first runs into the shop of the grocer or butcher, who yells at her and sends her back out. Then she runs across the street into the baker’s and jumps in the oven.<sup>86</sup> Hamadani goes looking for her, and inquires at the bakery where he is told, “She is gone, she dissolved herself in the fire.” He looks to the oven, and suddenly Lalla emerges clothed in green (sometimes green & gold, sometimes the garments of paradise, sometimes all gold, in one story she wears flowers and in another, bridal attire). The two become fast friends and wander together back to the village. In some stories she becomes his disciple, in others Hamadani rejects her, and finally in some Hamadani becomes Lalla’s student. Other times the story ends at the oven, and we are not told what comes next. Each of these endings carry their own significance, but the outcome is always the same – Lalla continues to keep company with the Sufis.

This story tells other stories, one of them is Kashmir’s transformation – Lalla becomes a metaphor for Kashmir, whose people are transformed by the advent of a more formalized Sufism and Islam brought by Hamadani and his seven hundred companions. Each of the different endings represent a different perspective – Hamadani and Lalla’s mutual recognition of each other is total acceptance of the other, Lalla becoming Hamadani’s student can be seen as a statement that Islam is seen as the superior, civilizing

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<sup>86</sup> In Knowles’ translation of the story (Grierson appendix p122), he uses the term *baniyā* and no English equivalent. It is a word in Hindi and Urdu that according to p.172 of *Platts Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi and English* means: “a merchant, trader, seller, shopkeeper, corn-chandler, grain-keeper, seller of provisions.” However the word in question is *wānīs* in Kashmiri, and means a shopkeeper (Grierson. *A Dictionary of the Kashmiri Language* p.1120-21). This word sparked some protest amongst Kashmiri acquaintances who all viewed the term *baniyā* as a negative term. One person rationalized this by the negative images portrayed in Hindi B-movies of *baniyā* as ruthless money mongers. (Facebook conversation December 2012). It further had impact on my own work as the translations I had used were primarily using a butcher as the first shop, and I had not noticed this until Voss-Roberts’ article, “Power, Gender and the Classification of a Kashmiri Śaiva Mystic.”

form of religion,<sup>87</sup> whereas his rejection of Lalla is the rejection of the old Kashmiri beliefs & practices. Finally, Lalla taking Hamadani as a student expresses the triumph of local cultural beliefs and practices over the foreign ideas, emphasizing the value of the deeply established Kashmiri culture and identity.

It is important to look at the shifts in symbolism here: how is it that Lalla is *naked* when Hamadani comes upon her? In the previous chapter we explored the significance of this image, yet here the metaphor of nudity takes on different connotations; for example, a lack of civilization or completion. Perhaps it is a metaphor for the state her realizations left her in – she is raw and uncooked – she is realized but not yet refined. So she goes to the butcher, the one who beheads, who *kills the ego*, and she is sent away, for she is already without ego. Then she runs to the baker, where she jumps in the oven herself – she is cooked voluntarily – by her own volition she chooses the fire of transformation, and just when everyone thinks, “that’s it, she is gone” she emerges transformed. It is the last in a series of transformations for Lalla that culminate in her becoming an enlightened being, emerging from the oven as being in the world but not of it. Hamadani is the catalyst – the encounter with a foreign idea in the form of the mythical *insan al-kamil*, the Sufi idea of the perfected human being. The encounter with her opposite applies the final polish. The *jñānī* and the *bhakti*, the sober Sufi and the ecstatic Sufi, and in this case, the completely free Yogini Lalla with the sober, disciplined Sufi, Hamadani. Both need the other in order to wake from the realm of opposites and transcend the realm of duality completely. They are able to see the extremes of themselves in the mirror of the other. This symbolism allows all

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<sup>87</sup> There are similar stories of other Sufi saints, having a civilizing affect on the local people. The stories usually depict the Sufi coming in and civilizing or pacifying the “*jungli log*”(jungle people), making a strong statement of what life was like before that parallels the story of the Prophet Muḥammad, as a civilizer of the idol-worshipping Arab people. Toshkhani brings attention to this in his article, “Reconstructing and Reinterpreting Lal-Ded.”

the outcomes to be possible, for in many teaching tales and religious traditions there is an encounter with one's opposite that enables the final transformation.

Peterson notes that the hero is “the active agent of adaptation,” always ready for change and transformation, and essentially serves as a natural aspect of the functions of the cosmos: the death and rebirth of ideas and patterns that ensures “the constant update of the techniques of survival”, and the hero's role is to “eternally upset the protective structure of tradition and enter into sacrificial union with the re-emergent unknown.”<sup>88</sup> He describes various examples, many of them containing the idea of fire as a transformative element. Our narrative illustrates these notions and ideas, showing they continue to touch a deep place in the psyche.

This multi-layered symbolism is part of what keeps this story alive – the underlying element of human transformation through encounter with the other/the unknown, and by extension the transformation of a community through encounter with the foreign. It is for this reason I think this story seems to have so much relevance – it realistically draws upon the environment, connects two religions and unites them in a transformative way that leaves both changed in way that Kashmiris can readily identify with, as Dr. Mufti articulates in the epigraph above. Yet, it leaves room for a multitude of interpretations and possibilities.

In Umberto Cichetti's experiences during a recent trip to Kashmir he met with elements of this truth of diversity that Lalla communicates. He was surprised by an encounter with some Sufis who told him of the merits of revering Hanuman, the Hindu deity known for his austerity, strength and single-minded devotion.<sup>89</sup> I have myself observed

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<sup>88</sup> Peterson, *Maps*, 248.

<sup>89</sup> Conversation with Umberto Cichetti in fall 2011 shortly after he returned from his summer 2011 trip.

the ways in which Kashmiris unite elements of both traditions. A Muslim Kashmiri friend told me of his love for baby Kṛṣṇa with great affection and much detail shortly after we met in South India.<sup>90</sup> After some time he also proudly told me that his family had for generations been making an annual pilgrimage to a particular Ladakhi Buddhist temple known for its 'baraka'.<sup>91</sup> It was a proud part of his family heritage that all of the religious traditions of the region were part of who he is, and truly illustrated the equality of all traditions for him.

These experiences reflect the natural landscape, showing how the intermingling of religious traditions has an effect on the general population, and how stories like that of Lalla and Hamadani narrate the elements of interconnectedness that the local inhabitants experience and/or remember on a daily basis. Yet, there is potential in this particular narrative to serve many agendas. From the symbolic perspective, the encounter with the foreigner or the stranger symbolizes a direct encounter with the unknown and always has a transformative effect. We see this clearly illustrated by the metaphor of Lalla's transformation in the baker's oven. According to Peterson, the foreigner is threatening because he is not part of the informing cultural structure. The established culture has its own structure of behaviours and beliefs and the mere presence of the foreigner threatens its integrity.<sup>92</sup> Peterson states:

When the members of one isolated group come into contact with the members of another, the stage is therefore set for trouble. Each culture, each group, evolved to protect its individual members from the unknown...each evolved to structure social relationships and render them

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<sup>90</sup> During 2000 I was attending a study abroad program in Kerala. This man was a local merchant in the same district as the café I would study at and we would speak regularly.

<sup>91</sup> An Arabic word used to describe a large amount of palpable spiritual energy in a person, place or thing. The mere fact he used this word to describe a Buddhist temple illustrates the mind-set of many Kashmiris from the region.

<sup>92</sup> Peterson, *Maps*, 249-51.



predictable, to provide a goal and the means to attain it. All cultures provide...particular modes of being in the face of terror and uncertainty. ...Every culture represents an idiosyncratic paradigm, a pattern of behaving in the face of the unknown, and the paradigm cannot be shifted, without dramatic consequences – without dissolution, metaphoric death – prior to (potential) reconstruction.<sup>93</sup>

Thus Hamadani's presence is a potential threat, and the resulting transformation of Lalla is no accident. Her 'death' in the baker's oven is a message to all who hold her dear that their transformation is also inevitable. But the transformation is not complete, it is only the first phase, there is still the inevitable accommodations and adjustments that need to be made, and we see this by the variety of endings encountered with this narrative. The process of shifting from one cultural paradigm to another is undoubtedly a drastic change for both the individual and the community psyche that identifies so heavily with all that has nurtured them and taught them about the world. Belief systems are the glue of the culture, and social structures do not disintegrate without some chaos. Peterson concurs, as he feels the psychological stability of an individual is directly tied to the group's well being, for without the touchstone of identity, meaning and the reason for being vanishes and the individual or culture is left in a vulnerable state open and exposed to the darkness of the unknown.<sup>94</sup> This vulnerable state instills terror, anxiety and stress into the community and individual. This of course results in a number of responses. Some more readily adapt to changes while others just cannot accept things so easily.

Toshkhani in his article *Reconstructing and Reinterpreting Lal Ded* takes offence to this narrative as an "imaginary anecdote... that continues to be repeated with total disregard to

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<sup>93</sup> *ibid.* 249.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.* 250.

historical plausibility.”<sup>95</sup> In the narrative he recounts, Lalla has “received spiritual enlightenment from him,” which just cannot be so for she is, in his mind, an advanced practitioner of his own Kashmiri Śaiva heritage. For Toshkhani, “The miracle of the oven is surely prompted by a hegemonistic design to establish the superiority of Islam over the creed of the ‘infidels.’”<sup>96</sup> He points out as I did in note eighty-seven above, the common narration of the uncivilized community being civilized by the arrival of Islam and its saints. He continues by claiming the Sufi image is meant to “de-Hinduize” her and that there is no way Hamadani was the “*wabadat al-wujud* type.”<sup>97</sup>

Peterson discusses in his work the ramifications of another culture arriving and believing their view of reality is somehow superior to the local one. The resulting assumptions and following changes can, and frequently does, produce dire results. Toshkhani’s rather emotional defence of Lalla is good evidence of these forces of change and their affects on him. The consequences this has had in the present can be seen in the foreign-funded *madrasas* in Kashmir, which are teaching that Lalla is a fraud, and it cannot be denied that Hamadani’s presence and the ensuing changes had a profound effect on the Kashmiri community. This is the probable source of Toshkhani’s evident irritation as he says, “You cannot disregard or dilute the Shaiva metaphysical content in her thought by harping on such stories and fabrications.”<sup>98</sup> There is no doubt that the history of Hamadani’s seven hundred followers fleeing from Timur’s edict and settling in Kashmir had

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<sup>95</sup> S. S. Toshkhani, “Reconstructing and Reinterpreting Lal Ded,” in *Lal Ded: The Great Kashmiri Saint-Poetess*, ed. S.S. Toshkhani (New Delhi, A.P.H. Pub. Corp, 2002), 39-65.

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.* 43.

<sup>97</sup> This is in reference to the doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabi, on the oneness of being.

<sup>98</sup> Toshkhani, *Reconstructing*, 46.

a profound effect on the Kashmiri community, changing the very fabric of the society.<sup>99</sup> And there is no doubt that some Kashmiri Pandits would be upset over this still to this day. Yet, it is not necessarily the intention behind the seventeenth century hagiographers of Lalla's biography and miracles of sainthood. Toshkhani may be correct in his accusations that there is a threat to his and Lalla's Kashmiri Pandit identity, and that Islam is being depicted as the superior religion by using the narrative of Lalla and Hamadani. However, the saint is being utilized as part of the transition process, and already underway by the time we have written evidence of Lalla. Adopting the local saint as a means to allay the fears and anxieties around the strange and new seems rather ingenious. It appears that this was part of the agenda of the Sufis who utilized her stories; by incorporating her into the narratives of great saints, she becomes part of the greater narrative that develops around Islam in Kashmir, and keeps the deeper roots of the cultural identity structure intact, connecting the past to the present. Let us travel back a few centuries and examine how the Sufi hagiographers presented Lalla in their narrative.

Jayalal Kaul quotes extensively from a variety of Persian sources in manuscripts extant in Kashmir. The first known mention of Lalla is by Baba Dawud Mishkāṭī in his *Asrār-ul-Abrār* written in 1654. He calls her Lalla 'Arifa, meaning Lalla the wise or intelligent, and uses Sufi symbolism and vocabulary to describe her, as wandering the wilderness of Love, wailing for the Beloved, and a knower of Truth (*haqq*). He also calls her "*Majnuni 'āqila*" a crazy-wise saint.

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<sup>99</sup> Hamadani is said to have brought seven hundred followers with him, many of them Sayyids as Timur threatened their lives with the requirement of riding a red hot iron horse to prove the purity of their lineage to the Prophet Muḥammad. More below on this story.

Another chronicler by the name of Pir Gulam Hasan, mentions her in his *Majmū`ab Al-Tarāwīkh* in 1835: “The saintly lady, Lalla ‘ārifa, a mystic of the highest order, was a second Rābi`a and was brought to light in the year 700A.H.(1300CE). It is said that this chaste lady was born to a Brahman family in the village of Sempur...”

And yet another, Hajī Mahī-ul-Dīn Miskīn writes in his *Tārīkhī Hasan* in 1909: “Bibi Lalla ‘ārifa was one of the perfect saints and a second Rābi`a of Basra.”<sup>100</sup>

Thus a consistent pattern is born throughout the following centuries equating Lalla with a prominent female saint of the Islamic tradition, Rābi`a of Basra, which elevates her status in the Muslim community, while simultaneously recognizing her past connection to the Kashmiri community and bolstering its identity as a spiritually adept group, that produces great saints. In these texts, Hamadani is but one famous saint to have fraternized with Lalla.

In fact when Mohammad Ishaq Khan writes about her one century later in his *Biographical Dictionary of Sufism in South Asia* in 2009 he writes, “the tradition of Lalla’s association with both these Sufis of the Kubrawiyya order is so strong [referring to Saiyid Husain Simnani and Mir Sayid `Ali Hamadani], that not only has *she always been remembered as a Muslim saint* but even as a great apostle of Islam in Kashmir.”<sup>101</sup> The bulk of the two pages he dedicates to her in his book provides information on her as a Sufi Saint without any mention of her Brahmin heritage. It even goes as far to say that her “legendization [sic] as a renegade against Brahmanism” accelerated the Islamicization process of the Kashmir Valley, that the

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<sup>100</sup> Jayalal Kaul, *Lal Ded*, 1-6.

<sup>101</sup> M. Ishaq Khan, *Biographical Dictionary of Sufism in South Asia*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2009), 189. Emphasis mine.

“Brahmans ostracized her” and those being Islamicized “owned her”. This is an excellent example of how Lalla’s outspokenness regarding the Brahmin’s blind enactment of ritual is used to further the narrator’s agenda. Although Khan does state that it is unknown as to whether Lalla formally embraced Islam, the narrative he provides speaks volumes about where he himself places her – prominently in the pantheon of Sufi saints, with ‘textual proof’ that she indeed met with the likes of other Sufi saints such as Hamadani, Jahangosht and Simnani. The implication being that although we cannot prove her conversion, the association speaks for itself – she preferred Sufi company over Brahmin. Considering the present political situation in Kashmir, where a number of more orthodox Islamic philosophies are taking hold, foreign-funded education is becoming more prevalent, and a large majority of Kashmiri Pandits have left the valley, it appears that Mr. Khan has an agenda to promote Lalla’s Islamic leanings and her connections to the form of Islam unique to Kashmir. There are two possible reasons for this:

1 – In response to the orthodox schools that are promoting a type of Islam that seems to be aggressively discounting Lalla as a real saint. Khan is reacting to this foreign imposition through his writing, and aims to preserve her in Kashmiri memory, despite attempts by the new foreign presence to otherwise discredit her.

2 – In response to the influx of Kashmiri Pandit writings on Lalla, where they are essentially reclaiming her as their own beloved saint, “one of them”. Khan mentions frequently in his writings that Lalla was a renegade reformer *against* Brahmanism, so why would they want to reclaim her? He uses the silence for centuries amongst the Kashmiri Pandits as a just proof to point out that this indeed was Lalla’s agenda, when in fact it is his own agenda.

It is entirely possible that Khan's response is influenced by both of these possibilities. As we have seen above, many times a narrator reveals conflicts they have within themselves through the vehicle of their own narrations. In this case it is equally important to look at what Khan does not include as well. For instance, he states, "it is certain she was a contemporary" of Simani and Hamadani, but does not note any textual proofs to support his certitude. In the very same paragraph he laments the lack of any concrete information about Lal Ded, that all is oral legend. The source proof for Khan's certitude appears to be the numerous hagiographies he mentions in the following paragraphs. These hagiographies that conveniently support Lalla in the image he wishes to promote are excluded in his mind from the oral legends and lack of concrete information. Somehow the written text is potent proof of the veracity and historicity of his claims, while simultaneously being insufficient for other concrete facts about Lalla.<sup>102</sup>

In contrast, there are a number of contemporary narratives which leave out the incident with Hamadani and Lalla. For example Kak does not mention it at all in any of her work. Her main purpose in *To the Other Shore*, is to explore the feminist aspects of Lalla and their expression in *Kashmiriyat* culture. There is frequently a sense that the theme of oppression of women by the overarching patriarchy and by males in general is at the root of what fuels her exploration. Perhaps a reason for neglecting this particular narrative relates to its intimate links with the masculine? Or with the transition of Kashmir to Islam? In any case, the absence of this story makes a silent statement, that in itself may be interpreted a number of ways.

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<sup>102</sup> Interestingly, although Khan discusses at length Lalla's connections with the Sufis, he never relays the full narrative, either in his articles, or dictionary. However, he gives a brief narrative in his book *Kashmir's Transition to Islam* labeling it a "strong folk tradition" and quoting directly from Grierson. He says nothing at all about how this narrative connects Hamadani and the Sufi community to Lalla.

There are others writers who are dismissive of Lalla's bakery transformation. For instance, Rafiqi only refers to it briefly saying: "It is most likely that the legend was concocted either to glorify the influence of Saiyid `Alī or to counteract the popular belief that Lalla influenced Sheikh Nūriddin."<sup>103</sup> P.N. Kachru's article *Lal Ded and Kashmiri Chroniclers*, barely mentions the story but his entire article is about the impossibility of Hamadani and Lalla ever meeting. "These historians cannot be left uncensored for their negligence towards the culture of the land" he says. When he reaches the subject of his article, Lalla and her meeting with Hamadani, he states:

This craft of manipulative chronicleship continued to slip down the mire and groped through the darkness for the stories like the meeting between Lal Ded and Mir Sayyed Ali Hamadani. No doubt, Khwaja Azam Dedamari in his *Waqiyat-e-Kashmir* (1735-36) has referred to the story, but thanks to him and his investigative method, the Khwaja declared that after inquiry and investigation the story could not be proved out to be correct.<sup>104</sup>

Parimoo on the other hand provides us with a more appreciative commentary. Although his narrative consists mostly of the standard story as I narrated at the beginning of the chapter, he calls it a "bewildering miracle" where Hamadani "saw at some distance a naked woman, bright like lightning, coming from the opposite side. The moment she saw him and the party, she ran..."<sup>105</sup> But before relating this version of the story, he also provides another version, quoting from Baba Ali Raina's chronicle *Tazkirat al Arifeen*, "Lalla Arifa, the second Rabia of Basra, went seven stations ahead to receive them [Hamadani & followers] with her body fully clothed as a woman is expected to be. This [Parimoo says],

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<sup>103</sup> Abdul Qaiyum Rafiqi, *Sufism in Kashmir: Fourteenth to Sixteenth Century* (Varanasi, Bharatiya Pub. House, 1972), 145.

<sup>104</sup> P.N. Kachru, "Lal Ded and Kashmiri Chroniclers" in *Lal Ded: The Great Kashmiri Saint-Poetess*, ed. S.S. Toshkhani (New Delhi, A.P.H. Pub. Corp, 2002), 93-98

<sup>105</sup> Parimoo, *Lalleshwari*, 31-32.

“negates the story of her wandering nude.”<sup>106</sup> Here is evidence of Parimoo’s reverence for Lalla; he does not want to see her naked, but at the same time, a few pages later he insists on giving us the most commonly heard standard narrative. Perhaps his little embellishment at the beginning of it is enough to ease his tension, for Lalla is evidently the superior saint in his version – being “bright like lightning” and emerging “clad in celestial garments” to meet Hamadani. However, his version neglects to mention what happens afterwards, leaving it up to the reader to determine themselves. This in fact, seems to be how the story is most frequently presented in recent years, as we will see below.

My favourite version of this narrative undoubtedly comes from Mr. Anand Koul, whose work on Lalla appears in the *Indian Antiquary* journal between 1921 – 1933. He spares no detail, and provides us with the exact location of the meeting between Lalla and Hamadani: “Khāmpur, 10mi south-west of Śrinagar on Shopian Road.”<sup>107</sup> The geographical location provides any local inhabitant with a visual image of the exact space and connects the narrative in a meaningful way to the community landscape. His additional details include the baker fainting out of fear of what the King would do to him, and Lalla emerging in clothing of gold and then “hastening after” Hamadani. He does not leave his story here however, and explains to us the exact purpose of Lalla’s actions. According to Koul, Lalla purposely threw herself in the oven to show Hamadani that the ordeal he had endured at the hands of Timur “was an easy job for persons of advanced occult powers.” He then proceeds to tell another story, that provides the historical context of Hamadani’s journey to Kashmir. The generous ruler Timur was in the habit of disguising himself and going out and giving to the poor, but a “greedy Sayyid neighbour” caught wind of one poor woman’s fortune and stole

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<sup>106</sup> *ibid*, 21-22.

<sup>107</sup> Anand Koul, “Life Sketch of Lalleshwari,” in *Indian Antiquary Vol.50* (1921), 310.



it from her. After a long detailed drama, which is longer than the baker story, the conclusion of this drama results in Timur's announcement that all Sayyids must prove their purity by passing the ordeal of riding the hot iron horse. "Only Mir Sayyid `Ali [Hamadani], who was a saint of the highest order is said to have gone successfully through the ordeal...on seeing Lal Ded coming out of a furnace of fire attired in clothes of gold his pride of riding the fire horse was humbled, and he becomes a constant companion of hers."<sup>108</sup>

Although Koul tells the initial story exactly as it is relayed in other sources by his contemporaries, such as Grierson and Temple, his additional details show that for him Lalla is the superior saint, yet Hamadani is also revered, an equal saint on some levels, but not quite enough to avoid being rebuked by Kashmir's saint of saints.

Contemporary versions of this narrative tend not to provide us with such embellishment; they usually leave us at the oven, Lalla standing in her glorious attire, sometimes with Hamadani present, and sometimes not. Matthew Bain in his internet writings *Kashmiri Sufism and Yogini Lal Ded*, tells many of the narratives about Lalla, including this one, however she jumps into a *tandoor* oven, and Hamadani himself lifts the lid to find Lalla attired in flowers.<sup>109</sup> His source is listed as Toshkhani's edited volume, *Lal Ded – Great Kashmiri Saint-Poetess*, however I could not find this version in said volume, nor anywhere else. Bain may be thinking of other narratives, as his website is dedicated to a variety of Sufi narrations and philosophical musings, he himself identifying as a British Sufi practitioner and former Buddhist.

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<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> Matthew Bain, *Kashmiri Sufism and Lal Ded*, last modified May 1, 2011, accessed Jan 1, 2013, <http://politicsofsoul.org/tag/hamadani/>

Another internet narrative by Yousuf Imran which relays more Sufi narratives, appears to emphasize Hamadani's saintly status. In his telling of the baker story each time he mentions Hamadani, he writes in brackets "RA", an abbreviation for the Arabic phrase, *radhi-allahu-anhu*, which means "upon him/her be peace," and is usually used in reverence to a saint or respected person of Islam. Whenever he mentions Lalla's name he does not offer the same "RA" adjacent to it. Yet, he calls her by her common Muslim epithet, Lal `Arifa, declaring her to be a "purified soul" and goes to great lengths to describe what occurred, showing his equally high regard for her:

When eyes of both strike each other, ideas were transferred spiritually to one another in a fleeting moment, not a sole word was uttered by mouth, all things were going on spiritually, both were strong mystic saints of the time. There was no contradiction between the sacred thoughts of Lal `Arifa and Mir Syed `Ali Hamadani(RA) because both were having almost the same belief of oneness of God, Shivaism believes in one God and ISLAM also believes in LAILLAHAILLALLA (There is no God but Allah).<sup>110</sup>

It is clear that for Imran, Hamadani holds a higher place in his hierarchy, yet the fantastic details of their meeting provides evidence that he does indeed believe they are both saints of the highest order. Perhaps it is the brief mention of Lalla's Śaiva heritage that has caused him to omit the "RA" despite his acknowledgement that he believes they both educe the same Islamic tenet of "no God but Allah."

Ahmad Salim`s article *Poetry Against Purdah*, provides another venue for this narrative to blossom in a completely different environment. Salim examines a number of South Asian narratives on Sufi and Hindu women and notes the similarities among their experiences, such as the tyranny each woman endures, and the miracles that ensue because of it. His telling of the narratives does not betray his own perspectives, for they are the standard

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<sup>110</sup> Yousuf Imran, *Lal Ded a Divine Poetess*, last modified July 22, 2012, accessed Jan 1, 2013, <http://www.dailykashmirimages.com/news-lal-ded-a-divine-poetess-29040.aspx>

versions without any additional frills, but the context communicates his intentions. He is revering not just Lalla but all female saints as “pioneers of women’s liberation” who “deserve to be remembered,” thus transcending Lalla’s Kashmiri identity and focusing on her femaleness, and its meaning for all South Asian women.<sup>111</sup>

The extraction of Lalla from Kashmir, and the abstraction of Kashmir itself is a result of the dance of intercultural exchange through modern technology. Ananya Jahanara Kabir in her book, *Territory of Desire: Representing the Valley of Kashmir*, argues that Kashmir represents a certain space of desire that is depicted as a magical and special place, which keeps all enchanted with an illusion that is not the reality of Kashmir. This imaginary space is coveted by Pakistanis, Indians, Kashmiris, and I would like to add, many others, despite its fictional existence. One example Kabir provides of this concept is an art show she attended in Bombay where the subject was Kashmir. Yet, she says, “there was only a token Kashmiri in sight” and the actual artwork and other art represented did not originate from a Kashmiri, save the poetry readings of Lalla, Habba Khattoon and Nuruddin, all hailed as “Medieval Kashmiri Sufi Poets,”<sup>112</sup> thus, the only Kashmiri present was the imaginal world of the medieval speaker through the poetry left behind. So it is even in the romancing of Kashmir we find Lalla’s place is secure.

This globalized context of greater access has also created more interest in Lalla in the Western world of academia. An interesting example is Michelle Voss-Roberts’ recent work examining the Christian mystic Methchild in contrast with Lalla. Voss-Roberts begins one of her articles, “*Power, Gender and the Classification of a Kashmiri Śaiva Mystic*,” with the Baker

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<sup>111</sup> Ahmad Salim, *Poetry Against Purdah*, last modified March 30, 2012, last accessed Jan 1, 2013, <http://www.himalmag.com/component/content/article/5040-poetry-against-purdah.html>

<sup>112</sup> Ananya Jahanara Kabir, *Territory of Desire: Representing the Valley of Kashmir*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 3.

narrative.<sup>113</sup> In her version Lalla is at the roadside dispensing wisdom to all the passersby when Hamadani happens along. I had not heard this version before, so was curious to find its source, and utterly surprised when I found this detail was not in the sources she quoted – Grierson and Jayalal Kaul.<sup>114</sup>

How did this detail get there? Perhaps because it seemed something feasible or logical a saint of “religious authority” would do at the side of the road, or perhaps it was very probable what a Christian mystic might do. In any case, what is important here is that there is embellishment. Written narrative by scholars is not any less susceptible to the morphing and changing that takes place in the oral telling of the same narrative. Furthermore, the embellishment and inclusion of the narrative also show that this story has an allure that is accessible to another audience who is not Kashmiri, supporting Peterson’s observations that stories with universal elements transcend boundaries. Voss-Roberts’ telling emphasizes the wisdom of Lalla and the ensuing transformation, and in the next paragraph she adds that “this tale as part of Hamadani’s hagiography is designed to assert his superiority over other holy persons, Lalleśwarī is also revered as a great mystic in her own right.”<sup>115</sup> Thus, the version she chooses to use in her narrative of Lalla and Hamadani echoes her own stated view of the narrative, it is primarily to assert Hamadani’s superiority, by placing Lalla in the position of being transformed by Hamadani, not vice-versa.

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<sup>113</sup> Michelle Voss-Roberts, “Power, Gender and the Classification of a Kashmiri Śaiva Mystic,” *Journal of Hindu Studies* 3 (3) (2010): 279-297, doi:10.1093/jhs/hiq025

<sup>114</sup> In Grierson’s translation of the *vaks* there is an appendix that he has pulled directly from *Knowles’s Dictionary of Kashmiri Proverbs*. In this appendix quoted by Voss-Roberts, Knowles states that Lalla met Shah Hamadan and “she ran away.” She then proceeded to the *baniyā* who turned her out and then to the baker where she emerges clothed in gold. In Voss-Roberts’ foot-notes she does not mention Knowles at all nor directly quote her second source, Jayalal Kaul, but merely states that he “provides a critical biography”, and later in another footnote that scholars have disputed the likelihood of the two meeting. Upon reading Kaul’s critical analysis of the narrative there is again no mention of wisdom being dispensed by the roadside, as Voss-Roberts suggests.

<sup>115</sup> Michelle Roberts, *Power*, 279.

In summary, this narrative of Lalla and her transformation provides many examples of how one narrative can initiate a number of responses both from the Kashmiri community and those outside of the community. We again see examples of spiritual reverence through narratives like Yousuf Imran's detailed narration of the spiritual meeting between Lalla and Hamadani, Parimoo's assertion of Lalla's respectability and brilliance in her spiritual persona, and Anand Koul's wonderful additional narrative of Hamadani and Timur. Deeper aspects of the human condition are communicated via the transformative process and the character of the foreigner in a new land. The story itself proves its longevity by the numerous versions so readily available both in print and on the internet, yet it also reveals the potential both to unite the community in representations like Ahmad Salim's *Poetry Against Purdah*, and divide them as in Toshkhani's critical review. Contemporary tellings tend to be open-ended and allow for multiple interpretations; we seldom see the detailed endings like Anand Koul provides. Nevertheless, this story continues despite the repeated scholarly evidence pointing to the improbability of this event being a historical one, as Kachru has duly noted. We see a narrative that continues despite its historical value and questionable veracity; it continues because the community continues to use it as a place to rediscover itself and its changing identities. Kashmir's complex religious history creates a multitude of responses, and the tellings of the Baker story are ripe with evidence of this diversity of views. Ultimately we see that whether in printed, oral, or digital format, the story continues to reflect the identities and perspectives of a community in flux.

## Chapter Five

### Concluding Remarks

*...the discourse of Kashmiriyyat operates in various spaces and various levels and is not reducible to the ideology of any specific group nor is it something found only among Kashmiri journals or newspapers. It can be seen at work at the individual level in Kashmiri narratives and at the community level...*

*Nasreen Ali<sup>116</sup>*

The narratives of Lalla have given a voice to Kashmiri identity for well over six centuries, and still those narratives grow and change with each shift in the *Kashmiriyyat*. There is something about her narratives that compels Kashmiris to pay attention and to jockey for their positions when it comes to their perspective on her, whether they be right or wrong.

In the two narratives we explored we found at the foundation of each narrative, a universal story with archetypal characters. Lalla appears as the heroine who transcends the known, reaching beyond the unknown and achieving liberation. As I have argued, this universal pattern of characters and the insight into the hero's journey is what sets the stage and piques the interest for the listener. In the first narrative of Lalla and the water pitcher, we see the two aspects of the feminine archetype come together in the virtuous character of Lalla and her tyrannizing mother-in-law creating the friction that ultimately leaves our heroine transformed. It is through the symbolism of the water pitcher, we find out that Lalla is truly free from bondage, and begins her naked wandering. In the second narrative of Lalla's meeting with Hamadani, we see the symbol of nudity in a different guise, and the fire

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<sup>116</sup> Ali, Nasreen (2009) p.183. *The Making of Kashmiri Identity*. In South Asian Diaspora, 1: 2, 181-192

of the baker's oven as an apt metaphor for the transformation that occurs through Lalla and Hamadani's meeting. Yet it is not only these universal elements that keep her stories alive.

The second element is the personal element of the narrator; whether it is an oral or written telling, the authors bring to the story elements of their own identities, cultural, religious, vocational, familial, spiritual and gender oriented. Through each unique telling we catch a glimpse of the personality of the teller, their own identities and how they intersect and conflict. For instance we saw various aspects of reverence for Lalla through Parimoo's detailed narrations that idealized Lalla and the Kashmiri way of life most dear to Parimoo. Yet, this idealized form of the Kashmiri woman he painted conflicts with the present day Kashmiri woman, and we see this represented in the tellings that focus on Lalla's retribution and emancipation from the tyrannizing mother-in-law. Additionally we witnessed some narrators like Hasan, wrestling with their reverence for Lalla and their devotion to their religion. For Hasan, the conflict between the universality of Lalla and her ties to Kashmir against his obligations to Islam and Sufism created unique representations. Khan also spends time in his narrations creating an implied Muslim identity for Lalla through his presentations of close associations with Sufi saints, and implying that the Brahmin community ostracized her, thus opening the doorway to Islam. We also saw aspects of religious identity come forth in simple ways such as changes in Lalla's name, like the epithets of Lalla 'Arifa, or the second Rabiya, connecting her to a Muslim identity.

Identity with the larger Kashmiri community and connection to it was communicated to me on various occasions through the telling of a Lalla story. Some tales impressed upon me the difficulties one family experienced as a minority religious group, while others like the merchant in Oman and the student in Kerala emphasized family and

communal aspects of Kashmiri life through telling a Lalla story. Sometimes one story can be told to emphasize a completely different point. Like one man using the mother-in-law to demonstrate how horrible Hindu wives are treated and another using the same detail to emphasize all women in Kashmiri culture undergo the trials of the mother-in-law.

In some scholarly renditions we see how Lalla's name is utilized to make a point of Kashmir's women in the present-day situation of political turmoil. While another scholar, Voss-Roberts, uses Lalla as a gateway for comparison and adds to the shifting patterns of narrative herself, through embellished details in her own retelling.

Despite the improbability of these stories being factually true, they continue to be retold. The story of Hamadani and Lalla in particular gets much attention in scholars' attempts to prove its inaccuracy. Yet this attention only serves to bring the story to the forefront, engaging scholars in active debate over the tensions and intricacies of Kashmiri identity through the venue of Lalla. She has become a means for Kashmiris, Muslim and Hindu, to debate about identity, present ideas on what it means to be Kashmiri and impose beliefs. As Dr. Mufti so aptly pointed out, Kashmiris have used and abused their beloved Lalla.<sup>117</sup>

A Kashmiri friend recently emailed me yet another article from the internet on Lalla. This article by G.N. Gauhar entitled "Lal Ded – a Conceptual Icon," argues that both Hindu and Muslim scholars are indeed jockeying for a position for Lalla, that either she is a Sufi or she is a glorified Yogini of Śaiva heritage, but neither is in fact true. I cannot help but smile as I read his article, for he is calling his fellow Kashmiris out of their illusions, pointing out

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<sup>117</sup> Dr. Gulzar Mufti. "A Journey from Heaven to Hell II." Greater Kashmir News. July 16, 2007. Accessed January 1, 2013. <http://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/2007/Jul/16/a-journey-from-heaven-to-hell-ii-8.asp>.



that they are all arguing with texts which are built one upon the other, and therefore none truly have an authentic historical fact to offer on Kashmir's beloved Lalla.<sup>118</sup>

Much like the turtles from Thomas King's creation narrative in the North American Aboriginal tradition, it seems the hunt for authentic, verifiable fact on Lalla is like finding the turtles over and over again, but still not reaching the source. Whether she is coming to us orally, in printed word, the digital world, or in Kashmir itself, she is still ever elusive. Yet, she exists in the minds and hearts of Kashmiris.

Lalla's true story may never be revealed but the narratives built up around her reveal so much more about the identities and tensions in a community struggling to keep an identity whilst navigating tensions that at times are barely believable to the outside observer. It is through Lalla that many of these tensions are expressed. Whether it is Jayshree Kak's reminiscence of childhood - listening to the singing of Lalla's *vaks* coupled with her deeper explorations of women in the Kashmiri culture, or Kachru and Toshkhani who argue over the veracity of the sources available on Lalla, each story tells another story, while Lalla represents the key to true Kashmiri identity. It is through her many Kashmiris keep a touchstone with that ever elusive identity.

At the beginning of this thesis I argued that Lalla's narratives served a layered purpose, to communicate deeper meanings and identities, and also communicate opinions, beliefs, and cultural, communal and personal identity. I stated that it is her deeper identity that keeps her alive and continues the narrative – the invisible

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<sup>118</sup> G.N. Gauhar, *Lal Ded – A Conceptual Icon*, last modified Oct 10, 2012, last accessed Jan 1, 2013, <http://www.kashmirdispatch.com/prose/10109590-lal-ded-a-conceptual-icon.htm>

communication lines of a deeper identity being revealed through her song and narration.

After this exploration, I conclude that this is partially true. The archetypal hero in Lalla, and readily identifiable human plight in her stories does endear her to the community and compel the listener to hear the story, but equally important is how she functions within the community. The ability to “use and abuse” Lalla as a means to communicate one’s identity and communal place is what keeps her from ever having a static form and what keeps Kashmiris from forgetting her. Again and again they can return to her to explore their pasts, discuss the present and predict the future. They take away from and add to her story, just as the Kashmiri identity loses and gains various characteristics. I believe King represents this best in his small volume. The literary device he utilized, telling the same narrative over and over with unique differences each time, truly speaks of the amazing fluidity of story and of identity. Story really is all we have to communicate to our fellow human beings what we know and what we see to be true in our unique view of the world.

However, there is still so much that is possible here to explore. This small foray is but a small dip in the ocean of narrative and the evolving story of Lalla. There are many more narratives to explore and among them the one that stands out is Lalla’s relationship with Nuruddin. Nund Rishi, the founding Sheikh of the Rishis Sufi order of Kashmir, and equally revered Sufi saint, has many connections with Lalla. Through exploring the narratives of these two, more understanding of the process of transition and interaction between the two traditions will readily come to

the fore. Furthermore, there are hundreds of internet conversations going on about Lalla and Kashmir, and these digital narratives alone have great potential.

The bottom line is that human beings love to tell and hear stories, and our fast projection into the future digital age has not changed that love. While working in Oman for almost three years, daily my job as an English teacher involved listening to students' stories, told in a new way, in a new language but communicating the old ways with the new, the shifting identities with established ones. It is hard to say who loved those oral sessions more, the student or me. Almost every day at least one student conversation began like this:

“Tell me a story that you know from childhood.”

“Okay Teacher, there's this man, his name is Juha...”

“Yes, and he has a donkey.”

“Teacher YOU KNOW!!” The student happily exclaims.

I smile, as I know the story does not end here, nor will it be the same as the last or the one before that, or even those after that.

Life is a story, and Lalla is just one of them – A shining connection to intermingling identities for Kashmiris and spiritual explorers. Her universal elements will continue to draw in the explorers of story and symbolism, while her unique Kashmiri qualities will shift and change with the times and the narrators.

It is clear Lalla is with us for a while...

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