

Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Award 2021: Certificate of Merit

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**Desire And Transgression in *Laila Aur Satt Geet*
(The Shepherdess and The Seven Songs)**



***Laila Aur Satt Geet* (The Shepherdess and the Seven Songs), Gojri, 96 mins, Dir. Pushpendra Singh**

Laila Aur Satt Geet opens with a low-angle shot of formidable trees that loom and envelop the subject in the frame. Director Pushpendra Singh showcases an affinity for the vastness and uncontained scope of mountainous regions, rendered in an array of wide shots. Yet, the recurring suggestion is of the suitably entrapped position the characters occupy in these spaces. Nature that spills out as far as the eye can see only serves to undercut the dual sense of constriction and unique solipsism the protagonist, Laila, experiences. The Gujjar Bakharwal tribe she marries into thrives on a keenly communal way of life that is in disjunction with her spirit, which is more stubbornly alert and uncompromising with its belief systems. She is dogged about choosing not to dilly dally in frivolity with other village womenfolk, nor does she exhibit any airheaded fancies. Instead, she is fuelled by more incendiary desires.

Her desires, especially considering the terrain it plays out in, are imbued with a distinct political undertone. It's a tool she wields on her own volition

and terms. She refuses to be someone with whom the security guards can have a fling whenever they please. Quietly, firmly and sometimes aggressively, she rails against the accepted power binaries in the Valley that neatly allocates fixed, the unbending position of victimhood to the women. Laila puts up with no such designated subordinated roles. She has this kind of determined stoicism about her place in the world that the actress Navjot Randhawa extrapolates with a gradually escalating restiveness. Laila never lets her agency be overwhelmed by the circumstances she finds herself in, regarding it completely non-negotiable.

Her beauty makes her the instant site of unbridled male desire, driven by the need for sexual possession and ownership. Her body is coveted by the station head officer and the forest ranger; much of the film pivots on the tension engendered as she wrestles with caving in to their advances. Singh underlines the tussle between compliance and retaliation through multiple perspectives, of the women, their husbands a stand-in for the community which is aware of the

price of not ceding, and the security forces a representative of the State with its taste for extortion. The film keeps returning to these primary tangents with an air of significant permanence. The equations among the stakeholders are irrevocable and immovable but also problematizes it by adding deviances and complex engagements with the nature of bureaucracy in the valley. Laila's inherited location doesn't tether her to falling in line and staving off violence. She is wary enough to discern that the local understanding of insistence on succumbing at a micro level to ward off larger, annihilating repressions is a deeply naïve and vain one. Unlike the others, she is not inured to casually sanctioned demonstrations of power excesses.

However, it is through the dynamic between Mushtaq, the forest ranger who doubles as an agent for the station officer) and Laila that the film invites us to deliberate on questions of cooperation, doubly lethal in the valley, and the male, bureaucratic prerogative. Mushtaq, originally from Kashmir, is situated in a liminality zone mired in the see-saw between his clear-eyed perspective on authoritarian inclinations, his history of belonging, and knotty matters of assimilation into the security forces. At one point, he spells out the dilemma misrepresenting his position, lamenting that while the rehabilitation scheme did help in securing Kashmiri youths like him a job, it only turned him into yet another cog in the State machinery. He works at cultivating an impulse for intimidation, but Laila dictates the order and sequence of events. Refreshingly and admirably, Singh portrays her as a woman who is not the least bit coy or easily unsettled by disadvantageous motivations to control her.

Singh extends the subversion of the usual power-play status quo to when Laila and her husband are in bed. What starts as one-sided pleasure, tilted solely towards his gratification, steadily manoeuvres itself in such a manner her sexual urges become pronounced and grow assertive and demanding. Even she is surprised by her sudden sexual drive. She comes to terms with her aches for something that cannot be realized where she is; no one can bridge the

disconnect she feels between herself and everyone else.



Ranabir Das's camerawork full of still splendour and extracts lyrical swell from even a tree's flaming hollow is in sharp contrast to the brutality, arbitrariness, and volatility linked to the smallest, everyday moments in the region. His camera languorously takes in the all-encompassing enormity of cloud cover, the circling of birds in the sky, butterflies fluttering over and fish in the gurgling river stream, thereby creating a minutely perceived sensory experience. Das imbues night-time shots of Laila surrounded by glow worms with strange visual evocations, continually layering on the oneiric aesthetic.

Amidst these, Singh reveals a delightful eye for the fantastical. The narrative veers into scenes that accrue a surreal, dreamlike tenor and mood. Men transmogrify into goats abruptly, dispersed wool shredded off sheep segues inconspicuously into the shape and colour of the clouds. The imagined coalesces with the real in mesmerizingly seamless ways as Laila strives to assuage her troubled core. When in bed with her husband, she whets her appetite by envisaging the forbidden. She swings between fulfilling her desire and the knowledge of the cost of doing so. Something unshakeable gnaws at her, quickly gaining the essence of a private language, which her husband can neither read nor even attempt to grasp. On fundamental levels, the extreme alienation between husband and wife disengages her

from any probable articulation of her needs and wants. This pushes her to seek truths on a higher plane of understanding, with Singh sculpting a personal narrative about Laila to arrive at the inescapably political and inevitably spiritual dimensions.



The valley is depicted as a place where identity is frequently questioned, intentions regularly interrogated, and a specific plan underpins each encounter and rendezvous. Everyone is precisely tuned to the feeling of being on the precipice, how a tinderbox of fury can be sparked off by the slightest of oppositions. Reality is slippery, and Laila, often framed at thresholds looking out, seems poised for some journey she must eventually make to preserve her quintessence which is always withheld and curtailed in her current place, particularly within normative familial structures. Her disembodied voice wafts over landscapes as she whispers about being trapped and confined to the state she is in and acutely hopes to be new. The film feels like a gathering of her conviction which nears its complete build by the end

when a sign finally propels her to embark on the ultimate stage, Randhawa plays Laila with an unwavering inscrutability. While she may fleetingly ruminate on male irresponsibility and empty exhibitions of their capability, we are never brought close to her subjectivity. A distance solidifies more and more as she drifts further away from everyone else, settling into her alternative, individual rhythms of leading her life that reaches its sublimated form and meaning in the final beguiling scene. The coda is infused with a transcendence designed as grand, mythic, and dazzlingly otherworldly.

Laila Aur Satt Geet is loaded with all the roiling emotions associated with absences, journeys, and departures. There's an undying bereavement in the air; loss and the brunt of separation weigh long and heavy on the people, with the several folk songs plaintively riffing on the same. The songs that punctuate and compartmentalize the narrative narrate several kinds of hopes; hope for loved ones who have left the valley to return someday, hope for the ravaged place to be resurgent with life again, hope for someone who can tell the stories of the place with honesty and unvarnished truth. Hope in the valley is a radical statement which challenges the conventional despair of repression that's commonplace and daily. The unmistakable strain the film offers is the impossibility of these hopes. Yet, by turning yearning into actuality, Laila posits the biggest transgression and lets a way out of the dark.

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