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Reimagining Laal Ded: Mysticism, Peace, and Women's Agency in Kashmir

Samprikta Chatterjee [α] & Prof. Manoj Mishra [σ]

Abstract- The traditional manner of theorising peace diplomacy has generally been a very androcentric practice. Theoretical paradigms that privilege state sovereignty, strategic rationality and militarised performance, and are products of masculinised processes have always been central to imagining the cartography of peace diplomacy. Feminist epistemological interventions in the spaces of International Relations (IR) and decolonial scholarship expose how these existing androcentric frameworks silence the vernacular epistemologies of reconciliation which are grounded in affect, ethics and spirituality. This paper re-reads Laal Ded *(Lalleshwari),* the fourteenth-century Kashmiri mystic-philosopher, as an early practitioner of what may be termed affective diplomacy—a mode of peace-making that operates through moral suasion, empathy, and relational ethics. Situated at the confluence of Shaivite and Sufi thought, Laal Ded's *vakhs*[1] constitute a non-hegemonic discourse of coexistence that continues to animate women's peace initiatives in contemporary, militarised Kashmir.

This paper draws upon feminist IR (Tickner 1992; Enloe 2014), decolonial epistemology (Mignolo 2011; de Sousa Santos 2014), and phenomenologies of mysticism (Irigaray 2001; Braidotti 2011), to argue that Laal Ded's philosophy innately performs an epistemic disobedience to both patriarchy and the colonial knowledge production. Laal Ded's re-conceptualisation of truth as an embodied awareness anticipates the decolonial frameworks of conflict transformation that privileges care over coercion. This analysis demonstrates that her legacy endures not just as cultural memory but as an operative philosophy guiding women in their attempts at vernacular peacebuilding across contemporary Kashmir. Acknowledging Laal Ded as a theorist of peace expands the geography of diplomatic thought beyond the confines of State and State defined boundaries and reiterates the relevance of the feminine, mystical and local as the legitimate terrains of international ethics.

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I. Introduction

Within the overarching linguistics of international relations, peace is navigated through summits, cease fires and treaties which are rituals of control that are enacted mostly by men in suits. The discipline's foundational metaphors—balance, containment, deterrence—emanate from a worldview that naturalises hierarchy and mastery. Feminist IR scholarship has long argued that this performative rationality effaces the affective and ethical labour that sustains genuine peace (Cohn 2013; Enloe 2014). As J. Ann Tickner (1992) observes, international politics is built on a gendered dichotomy between protector and protected: a "patriarchal security epistemology" that renders empathy suspect and care apolitical.

Kashmir is the counter to this established narrative. Across centuries of conquest, colonisation, and militarisation, the region has simultaneously cultivated a dense tradition of spiritual humanism. Its cultural texture—woven from the dialogic interpenetration of Shaivism and Sufism—produced an ethos of syncretic coexistence that resisted both religious exclusivism and political absolutism. At the heart of this ethos stands Laal Ded (Lalleshwari, 1320–1392 CE), whose poetic aphorisms (vakhs) destabilised the ritual orthodoxies of her time and articulated a mysticism grounded in self-knowledge (svātma-pratibhā), compassion (dayā), and justice.

This paper argues that Laal Ded's mysticism constitutes an early articulation of vernacular peace diplomacy: a culturally embedded negotiation of harmony through the transformation of consciousness. Her philosophy anticipates the feminist insight that peace is not the cessation of violence but the cultivation of relational ethics. The paper proceeds in four segments. First, it delineates the gendered architecture of diplomacy and its epistemic exclusions. Second, it situates Laal Ded within the Shaivite-Sufi milieu of medieval Kashmir, interpreting her vakhs as acts of epistemic resistance. Third, it traces a feminine genealogy of peace that links mystic ethics to feminist diplomacy. Finally, it examines how her philosophical legacy continues to inform women's peace activism and cultural diplomacy in contemporary Kashmir.

The significance of this intervention lies in its refusal to separate the mystical from the political. Reading Laal Ded through feminist and decolonial frameworks reveals an indigenous epistemology of peace that destabilises both the militarisation of Kashmir and the masculinisation of global diplomacy. Her thought enables a conceptual move from diplomacy as

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[1] Meaning speech in Kashmiri language.

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strategy to diplomacy as praxis of relation—a mode of being-with that privileges empathy over enforcement.

II. Theoretical Framework: Feminist IR, Decolonial Epistemology, and Mystical Phenomenology

1. Feminist International Relations

Feminist IR emerged as a critique of the positivist and state-centric assumptions that structure classical IR. Scholars such as Tickner (1992), Enloe (2014), and Cohn (2013) demonstrate that the discipline's claim to objectivity rests upon what Carol Cohn calls the "sanitised abstraction" of militarised masculinity. Feminist approaches re-centre embodiment, emotion, and everyday practice, revealing diplomacy as a gendered performance rather than a neutral instrument. The narratives advance an ethic of care (Gilligan 1982; Ruddick 1989) that redefines rationality through relational responsibility. This paradigm shifting optic enables the recovery of women's contributions to peace not as auxiliary but as constitutive of international ethics. Within this framework, Laal Ded's mysticism can be theorised as a proto-feminist diplomacy—a negotiation of peace through affective intelligence and moral persuasion.

2. Decolonial Epistemology

Postcolonial and decolonial theorists expose how modern knowledge systems perpetuate colonial hierarchies. Mignolo (2011) and de Sousa Santos (2014) describe the persistence of "abyssal thinking," a cognitive mapping that privileges Euro-Atlantic rationality while relegating other epistemes to the periphery. The project of epistemic disobedience demands recognition of plural ways of knowing—the ecology of knowledges. Reading Laal Ded within this frame positions her mysticism as a subaltern epistemology that contests both Brahmanical patriarchy and later colonial knowledge regimes. Her insistence that divinity resides within each subject undermines the hierarchical metaphysics underpinning both colonial knowledge systems and patriarchy.

3. Mystical Phenomenology

Philosophical feminism, particularly in the work of Luce Irigaray (2001) and Rosi Braidotti (2011), reconceives spirituality as a phenomenology of embodied becoming. Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference and Braidotti's nomadic subject foreground relational ontology and continual transformation—principles central to Laal Ded's vakhs. Her mysticism articulates what might be called a phenomenology of peace, wherein self-realisation entails dissolving the dualism between self and other. Such mystical phenomenology converges with feminist IR's critique of abstraction and decoloniality's insistence on plural ontologies.

Together, these frameworks construct a tri-axial lens through which Laal Ded's thought can be apprehended as feminist, decolonial, and philosophical—a pluriversal epistemology of peace.

Section I: The Gendered Terrain of Peace Diplomacy

The discipline of International Relations was institutionalised after World War I around the Westphalian state and its masculinist ethos of sovereignty and protection. Even ostensibly cooperative paradigms, such as liberal institutionalism, reproduce what Christine Sylvester (2013) terms the "gendered performances of dominance." Diplomacy thus emerges as a language of mastery, one that defines security through exclusion and peace through control.

Feminist IR dismantles this architecture by exposing how its supposedly neutral categories—sovereignty, security, interest—are gendered technologies of power. Cohn (2013) demonstrates that nuclear strategy itself is inscribed in a phallic vocabulary of potency and penetration. Enloe (2014) observes that diplomacy is sustained by "the sturdy architecture of masculinised respectability," in which women appear as symbols of the nation, not as agents within it. The result is an epistemic violence that delegitimises affect, spirituality, and emotion as sources of political knowledge.

To counter this exclusion, feminist peace research foregrounds relational epistemologies that treat care and interdependence as forms of rationality (Ruddick 1989; Gilligan 1982). Rather than romanticising women as natural peacemakers, it analyses the everyday micro-practices through which women sustain community amidst conflict. Yet, even global policy frameworks such as the United Nations Security Council's Resolution 1325 (2000) often instrumentalise women as implementation tools rather than epistemic subjects. Diplomatic knowledge remains andro-centric, privileging strategic calculus over ethical relation.

In South Asia, notions of peace historically derived from religious pluralism and cultural dialogue. Ashis Nandy (2001) identifies an indigenous "dialogical civility" that mediates difference through ethical hospitality rather than juridical compromise. Colonial modernity, however, re-encoded patriarchy within diplomatic institutions, marginalising vernacular moralities of coexistence. Postcolonial nationalism largely perpetuated this gendered hierarchy, equating peace with sovereignty and silencing subaltern voices—especially those of women in conflict zones such as Kashmir.

Kashmiri women have nonetheless enacted diplomacy in affective and cultural registers—hosting inter-community dialogues, preserving memory, and mediating trauma. Their work exemplifies what Aggestam and True (2020) call "everyday diplomacy," a non-institutional practice rooted in empathy and

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listening. Situating Laal Ded in this context is not antiquarian romanticism but a theoretical re-centering of epistemic authority. Her vakhs prefigure these feminine negotiations by offering a hermeneutic of coexistence that transcends sectarian and political binaries.

Laal Ded's mysticism performs what Rosi Braidotti (2011) calls an ethics of becoming—a refusal to fix identity within closed categories. Through self-interrogation and compassion, she generates an ontology of peace grounded in vulnerability and relationality. This diplomacy of consciousness redefines peace from a geopolitical outcome to an epistemic disposition. Reading her through feminist IR exposes diplomacy's hidden metaphysical commitments and opens space for plural, embodied, and gender-aware conceptions of reconciliation.

Section II: Laal Ded's Mysticism as Epistemic Resistance

To reduce Laal Ded to a figure of devotional piety is to miss the radical political ontology that animates her work. Born in the fourteenth century at Pandrethan near Srinagar, she lived through a period of profound epistemic rupture: the waning of Shaivite dynastic rule, the consolidation of Sultanate authority, and the intensification of patriarchal orthodoxy. Her decision to renounce domestic life and wander as a naked seeker constituted what Butler (2004) would call a performative resignification—a bodily act that dislodged the gendered semiotics of shame. As Hoskote (2011) remarks, "her nakedness was armour." In discarding both garment and social role, Laal Ded transformed vulnerability into sovereignty.

Her vakhs—concise, aphoristic verses in Kashmiri—function as a dual discourse of revelation and resistance. A celebrated verse asks:

The idol is stone, the temple is stone,
Above all the mind is stone;
What do you worship, O foolish priest?

Here, devotion becomes epistemological critique. By locating divinity in the self's reflective consciousness rather than in ritual architecture, Laal Ded displaces sacerdotal mediation. The gesture parallels what Mohanty (2003) terms epistemic self-authorization—the reclamation of knowledge from institutions that render women passive recipients. In this relocation of the sacred from structure to subjectivity, she performs a decolonial act avant la lettre: the re-centering of indigenous, embodied ways of knowing against both Brahmanical hierarchy and the rationalist abstraction that would later underpin colonial modernity.

The porous metaphors of her language—light, breath, water—enable a shared semioticism between Shaivite non-dualism (advaita) and Sufi monism (wahdat al-wujūd). Scholars have read this as Kashmir's first interreligious phenomenology (Raina 2019). The vakhs thus instantiate what Mignolo (2011) calls border thinking: a mode of cognition born at the interstices of civilizational grammars. By articulating truth through multiplicity, Laal Ded embodies the pluriversal epistemology that de Sousa Santos (2014) opposes to the abyssal dualisms of Western modernity.

Her mystical discourse also subverts the masculine epistemology of conquest. Instead of mastering reality, she dissolves the subject–object divide through contemplative intimacy. Such immanent relationality undermines what Galtung (1969) later theorised as structural violence—the social architecture that naturalises domination. If all beings participate in one consciousness, coercion becomes metaphysical heresy. In this sense, Laal Ded's mysticism constitutes a theology of peace before the term existed.

From a feminist standpoint, her self-narration operates as a proto-auto-ethnography. Her body becomes both an archive and a method. Spivak's (1988) notion of strategic essentialism helps explain the paradox of her speech: she adopts the idiom of devotion only to exceed its limits. By speaking in the vernacular, she authorises subaltern women as epistemic agents; by performing ascetic withdrawal, she enacts political dissent. Her vakhs are thus counter-texts to the patriarchal script of obedience.

Transmission amplified this resistance. Her words circulated not through canonical manuscripts but through the oral repertoires of women—singers, spinners, grandmothers—who became what Stoler (2009) might call an affective archive. Through them, Laal Ded's epistemology was domesticated yet radicalised: theology as lullaby, philosophy as everyday counsel. This feminisation of knowledge production ensured its survival precisely because it escaped institutional capture. Her peace diplomacy unfolded not in courts or monasteries but in the ethical sensibility of households.

Ontologically, her doctrine of non-duality (advaita) refuses the binary logic on which both patriarchy and empire depend. To recognise divinity in all beings is to dismantle the epistemic infrastructure of enmity. Her ethics of compassion (dayā) and insight (pratibhā) propose peace as inner equilibrium radiating outward—a formulation that resonates with Lederach's (2005) concept of the moral imagination. Diplomacy here becomes the cultivation of perception, not the management of power.

Laal Ded's acts of renunciation thus acquire theoretical weight as a politics of the flesh (Irigaray 2001): an embodied critique that re-inscribes the feminine body as a site of epistemic production. Her mysticism is not quietist withdrawal but an ontological insurrection that unlearns domination. It is through such epistemic resistance that she inaugurates a vernacular modernity in which knowledge, ethics, and peace are co-extensive.

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Section III: The Feminine Genealogy of Peace Diplomacy

Locating Laal Ded within a broader feminine genealogy illuminates how women's mystical praxis across centuries has constituted a subterranean tradition of diplomacy. From Rābiʿa al-Basrī in eighth-century Basra to Mirabai in sixteenth-century Rajasthan, women mystics articulated political subjectivities through affective spirituality. Leela Gandhi (2006) describes these formations as affective communities—ethical networks bound by empathy rather than ideology. Their politics unfolded in gestures of care, forgiveness, and listening: what Gilligan (1982) called an ethic of care long before IR theorised relationality.

This genealogy destabilises the modernist fiction that diplomacy originates in the nation-state. It demonstrates that long before embassies and protocols, inter-community negotiation occurred through vernacular cosmologies. Rābiʿa's refusal to love God out of fear redefined piety as non-coercive relation; Mirabai's defiance of royal authority through song converted devotion into resistance. In Kashmir, Laal Ded's dialogue with Nund Rishi—who called her his spiritual mother—transmitted this feminine ethic into the region's composite culture, bridging Shaivite and Sufi lineages. Their exchange performs what Braidotti (2011) would describe as a nomadic ethics: subjectivity as relational movement rather than fixed identity.

Within feminist IR, such practices can be theorised as affective diplomacy—the management of relational energies that sustain community across difference (Aggestam & True 2020). Sara Ruddick's (1989) idea of maternal thinking and Sylvester's (2013) empathetic security provide analytic tools for this reading. Care, empathy, and attentiveness constitute a rationality alternative to coercive negotiation. Laal Ded's mysticism embodies precisely this alternative rationality: her self-discipline and compassion become instruments of political transformation.

Decolonial theory further situates this genealogy within the ecology of knowledges (Santos 2014). By foregrounding emotion and embodiment, these women performed an epistemic insurgency against both patriarchy and colonial modernity. Their spirituality was neither purely religious nor secular but transcendently immanent—a mode of being that unsettled the dichotomy central to Western metaphysics. This hybridity anticipates contemporary decolonial calls for pluriversal politics, where multiple ontologies coexist without hierarchy.

For Kashmir, this genealogy carries specific resonance. The valley's historical identity as a meeting ground of traditions has repeatedly been threatened by geopolitical instrumentalisation. Women's mysticism preserved an alternative sovereignty grounded in moral authority. Even under colonial and postcolonial militarisation, Kashmiri women continued to mediate conflict through cultural practice: oral storytelling, healing rituals, inter-community hospitality. Such acts constitute what Enloe (2014) terms the hidden labour of peace—forms of diplomacy that remain invisible to statist historiography yet indispensable to social survival.

In theoretical terms, this genealogy reframes agency itself. Rather than equating agency with resistance in the oppositional sense, Mahmood (2005) urges recognition of pious agency—the capacity to act within disciplinary traditions through ethical cultivation. Laal Ded's ascetic practice exemplifies this: her withdrawal is neither submission nor rebellion but re-subjectivation through self-knowledge. This reading complicates the liberal feminist assumption that autonomy must manifest as defiance; it situates freedom within relational interdependence.

Such re-conceptualisation enables a feminist-decolonial theory of diplomacy that values receptivity as much as assertion. Where conventional diplomacy prizes eloquence, affective diplomacy values listening as praxis. Laal Ded's silence—her pauses between verses, her non-reactive stance toward mockery—functions as an aural politics of attention. This resonates with Irigaray's (2001) claim that genuine dialogue requires an interval, a breath, in which the other may appear. Her mysticism thus provides not only metaphor but method: diplomacy as disciplined listening.

The feminine genealogy of peace also exposes the historiographical erasure enacted by colonial modernity. British orientalists, eager to codify religions into discrete systems, re-classified syncretic saints along sectarian lines. In this process, women's mystics were written out of canonical narratives (Kumar 2012). The recovery of Laal Ded therefore functions as a decolonial historiographical act—what Santos (2014) calls rearguard epistemology, the reclamation of suppressed knowledges from the underside of modernity.

Furthermore, the affective rationality embodied in these mystics challenges the foundational premises of IR. If sovereignty is predicated on separateness, their ontology of interbeing destabilises the very idea of borders. Their diplomacy operates through transversality rather than territoriality—an ethics of relation that contemporary feminist theorists see as essential to global peacebuilding (Tickner & True 2018). By tracing this lineage, we unearth an archive of international thought that is both pre-modern and post-statist.

In Laal Ded's case, the political import of her mysticism lies in its capacity to render compassion a form of governance. Her verses train affect; they legislate without law. Through poetic repetition, communities internalise an ethics of empathy that functions as soft regulation. This is diplomacy at the level of subject formation—a governance of the soul rather than the border. Such a conception reframes

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peace not as an event but as a processual ontology sustained through cultural practice.

Finally, this genealogy reveals that women's spiritual labour has long constituted the unacknowledged infrastructure of peace. In the Kashmiri context, this labour persists in women's collectives that employ storytelling, song, and inter-faith dialogue as tools of reconciliation. By connecting these contemporary initiatives to Laal Ded's philosophical inheritance, we see continuity between mystic ethics and modern activism. The mystic's language of love, humility, and compassion becomes the grammar through which women negotiate survival in a militarised landscape.

Section IV: Contemporary Resonances: Laal Ded in Militarized Kashmir

Invoking Laal Ded today is an act of epistemic recovery. In a valley partitioned by checkpoints and competing nationalisms, her language of unity offers what Lederach (2005) calls the moral imagination of the possible—a capacity to envision human connection amid structural estrangement. Her vakhs, recited in households and classrooms alike, circulate as affective technologies that sustain communal resilience. They operate as what Stoler (2009) terms an affective archive: a living repository through which ethical memory exceeds institutional historiography.

Kashmiri poets such as Naseem Shafaie and Rafiq Masoodi draw on Laal Ded's aphorisms to narrate the psychic dissonance of militarized life. Their verse translates mystic vocabulary—light, breath, silence—into idioms of survival. Visual artists reinterpret her naked asceticism as a metaphor for exposure and truth, reclaiming vulnerability as strength. In protests and social-media movements, fragments of her vakhs appear on banners: moral citations that confer legitimacy without violence. The endurance of her language across political divides demonstrates what Mignolo (2011) calls pluriversal ethics: the coexistence of multiple truths within a shared moral horizon.

Women peacebuilders explicitly anchor their praxis in this inheritance. Collectives such as Athwaas, Kashmir Women's Collective, and Ehsaas Trust use her idiom of compassion to mediate inter-community dialogues. Their initiatives exemplify feminist diplomacy's micro-infrastructures of relation (Aggestam & True 2020). Workshops on trauma healing open with her vakhs; reconciliation meetings quote her lines on humility and patience. Such gestures enact what Enloe (2014) calls the politics of the everyday—a diplomacy that unfolds in kitchens and courtyards rather than conference halls. The slow temporality of listening, central to Laal Ded's ethics, becomes a methodological principle for these women.

These practices also illustrate how feminist IR's categories of embodied agency and affective governance (Sylvester 2013) manifest in local contexts. Peacebuilding here is not a linear project of resolution but a recursive process of care. Through ritual, story, and song, women reproduce a counter-hegemonic order that privileges empathy over enforcement. This resonates with Butler's (2004) concept of precarious life: vulnerability as the foundation of ethical relation. Laal Ded's philosophy, by sanctifying vulnerability, provides Kashmiri women with an ontological justification for non-violence.

Decolonial analysis further reveals how these affective practices resist the epistemic enclosure of the conflict narrative. State and media discourses frame Kashmir through binary logics—terrorism vs. security, separatism vs. nationalism—whereas women's initiatives invoke Laal Ded to articulate a third space of belonging grounded in mutual recognition. Such border thinking (Mignolo 2011) destabilises the coloniality of both the Indian and Pakistani imaginaries of Kashmir. Her mysticism thus becomes a language of subaltern diplomacy that speaks simultaneously to God and the government, to neighbour and stranger.

The persistence of her philosophy in domestic contexts—mothers soothing children during curfew with her verses, teachers using her lines to explain tolerance—exemplifies vernacular peace education. It suggests that diplomacy's most enduring institutions are emotional, not bureaucratic. As Santos (2014) argues, "there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice." The continued vitality of Laal Ded's ethics within Kashmiri lifeworlds restores such cognitive justice by validating the region's indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate political reason.

At the transnational level, her figure has acquired renewed relevance in India–Pakistan cultural dialogues. Cross-border peace networks cite her as a shared ancestor of moral imagination, invoking her vakhs in interfaith gatherings from Lahore to Delhi. Her appeal lies precisely in her refusal of fixed identity; she belongs everywhere because she claimed nothing. This cosmopolitan anonymity prefigures what Braidotti (2011) calls nomadic subjectivity—a form of belonging through motion rather than territory. In a geopolitical landscape obsessed with borders, Laal Ded models spiritual mobility as a counter-diplomatic practice.

Revisiting Laal Ded within contemporary Kashmir thus discloses two intertwined insights. First, that mysticism can function as soft infrastructure for peace, producing ethical dispositions that outlive formal negotiations. Second, that feminist, decolonial, and mystical epistemologies converge in their critique of mastery. By recasting peace as relational ontology rather than political outcome, these frameworks collectively unlearn the masculinist impulse to dominate. Laal Ded's ongoing influence demonstrates that diplomacy need not speak the language of the state to

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be effective; it may whisper through poetry, ritual, and compassion.

III. Conclusion

Re-imagining Laal Ded through feminist IR, decolonial epistemology, and mystical phenomenology re-configures diplomacy itself. Across centuries, her vakhs have enacted what Mignolo (2011) calls epistemic disobedience: a refusal to let meaning be monopolised by institutional power. She transforms peace from juridical accord into existential practice—an ethics of relation grounded in awareness and empathy. In this re-articulation, diplomacy becomes less a negotiation of interests than a continuous re-calibration of intersubjective balance.

By integrating feminist IR's critique of patriarchal rationality with decolonial theory's insistence on epistemic plurality, we recognise Laal Ded as both philosopher and practitioner of what Santos (2014) names the ecology of knowledges. Her thought dissolves the Euro-Atlantic boundary between reason and affect, secular and sacred, politics and mysticism. Within this pluriversal horizon, peace is not the silence of guns but the resonance of mutual recognition.

In militarised Kashmir, where the state regulates visibility and speech, Laal Ded's continued circulation constitutes a counter. Her ethics of compassion has become a grammar for women's diplomacy that survives outside formal channels. These women translate her metaphysics into praxis—through caregiving, storytelling, and community mediation—demonstrating that mysticism can operate as political technology. Their work materialises Butler's (2004) claim that vulnerability is not antithetical to agency but its very condition. Through them, Laal Ded's ancient insight—to know oneself is to disarm violence—achieves renewed political resonance.

Acknowledging Laal Ded within global peace theory expands IR's conceptual geography. It provincialises Eurocentric paradigms and foregrounds South Asia's vernacular philosophies as sites of diplomatic innovation. Her mysticism reveals that sustainable peace demands not power's choreography but consciousness's transformation. In the age of militarised nationalism, her lesson endures: that the most radical diplomacy may begin with empathy's smallest gesture.

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