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Punjab’s craft of *Guddi Patola* and its reflection in Pakistani Visual Arts: The case of Ruby Chishti

Abstract

In one of my previous papers I shed light upon how phulkari, which is Punjab’s indigenous embroidery craft, has inspired a set of contemporary Pakistani visual artists to create distinguishable art. The aim of this paper is to highlight another local craft of Punjab which is doll making (*Guddi Patola*) as a means to create yet another distinctive expression in visual arts. To find reflections and possible connections of this local craft of Punjab in Pakistani contemporary visual art scene, the case of Ruby Chishti, who is a Pakistani born sculptor now living and working in America, is used. Various aspects of doll making that have provided the basis for a complex narrative to be built in Chishti’s work will also be discussed along with aesthetical qualities of this local craft and possible potentiality of its process.

Doll Making and Punjab’s Cultural Past

An agreeable ratio of Punjab’s population has been doing farming and cultivation from ages. The trade system which was popular in olden times was barter system as there was no concept of currency. In a similar fashion life, unlike urban areas, in old especially rural Punjab was rather simpler whether it’s the matter of celebration, cooking food or inventing pass times. Most of the tasks were carried out at home from making butter to stitching clothes. Mother would use leftover pieces of fabric (*Patola*) from stitching and roll them into a ball and would give it to the baby to play with.

The homemade toy kept on evolving and now has its own recognition after being shaped into a proper craft industry. It has become a sign of cultural significance too. *Guddi patola* is a general term that is used for a toy made out of fabric scrapes however among the cultural toys which are made out of waste fabric, doll making is most popular and is considered a girl oriented activity.

As said earlier Punjab is known for its culture and crafts and has a rich history of craft making especially doll making. Almost all rural even in urban and suburban areas small girls do enjoy making dolls out of fabric. Since private organizations have started craft fair pop up markets, the handmade dolls have gained more popularity and are now seen frequently at Sunday craft market and organic fairs in major cities of Pakistan like Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad (Fig: 1). In Okara district the story of doll making has a strange connection. When a guest from Germany Dr Santa Siller arrives upon an invitation of her student who was the resident of the of Thatta ghulam Dhairka, Okara the village was devoid of its basic needs. Her desire to uplift the condition of the residents introduced the locals of that area of Punjab to the craft of doll making. Later on the activity was turned into an industrial project (Fig: 1 & 2) and social well fare program still benefitting the locals (A Peek Inside the Doll Village of Punjab).

Crafts are cultural in nature. They reflect the ethnic spirit of a region hence embody a character and distinctiveness(Ahmed). Dolls of Punjab exemplify the innocence and purity of its people especially women. Making doll is no doubt a sensory, physical, somatic, and a body-oriented process however what is it which has made Ruby to use doll craft as the basis for her creations?One by one I would discuss the characteristics of doll craft and possible factors to draw a kinship between this craft and Ruby’s art.

Emotional Value of DollMaking

Punjab has a lot of activities that come under pass time. Doll making is one of them however it has a lot of emotional and didactic purposes too. In Punjab rural or urban, small girls do have a phase where they sit with their mothers or other sisters, cousins or friends and play around with the rags turning them into beautiful dolls or any kind of stuffed being. During old times, in rural areas especially girls of all age used to not only sit together and make rag dolls but also sang along too. Making stuffed creations and dolls while sitting and singing together was family and bonding time. Little girls would ask the mother to make a *gudiya* (doll) out the same scrape pieces of cloth (*patola*). When *gudiya* (female doll) is completed the need for the *gudda* (male doll) would be felt. And that is how that homemade craft would teach the little girl about the value of companionship from her younger years. This would also serve as a means to learn about past stories. Faith, beliefs, culture even everyday life too was reflected through that simple activity. Nowadays this doll

making has become some sort of a business too. People buy them as traditional gifts or as a cultural souvenir.



Fig: 1



Fig: 2

The Domestic Feel of Doll Craft

The method that is involved in the making of this craft gives the dolls an air of domesticity. The reason of this characteristic is also because of the materials too that are involved. Methods like patching, the stitching, needling etc. are the acts usually performed by women in the vicinity of their comfort zone. Ruby has made good use of that naivety in her work. This carefree atmosphere of the work makes the spectator to dwindle between the seriousness which is usually associated with the plastic arts and lightheartedness which is one of the specialties of crafts.

In any craft color shape and texture are very important factors to be read by the onlooker. And they do play a vital role in giving that craft its particular identity. Ruby is taking every aspect of doll making to another level though making a clever use of them meanwhile. However in's *my birth will take place thousand time (Fig: 3)* the colors or the texture appear to be taking a back seat than the whole form of the sculpture.



Fig: 3 My Birth Will Take Place Thousand a Times, rubychisti.com©2013

When we look at Ruby's soft bodies, they surely tell the story of how they had been made. The forms are so engaging that they make the viewer to think of the process. They also tell the story of sheer pleasure

which their maker must have had during the process of creating them (Fig: 6, 7)

Breaking Rules and Harvesting The Expression

The laid out rules of doll craft are helping Ruby to initiate her work. She knows what exactly she wants from one piece. Her pieces follow strictly the rules of that craft activity. The fabric will be cut out in a specific shape, sewn together and the drafted drawings will be placed according to the format of the design. Then the morphed fabric stuffed with wool will be joined together to yield a final form. There is no ambiguity or mysteriousness which lies in the process of Ruby Chishti's stuffed items. However those soft bodies are not made to be someone's toy. They are not made to be played with. The objects are created devoid of their conventional use (Fig: 4, 5). They are isolated from their usual environment serving only one purpose and that is to be solely an artistic expression.

Doll Craft and Creating Connection

As discussed earlier this craft carries an emotional side. Ruby might have used that emotional side to elevate the status of her work at the same time it has provided her with a link to her surroundings. Such links help the artist to create more relevance and relation to the viewer as the viewer sometimes has also been a part of the same society. A spectator would be guided directly to the phenomenon of childhood or pass time or some kind of nostalgia then merely focusing on what colors are used or which texture is present (fig:3).

It is noticeable that the artist has kept either the material or the technique or in some cases both same as they exist in the original craft so the onlooker can make use of the conventional association to establish possible connections. For example if the hair in dolls are made sometimes in yellow color and with thread, or hands are feet are kept simple, Ruby has maintained that analogous notion. In my opinion, this strategy first draws the viewer in the familiar territory, pulls him nearer to the work and then engages him into the labor of intellectual autopsy.

The boundaries between art and craft are long been questioned in the western world during latter half of the 19th century. And then the times came when a chair was not only an object to sit on but an object d art. Long ago it was the presence and absence of function which has differentiated craft and art but then art and craft movement opened a new dialogue and made this distinction an old one. Later Bauhaus philosophy and their practice has shown us that the streak was two way. Craftsmen

became increasingly creative and artists started working with almost every single material they got their hands on. These experimentations of late 19th and early 20th century in fact point towards the nature of the two realms of art and craft. It seems that Ruby has uncovered the fluid nature of doll craft to generate a new concoction.

The Therapeutic Nature of Doll Craft

Besides serving as a means to reflect culture and belief, the activity of making dolls is self-contained and has a standalone quality of being therapeutic in nature. The reason again is the act of making and a sense of accomplishment that comes with it. It has been reported that this craft have shown significant benefits in complex trauma cases. It has played a vital role in treating posttraumatic stress disorder resulting from child sexual abuse and family violence (Stace).

Another aspect of craft is their generative side that they can be made again.

The Generative Quality of Doll Making

Craft as it is mentioned earlier has a lot of sides ranging from emotional to intellectual. Besides other properties of doll making that probably have inspired Ruby, first and foremost could be the act of making and the joy that is associated with any craft activity. *Ellen Dissanayake* in her article *The Pleasure and the Meaning of Making* has explained the point (Dissanayake). What is Ellen trying to say here is that the process of making itself is so pleasurable that one could easily carry on without worrying too much about the results? This could also mean she is stressing on the making part of the craft where one sits with some material and goes through a period of contemplation while conceiving the idea of a form he wishes to make. The artist then went through the process of making it ultimately giving birth to something which then has its own existence. The whole process according to her gives one a distinctive sense of accomplishment. The similar joy or pleasure must have been experienced by Ruby while creating (Fig: 3, 6, 7).

Like Greyson Perry, Ruby's use of craft activities center on self-reliance. She continues to explore the process of doll making while following some rules and negating the others (Perry). Like almost all the girls she also shares some childhood memories with this craft which she puts into the creative process. Though the modalities of doll or stuff toy sit comfortably next to her emotional part of the work yet she might have been enjoying the process or the act of making them. She might have

been having joie de faire (like joie de vivre) as said by Ellen Dissanayake(Dissanayake).

The Laid out Rules and the Downside of Doll Making

Every process has pros and cons. Craft too has a down side when considered in artistic domain as it has some laid out rule that one needs to follow to end up having the required result. But for an artist breaking rules is important to have the desired result. However artists with their non-conformist behavior bring out possibilities even in the darkest of situations. Expanding horizons is always valuable. The downside of craft emerges as a blessing in disguise. The laid out rules (which is a no no for an artist) in making of a doll craft come forth and help the artist to start on with his abstract ideas. As Marry Douglas says

Oftentimes, the language or values of another field are appropriated to leverage a higher status whether craft practice takes on the critical language of art or art absorbs certain notions of craftsmanship (Douglas).

Material and Form of Ruby’s Art and its Kinship with Doll Craft

Any art work has two major parts one is its material with which it is created and the other is its Form and its shape the work takes through which the work speaks to the viewer. Material generally used to make art is paint and canvas and if it is the case of sculpture or 3d work, conventional approach is to use clay, marble or wood. Ruby has worked with fabric, thread and cotton wool as her material that gives her sculptures a direct kinship with the doll craft as the similar is used to make dolls. However the entity that gives more resemblance to ruby’s soft bodies with that of the doll craft is the Form. When a spectator looks at her soft sculptural pieces, the physique of the work immediately draws viewer’s attention towards the affiliation it has with that craft.

Cross Over of Two Realms in Ruby’s Works

F. E. Sparshott in his book *The Structure of Aesthetics* has given a statement in the chapter *Grades and Kinds*. The statement could help to determine one way of knowing how Ruby has managed that crossover of Punjab’s indigenous craft with her artistic expression. He says that craftsmanship is more about good design and less about good taste. This means that activity of crafting is more concerned with the rules that need to be followed in order to create a good design rather than exerting the creator’s understanding of beauty and goodness. Now artist with their understanding of creativity carry an air of nonconformity unlike a craftsman. When this individual eccentricity is combined with good

design a new form is born. Which means artist's free-spiritedness allows him to wander in the realm of his imagination where he generates lot of other possibilities. Then he looks around to gather whatever is required to achieve the desired results. In this journey his eccentricities in other words his individuality plays a major role and helps him to take decisions which yield radical results. It is to note that this individuality also refers to the understanding of taste which every artists of this merit has developed or gained through experience or exposure.

Sometimes artists do not employ the media/medium like others. They are dealing with the challenges of the specific media and navigating through the possible ways of using it simultaneously creating Meta narratives (postmodern term meaning story of a story). As Greyson Perry said when asked on using craft material and technique:

Although I use the emotional and intellectual framework of a craft medium, as a potter, I see myself as an artist, not as part of the crafts movement (Perry).

The Meaning of Ruby's Forms

There is a lot to ponder over for a spectator. He would immediately think of the purpose of placing them the way they are. He would think of round small bodies, yellow wool hair. Colorful patterned clothes and hugged bodies (Fig: 3,9) are not meant to play then what meaning their existence has? What connection the artist is trying to make with that of a shirt or a shawl or a stuffed animal. Hence the spectator is made to navigate quite cleverly through the labyrinth of the material and techniques used. Isolation here is used to bring unity to the work.

Ruby Chishti's work pronounces the fragility of existence. The tenuous, soft layered material used by her to express her little elf puts the viewer both at comfort and at variance with its serenity. In “Blemishes of Time” Fig 4, the two stuffed bodies appear to be peasants of rural Punjab holding a clay bowl in their hands. Their heads are replaced with water taps. The work can be interpreted in many a ways but the most appropriate translation would be if the work is placed in the context of rural Punjab and its peasant culture. Tap head bodies holding empty clay bowls mimic those hard working peasant couple who after working day and night in the field left with nothing in their hands. On the contrary the work could also stand for the welcoming nature of the people of Punjab who are ready to offer whatever they have when it comes to hospitality.

Doll as said is made out of scrape thus have a fragile nature. It is amazing to notice how Ruby has connected that fragility is amazing. She

says “I felt that in this fast pace of life and struggle to survive...I could not find the luxury to have time to recall those memories which were dear to me. I started to think in the materials that were ephemeral like fallen twigs, just like the fragmentary nature of memory.” Her works “Sketch of the fading memory” and “...And then I buried my pride along with you (Fig: 5) ...” are expressions of this realization.

Use of Doll Craft and Meaningfulness of Artistic Expression

Speaking in relation to the viewer, the choice of using craft material or techniques also has another side. This side of the work might have been acknowledged by the artists or it is unintentional, it makes their work interactive to a considerable extent. Here the interactivity is mental. Now one must be wondering that all art call for mental inquiry but do all art is mentally accessible to its viewer? The answer surely is no. But the presence of this craft as her prime source of inspiration has made her work more accessible as the presence of conventional notions welcomes the spectator for critical appreciation. This could also mean that the viewer’s presence is also an important part especially for such hybrid expression as the amusement lies in recognizing the familiar forms and then finding them in another context which is created by the artist. The simple craft has acquired such an interesting identity in her work.



Fig:4 Ruby Chishti, Blemishes of Time II, 2009, rubychisti.com©2013



Fig: 5, Ruby Chishti, And Then I Buried my Pride Along With You, rbychisti.com©2013



Fig: 6 Ruby Chishti among her sculpture installation, rbychisti.com©2013



Fig: 7, Ruby Chishti, crows, rubychisti.com©2013

Ruby by recognizing Punjab’s local craft of making dolls to create an artistic expression has raised the level of this craft by following approaches.....

Double Coding

Although the craft that has inspired Ruby to create works has traditional ground yet the resulting expression is Modern in nature. Moreover a hint of Post-modern double coding can also be traced in them. Double coding was a philosophy which was applied primarily by the architects of postmodern era. This philosophy allowed them to invent a dialogue between the past and the present. New forms are created by borrowing styles and motifs from historical times to satisfy the peers and the public at the same time (Jencks). The similar effort seems to be working in her mind though artist’s intentions operate on different parameters. His or her prime concern is not to satisfy the thirst of the viewer but to express what he or she feels. However since the modern thought is about to invent new ways of expression by being innovative so intentions might have been tamed according to the need of the time. Artists from modern times have been practicing art with the freedom more than ever. Such liberty allows them to plan their creativity at all levels by all means.

My Birth Will Take Place Thousand Times (fig: 3.)surely are rag dolls however no one would think of them merely as toys. The form is raw and so is the medium. The whole installation carries an organic feel yet the narrative is made so strong with their head bowed that it would make the viewer sympathize with the creatures who are sitting in a circle. The

usual perception of a rag doll is dramatically changed even though its usual form is remained intact. Ruby’s pieces if seen together seem to be the parts of one doll house which are separated by a storm of time or emotions. Which are though created as an individual entity yet seem to belong to the same time and place?

Aesthetic Potential of Doll Craft

The form of this craft is aesthetically so potential that it can be placed alone as an expression. Putting something out of its usual context initiates a dialogue itself. If we forget about the formal changes or material handling in *My Birth Will Take Place Thousand Times No Matter How You Celebrate It*, the meaning of the doll is changed only by being placed in a particular set of environment. Even the way in which those dolls are placed usually known as the composition have a certain idea behind. Hence the artist here is not only borrowing elements from the crafts, she is quite successfully changing its context also by questioning its identity.

Sense of Theatricality

Hybrid forms such as Ruby’s fall into the dimension somewhere between the ambiguity of arts and straightforwardness of crafts. Besides having a quirky and wild feel, Ruby’s creatures have acquired a sense of theatricality too. It looks like as if a drama is staged for its audience where the characters are quietly playing their roll. This is also indicative of the contradictory characteristics of 21st century art. The stage is set for a drama with the immovable players; hence the stage is not where the characters are physically present but the mind of a spectator. The way stuffed cows or crows are placed creates a ghoulish show as if a death or a tragedy has stricken. The non-human status of Ruby’s dolls or cows makes us to imbibe pain of which the artist is talking about.

The Overlapping of Craft and Contemporary Art in Ruby’s Work

Ruby Chishti’s work if taken in terms of form and matter overlaps the craft of doll making and contemporary sculpture. Upon asking this straddling she replied

I consider myself an artist who is interested in creating and therefore I do have a huge respect for all traditional methods or disciplines. If one sees me working with many unconventional materials that does not mean that I am trying to challenge any material or substance associated with a particular discipline.... I find my role as an ever-growing artist not to get stuck in one place by not acknowledging

another. This very desire makes me see and explore qualities hidden in all kind of materials (Chishti).

This above statement also reveals the integrity of any artist. That as he is the keeper of that freedom which he is being assigned too unlike any craftsman. And he would use that sovereignty to yield results by exploring material and experimenting with forms. In fact this act of exercising freedom is essential for his existence as an artist.

Process is important because when you try other materials that you have not worked with, you find your own ways to do it, which are not right or wrong, and you put yourself in unfamiliar situations (Chishti).

However another statement she gave in the same interview nullifies this argument;

I work in different materials (not objects) because I have a love for every material that has ever played a significant role in my life and I do have a strong bond with it and because of that bond it reveals itself in front of me....(ibid).

The Impermanence of Dolls and Ruby’s Soft Bodies

The dolls are made out of waste fabric and so is the material which is used to stuff them. Their existence is fragile. This impermanent nature of doll craft has given Ruby’s sculptures another type of sensitivity. The material choice is delicate. The uncanniness of the materials in Ruby’s work directs towards the ideas of transit and permanent. The techniques especially where the fabric and thread is involved is acting as a bridge between the craft of doll making and the art of sculpture (Akhtar). Ruby describes her work in her own words:

...Since my initial work, ‘My Birth Will Take Place A Thousand Times’ I have been questioning how thoughts form and how conventions become norms and take root in a society (ibid).

The Kitsch-ness of doll craft and Connection with the Past

I have mentioned earlier in that the conventions are used to build connections. Using craft which have been in practice from a long period of time to create art could be an act to search one’s identity or build a connection with the past. The success of her work lies in the relationship she has built between the choice of the material and the content of her work as the material selection is strongly supporting the concept. In her works craft of doll making has not been taken as an object to copy. Instead she has dissected the craft intellectually and symbolically, interpreting its form and structure.

While making doll like sculpture she has done emotional search of the doll making process itself. However a doll which is taken as a metaphor of women in her work is reconstructed with rags of one's own choice or with the things which are left as scrapes creates the identity of a woman in her work. She has carefully yet creatively analyzed the whole process of making a doll and has designated an array of symbols to each step. By using such materials and process this is also possible that she intended to keep the innocence into her work and didn't want to solely leap across the oh-so-intellectual appearance of postmodern, conceptual or abstract art!



Fig: 8

Conclusion

Crafts of Punjab carry a feel of jagged simplicity and innocent earthiness. These capacities of culturally rich Punjab have been inspiring the local artists to create various expressions. Today *guddiya sazi* or doll making not only holds an emotional value for the people of Punjab but also is aesthetically so potential that it has provided a foundation for artists to draw their inspirations. Using this traditional crafts as source of inspiration no doubt would help making the crafts alive. Moreover it is surely a kind of homage to our traditions and culture though it is not necessary for an artist. A living and learned societies around the world do different measures to preserve their cultural traditions. Festivals are held, workshops are conducted to pay homage to long and old values.

However in Ruby’s work this cultural tradition of Punjab is not only kept alive but is extended to become a distinctive expression at international level too.

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