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Punjab’s Craft of ‘*Kadhā’ī*’ as an Art Form in Pakistani Visual Arts

Abstract:

The core aim of this paper is to highlight the use of Punjab’s oldest craft of embroidery locally known as *kadhā’ī* as an artistic expression in visual arts. Discovering a local and widely known craft of *kadhā’ī* as an art form and exploring its characteristics to develop complex creative equation of a distinct merit is visible in contemporary Pakistani visual art. The work is produced in Lahore which is a major social, political and cultural seat of Punjab, the second largest province by area. Besides discussing the characteristics of *kadhā’ī* and its cultural and emotional significance for the people of Punjab, the paper will also shed light upon how this most revered craft is explored by the local artist to create art works which have won appreciation at international level.

Keywords: Punjab, Handicraft, Kadhāi, Lahore, Cultural, Emotional Significance, Local Creation.

Known as *panj-āb*, a land of five rivers, Punjab is one of the most populous and prosperous province of Pakistan. Besides sharing borders with India, due to its strategic geographical position, Punjab also touches all other provinces of Pakistan which include *Sindh*, *KPK*, *Gilgit-Baltistan* and *Balochistan*. All these areas have their distinct cultural character that probably was influential on Punjab’s taste in one way or the other to some extent. The reign of Mughal Empire contributed a lot towards enriching Punjab’s history. Though every province of our country has its own flavor however Punjab is the richest and colorful when it comes to culture, tradition, folk lore and crafts most of all.

Whether a country, a province or a town every place is known for its specialty that marks its identity. Local craft contributes a lot towards

marking such identity (Ahmed 106). While imbibing various streaks and maintaining its own rich tradition, Punjab stands tall when it comes to crafts. Among all other crafts like weaving, basketry, wood work embroidery is extensively practiced activity. Locally known as kaḏhāṭī, embroidery falls in the oldest tradition and reflects the richness of this province. Colonization and globalization has affected the use of material and methods which are involved in the practice of kaḏhāṭī however there are areas where oldest methods are still in practice. If we speak about Punjab, *pulkhari* (fig: 1) is the best known method. *Phulkari* means flower work. This process was very popular even before partition as some of the surviving textiles provide the evidence (Ahmed 108).



Fig: 1 Phulkari from Punjab humsheri.org

As said earlier a craft also marks the identity of a certain region by displaying their culture. This is also true that rural and urban kaḏhāṭī carry a very different character since the latter is always ready to absorb trends and fashion. In Pakistan within a province multiple types of embroidery are in practice. Different stitches are used in different regions and thus become the identity of that particular place. Regions and tribes have their characteristics style through which they are known. Craft of any area or region is a way to express their love for their motherland and is a reflection of its culture. The origin of the craft of kaḏhāṭī in Pakistan are not certain however there are few instances where an assumption could be made that it was practiced during the time of Mohenjodaro, Gandaraperiod and. Historical evidences tell us that the craft got more

intense and rich during the times of Mughals when they ruled the subcontinent (ibid).

When we look back at history it appears that this beloved craft of Punjab has been going through the stages. The reason involved could be cultural, social and political. For example at one of time in history kaḏhāī was taken as a comfy, hand held leisure time activity whereas at other times it was a way for women to put their share in financial matters of their family. This craft it seems is still playing both roles along with acquiring other multiple identities.

Kaḏhāī is a labor intensive work that is done by usually skilled workers known as craftsmen to have good results. It requires a person to carry a lot of patience and a steady eye to do it. Their craftsmanship requires a set of rules to be followed to achieve neatness and exactness of a design. 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 made a lot of things possible. 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 (Sparshott 338).

Before I discuss why and how kaḏhāī is being used in some of contemporary Pakistani visual art as a distinct expression, it would be beneficiary to shed some light on creativity and its two importance faculties art and craft. From the times of antiquity till the times of today, creativity is one of the distinctive qualities of human race. Art and craft are two of the three facets of man's creative capacity (Morriss Kay 158). Art is a language of enormous breadth and its definition is still evolving however we all know that it is intuitiveness, visionary field and expression on which art primarily counts, whereas for crafts technical expertise is of paramount importance. In the realm of art, human imagination and skill

both are put together to yield an expression which is personal yet carries a universal appeal. The work which is done in this domain is usually appreciated for its aesthetical value and the element of beauty it carries for the spectator. Apart from the superficial appeal of the work, emotional resonance is another important factor which defines a work of art. Artists are charged by an emotion and try conveying the similar feeling through ideas and techniques to the viewer so the spectator could resonate with that emotional intensity of the artists. And that makes art, a means of communion also. Craft as I said earlier also carries an emotional component. The group of artist whose work is under discussion has brought forward that emotional side of craft to come up with an equation which has not been locally appreciated but also won a huge applaud on international art scene.

If we talk about art and crafts solely, they seem to be at two ends however in between lays a whole world of variable expressions which is invented by earlier generations. Folk art, tribal art, kitsch art, fine craft, outsider art are to name a few. All these forms tell the story of freedom and flexibility of creative expression which is explored over a period of time. When a spectator looks at the work samples, which I have chosen to discuss, the physique of the work immediately draws his attention towards a kinship those works share with the craft of embroidery. Such an approach where the work is done with unconventional material or method could be referred as Modern art, the art that was produced from late 19th cent till mid-20th century in the western parts of the world. However in Pakistani art this approach becomes evident in early 21st cent. There are a lot of reasons behind it however this is no place to indulge in detail since the purpose of the paper is to highlight the reappearance of the craft of *kaḏhāṭ*, and the resulting effect.

After Modern art that bloomed till 1960's another era of art making appeared on the art map which is named as Contemporary. Contemporary art and contemporary approach both are still evolving. When we say contemporary we mean radical ways of thinking and approaches towards almost all the walks of life and art is not separated from that. This radical approach has given the license to the maker of contemporary art to advance in radical ways. There is a lot of fusion and blurring of boundaries. Pakistani art scene has also been witnessing contemporary approach especially from the turn of this century and has

received its fair share of such a fusion. And such strong fusion of art and craft is visible in the works of Ayesha Khalid.

One does not have to make an effort as that linkage could easily be made when the viewer laid his initial eyes on their art pieces where kaḏhāī is leading the whole creative equation. For example Ayesha Khalid’s recent works of 2013-16 *The Persian Carpet* (fig:2) *Kashmiri Shawl* (fig:3) and *The Conversation* (fig:4) show the connections with textiles and tapestries and the techniques involved are embroidery, sewing and needle work. Kaḏhāī does have a kitsch feel to it which is quite discernable in Saba Khan’s work where she is playing with beads, sequins, thread and fabric.



Fig: 2, Ayesha Khalid, *The Persian Carpet*, islamicartmagazine.com



Fig: 3 Kashmiri Shawl, designdaysdubai.com

Prior to discussing the works and the use of kaḏhāī to yield artistic expression it would be of paramount importance to see that what has made these artists to get their inspiration from kaḏhāī? What lies in this beloved craft of Punjab that has given them enough substance to create such works of powerful expressions? Are there any political cultural or personal reasons to look at this local craft for inspiration?

Conventionally art is created by using paints or pigment, clay or marble, paper or canvas and wood or plaster. However in early 20th century there was an artist duo Picasso and Braque in Paris who thought of using unconventional material like newspaper clips or chair canning on to the surface of an artwork thus radically changing the art making process. Their approach paved the way for many avantgarde ideas since then. All artists no matter what race or nationality they belong have built in intuitiveness. They carry an ability to innovate and extract ideas from where a layman cannot imagine. Using kaḏhāī as method to create no wonder is a radical way of thinking and linking things together however the craft of kaḏhāī must carry such a character which has facilitated the artist to bring it into the main stream of materials and methods.

The act of kaḏhāī has a very symbolic feel to it. It sounds surreal when a tiny metal needle carrying a long piece of thread waving at her back decides to pass through a surface of fabric. With every step of passing in and passing out of the surface no matter how soft or hard that is, the needle with the help of a thread creates a beautiful world that might look like a mess at the back however the front celebrates her struggle. When a flat smooth surface of a fabric is pierced through a needle and a thread is passed through it, a certain kind of mark making is generated. It looks like if someone wants to leave a trace of his or her existence or presence or passionately wants to dispense a story. Now this tells us that one of the many qualities of craft is to express human values and show intimacy with the culture and tradition of a particular region. Hence an embroidered fabric becomes a diary of recording stories of struggle. That gives this craft a notion of emotional framework which is more or less a part of all crafts. No matter whichever way kaḏhāī is done, this craft holds immense cultural significance for the people of this Punjab also. Stories of past and present are recorded on fabric with the help of thread in various designs and pass down to the younger generation at events like marriage or other social celebrations (Ahmed 106).

Since crafts are born and created in the peripheries of a society hence are less contaminated by the mainstream thoughts and ideas. This adds an air of primitiveness and naive feel to it which surely holds a fresh perspective when compared with the main stream materials and methods of art making. Therefore search for novelty could be another reason. Postmodern age which is age after computer and internet is about absurdity. The weirder the idea, the more it will be considered creative. Though the material used in the works of Risham Syed, Ayesha Khalid or Saba Khan is not weird yet is uncanny for art making. By employing such bizarre method to create their works, artists might have been trying to look for novelty as innovation is another prime concern of any artist. Greyson Perry speaks of this concern in this manner.

But craft is a hot word in the art world at the moment, because people are tired of conceptual art where the ideas aren't even that good, ideas that wouldn't stand up outside the flimsy theatre of the gallery (Perry).

Besides novelty, there are other dynamics which could kindle the thoughts of an artist when it comes to the formal aspects of his creative expression. As mentioned earlier that 9/11 has left the world with a lot of whims that urge the notions of identity and sense of belongingness. Another possible reason of crossover could be the pursuit for bonding with their surroundings. They must have been searching the roots of their past or elements which could connect them to their history. Too much westernization of the culture which has affected the physical nature and the character of art could be another impetus. It appears that they are trying to induce local elements or flavor to maintain the last or losing link with their surroundings where they live and work. Another aspect of identity could be the identity of the artist him or herself. As with ever growing freedom of content and form artists themselves are dwindling between the realities of being an artist or an artisan. As McKenzie says

It's about creative satisfaction. As an artist, I love the idea I can make a huge painting or tiny little bracelets (Sherwin).

Sometimes the artist already has exposure to the crafts at home later become as one his or her biggest muses. As Khalid said in one her interview

I was very much interested in textiles thanks to my mother. She sewed herself and taught us how to sow, stitch, and embroider. In our house, every girl had to learn how to do all the household chores, but it was not a form of pressure for me. I was really interested in learning embroidery and sewing. I used to stitch my own clothes from a very young age. When I was in the eighth grade, I stitched my first school uniform (Flipi)

At another instances she recalls her increased interest in them.

My life and art are interconnected. My interest, before I started painting, was in textiles and they first entered my art in the guise of veils, curtains and tablecloths, and pattern more generally. I enjoy textiles in all their forms. Plus, I like doing things with my hands like knitting, embroidery and sewing, and so it's normal that textiles themselves became a medium (ibid).

In her article *The Pleasure and The Meaning of Making* Ellen talks about the making or the craftiness of craft.

There is an inherent pleasure in making. We might call this *joie de faire*(like *joie de vivre*) to indicate that there is something important, even urgent, to be said about the sheer enjoyment of making something exist that didn't exist before, of using one's own agency, dexterity, feelings and judgment to mold, form, touch, hold and craft physical materials, apart from anticipating the fact of its eventual beauty, uniqueness or usefulness (Dissanayake).

What 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 result! 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. He 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 Khalid while creating The Persian Carpet(fig: 2). The making part of the works must also have provided her with some kind of meditation as the process repeats itself.

She is comfortably continuing as the rules of that process are laid out once in the beginning like in any other craft activity. The only thing left is to finish the piece without worrying about the twists and turns one usually encounters when working with paint or pigment.

Besides all these points which are discussed above the touch of hand and handmade process comprises an idea of exclusiveness too and this is a very crucial element to art and artists.

We all know in children books moral teaching is done via personification. Good, bad, evil and ugliness appear in some kind of a character. Craft also embodies multiple meaning and characteristics. The primitive and naïve feel of kaḥāī has probably helped the artists to establish arguments about hard phenomena like feminism and identity. The simple look of this craft has helped them to state deeper and darker truths.

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 these artists have managed to use craft as their inspiration and use it in their process of art making. 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 made a lot of things possible. 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. An artist’s sense of creation is like a flower in the garden of his most prized imagination. He loves and owns it with same passion and intensity with which he owns the whole garden. While cherishing that flower he lets it bloom in the garden of his creation (شارب).

پُھلا وے گلاب دیا

کیتھے تینوں سانپھ راکھاں، ساڈے سچناں دے باغ دیا

Punjab has been witnessing the urbanism hence its craft of kadhāī has also gone through this change. Ayesha has picked the process of embroidering as a subject for one of her live art performance (fig: 4a & b) in Manchester UK where she is trying to explore the difference between the handmade and machine embroidery. However by doing so it looks like she is reflecting back on the role industrial revolution has put on society simultaneously exploring the themes of spirituality and self-worth. Hence the technique itself is working as a theme in these artists’ work. She have developed different connotations of the technique as themes to explore the issues like feminism, empowerment, individualism, socio cultural changes. It is so surprising to note that how she is interpreting a tiny bit of this craft activity so eloquently. The act of leaving a needle with a thread inserted into the fabric mimics a pause in a person’s life to sit back, reflect and recollect energy to move on (fig: 4b). In front of the wall, which has hand embroidered identical flowers, down on the floor, a video is projected that shows a close up view of a machine needle embroidering a similar flower (fig: 4a). Ayesha has used the sound of the machine needle too to represent the sound of a bullet. To her it is similar to a sound of a destructive activity. Her idea of using the machine needle’s sound complements her content as if we do not look at the video we do find the sound quite unpleasing to the senses. She has taken machine needle activity as worthless as it is accessible to masses in comparison to the handmade activity as the touch of a hand makes it precious. Finding symbolism using the stages of a certain craft is really what sets her work apart from the rest.

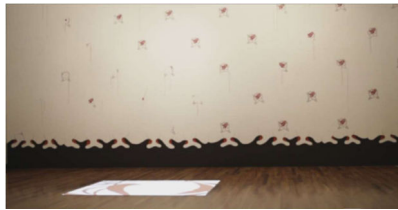


Fig: 4a



Fig: 4b

There are quite clever systems of operating and working with this craft as artistic expression. Artist has kept either the material or the technique or 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 a flower in the craft of embroidery exists in thread, it is kept in the similar material likewise if a common *kahmirishawl* or tunic carry the design in the form of motifs in a specific pattern, Ayesha has maintained the analogous notion her shawl and the jackets. 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.

Stitch has an improvisatory quality and its repeated gestures are like acts of reparation. this characteristic has been used in one of the video installation (fig:5) by Ayesha Khalid where a hand is embroidering a flower and next to this is another video where the whole act is played in reverse. As said earlier a needle with a thread at her back going in out of a fabric surface is akin to a woman struggling through her days in and days out of her life. Hence the artists have created a system where they are using a set of commonly known facts and associated gestures about this craft of *kaḏhāṭ* and translating them into something more complex and intellectual. In their works the act of threading a needle, passing a needle through a fabric, or embroidering a flower and undoing and resulting designs and motifs are more than just simply an act or a fact. They have turned them into beautifully complex narratives.

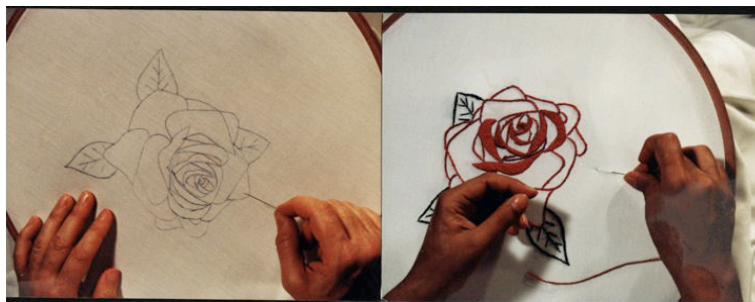


Fig: 5, Ayesha Khalid, *The Conversation*, Muftah.org©2014

An interesting thing to note is that craft especially *kaḏhāṭ* is not only a woman oriented activity but it contains a double symbolism. Every stage of a woman leaves a mark on her soul. When a needle pierces a

fabric it appears as if it is a mimic of a woman’s life. While doing a flower she is reminded of herself. With red she fills the canvas of life with color despite of all troubles and hindrances. As if the red flower is a way to escape from the ugly truth. This state is mentioned in such profound words in a compilation *Tangay Jhang Janday* by Prof. Sharib (شارب).

رتے رنگ دا پُہل ماہیا

دیکھ کے صورت نُون، گیاں دکھڑے بھُل ماہیا

Getting attracted towards the practices which are traditionally feminine e.g. sewing, stitching, embroidery and involving such practices into art could also be their way towards exploring the role and status of women in the society. These activities do define the nuance of a woman. It is so amusing that a simple craft of *kaḥāī* has become a source to state such solid ideas like feminism for these female artists.

M Anna Fariello as quoted by Dennis Stevens says that the craft activities like knitting, embroidery, sewing, stitching, needle work are the product of social or communal events. She considers waves of feminism which came one after the other a reason of establishing domestic craft activities as main stream art mediums (Buszek 50). These craft activities are stereotyped as feminine yet they were imbibed as a medium to express resistance against male chauvinism and male dominance. These domestic practices were used with all the intentions of radical force and female activism. This equation was built gradually during the phases of feminist movement. Each phase or wave can be categorized with a major advancement of this phenomenon. Last wave created loosely connected groups who were eager and did established crafting as a form of protest (51).

When art and craft movement of early 20th century gave importance to the value of a craftsmanship and make art an everyday experience, craft movement of 1970’s calls for a subversive reaction in the form of political protest against women’s liberation from a male dominating society. 1970’s craft movement was chiefly concerned with the mixing of the two. The two include the traditional craft practices and the modern culture. In a way there was an effort to re-present the traditional crafts as a means to reconnect the past and the present (ibid).

Although by withstanding the test of time kaḍhāī does have a status of its own yet however when an art practitioner engages it into the process of her art making that does uplift the status of this craft more either consciously or unconsciously. Hence this beloved craft of Punjab finds its new ways and avenues to continue into the realm of art. In our visible world a lot of time around us we find our eyes confronting the intersection. Some intersections are achieved by blurring the boundaries and the resulting effect is equally pleasing to the eyes. Art is an area where artists, since they have a license to break the rules, experiment and take risks. Those risks and experiments at times result in beautiful combination. Artists have always been interested in exploring possibilities. They like to give their take on whatever comes their way. In the beginning I mentioned that a craft of a certain area contributes towards making its cultural identity or historical significance whereas art of a certain area reflects the creativity and inventiveness of its inhabitants. Although it is a known fact that craft though looked down upon when compared with art however being a handmade entity has a worth of its own. This touch of hand and labor which is put into the making of kaḍhāī elevates its position. It is appreciated because of the handwork and finesse it involves.

Artist engaging craft into their work help exploring this domain that lay silent yet run parallel. This also helps to discover the potential kaḍhāī contains. This elusive identity and multifaceted property of kaḍhāī seems to be given rise to a freedom which is utilized by the artist of 21st century. I believe its mysterious and vague identity has helped the artist to grow on creative expressions to revive a silent activity by bringing it into main stream. Expanding horizons is always valuable. Even the downside of kaḍhāī emerges as a blessing in disguise. The laid out rules (which is a no no for an artist) in making of a certain craft activity come forth and help the artist to start on with his abstract ideas. Apparently it is little hard to imagine that pure and innocent craft like kaḍhāī could serve as a potential source of inspiration for an artist to create intense creative equations. As Marry Douglas says

Often times, 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).

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