

Threads of Visual Exploration: Textiles and Allied Practices

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Week – 08

Lecture – 37

Hello everyone, this is Rajarshi Sengupta, and we are here in the second instalment of our week on Textiles and Contemporary Art Practice in India. So, as we have already started talking about some of those examples in which we understand how textiles have been a crucial part of contemporary art-making in India, we will continue this discussion with this project by Nalini Malani and Iftikhar Dadi. And in this project, we see that I mean how it managed to sort of look into certain boundaries that we created in the post-independence era. As we know 1947 was a decisive moment for a number of communities and especially the communities who were there in the frontier provinces.



So, for example, both Bengal and the western frontier's [like] Punjab and Sindh region. What we see during ... this time [that is] with the partition of India during this time, two nation-states were created, that is, India and Pakistan. ... eventually, Pakistan was

made into East Pakistan, West Pakistan, and then Eastern Pakistan, [which] was then transformed into the nation-state of Bangladesh in 1970. So we find that during this particular point in time (after 1947), the map of the Indian subcontinent had gone through a radical transformation. With this transformation, we see a number of communities, perhaps like a lot of people in the Indian subcontinent, were affected by this partition. And we can see that I mean how these kinds of lines were drawn in terms of understanding the borders which were created (these newly created borders), how they have shaped the idea of communities very differently from how they existed before. So, those issues are something that ... [was] brought out by certain artists who faced this, perhaps like ... the trauma of the partition or like whose family was displaced and of course, like I mean they have suffered [in] this process of partition, which was a decision made by the colonial government. So, this is something we see that to be there reflected in this work called *Bloodlines*, which was first made in 1997. In this work by Nalini Malani [and Iftikhar Dadi]. Nalini Malani is an Indian artist whose family migrated from Karachi to Bombay during the partition. We also see Iftikhar Dadi, who was based in Karachi at this time and who (of course, after that) moved to the US to teach art history.... Iftikhar Dadi today is one of the very well-known art historians who specialises in contemporary art making in the South Asian context. So, we see that the collaboration between artist and art historian that had resulted in relooking at this map or not perhaps the map but then like I mean these lines, these border lines which they call as Bloodlines. And by bloodline, perhaps the indication is there towards understanding that the shared trauma or, like I mean, the shared experience that runs in the blood of all the communities in these frontier regions as well as in the subcontinent. And how the same bloodline that divides these communities. So that idea then we see that to be there, that is projected in these 16 square canvases. So, these panels that we see on the right side of the screen here (that is on display), so all these panels are then arranged in a particular way so that I mean this the map that Radcliffe created, and ...[which] is called as the Radcliffe line. So, this borderline is exemplified in the arrangement of these panels. Then we see that, I mean, except for these lines those are created, there is no other map that exists, but it kind of gives us a sense of what is there in the western frontier, what is there in the eastern frontier and the space in between is void. So, this kind of, like, I mean,

understanding, which gives a certain indication, but it does not really tell us the entire story; it is something that focuses on the borders and not in the land that sort of, like, I mean, stays in between. Now, then, we get into the details about how these lines are created and how these panels are created. So, we see sequin or chamki that is something that is used for making these surfaces on these panels. These panels, the way they are created, we see that there are those golden sequins here, and then, of course, like I mean, we see the bloodline or these border lines are created by these red sequins, and then there is this ultramarine blue sequin that is used for indicating water. So these ... three kinds of sequins are used for giving a suggestion of the land, (giving) a suggestion of the sea and, of course, the suggestion of the border line which is executed in red. So these are the kinds of aspects that are then sort of prioritised in making these borders (that we see). Sequin is something that is used in a lot of textile making. If we think about the cheaply made Zardozi textiles and then, of course, (like I mean) all the attire which are associated with bridal textiles, weddings or any kind of occasion. We know that how, in recent years, we see (at least since the 1970s and so on) how the South Asians sort of connect themselves with this kind of the glitters of sequins and how this kind of Zardozi embroidered works are then preferred not only in one country but in all these countries. So, for example, in Bangladesh, in India and in Pakistan. So, for that reason, we find this particular way of chamki embroidery that is there that exists in these three countries and appreciated by the communities in all these places even though there are many political differences or like I mean differences in terms of ... how one understand their religious identity and so on. But then this was something that was considered by the artist and the art historian (both of them or the collaborators) as a unifying way for the South Asians to come together. So the sequin embroidery and that is how textile again steps into this understanding about the divide and the connectedness between these communities, and that is how this discussion in which we see the bloodlines, the borderlines are sort of stressed. Then we also see the connected practices that perhaps, as I mean, even though this kind of borders exists, this connectedness is something that still flows as the lifeline for all these communities across these countries. So, this is the way in which we see again textile making; Zardozi making or using chamki or sequin in embroidered textiles has

served as a way for the collaborators to understand how the connectedness of these communities can be critically looked at by this artwork.



Then we also see that in textiles, there is a heightened sense of activism that is embedded. In some cases, we see how certain practitioners have focused on the textiles' role in activism in resistance and that has become a part of the discussion and debate in the contemporary art field in India. So, this is what we see on the right side of the screen. There are a number of these cloths (again untailed pieces of cloth), and which are worn in the lower part of the body by particular community members in Manipur and part of North Eastern India. So, what we see, I mean the Thangkul community members or the Thangkul women in Manipur and parts of North East India, what they wear and then how that was made as part of, like, I mean, this discussion or like the discussion on resistance by incorporating textile here. So, we see that these textiles which are called Luingamla Kashan (Kashan is this untailed piece of fabric that we see displayed here in this gallery space). So, all these Kashan are made by Zamthingla Ruivah from Manipur, and of course, she also comes from this Thangkul community. she was trained or she learnt weaving from her family and she continued to weave these Kashans. But then there was a particular moment in 1980s [when] a community member (the woman named Luingamla and was died while resisting her rape by the armed forces. Then Zamthingla

Ruivah decided to make a Kashan that is dedicated to Luingamla, and that is how this particular kind of Kashan that was made by Zamthingla Ruivah came to be known as Luingamla Kashan. This Luingamla Kashan is something that we see that is sort of characterized by this red colour (of course ... there are variations in the red) and then there are those vertical strips that we see in both sides of this Kashan and then there are horizontal or parallel lines usually there [will be] four sets of these horizontal lines that sort of ... pass through this Kashan. This is a textile that she started making to commemorate the death of Luingamla, and then at the same time, it's not just about commemoration, but it was also about remembering the resistance of this woman, her valour, [and] her courage. How she also sort of, you know, was attempted to be subjugated by the authority. So all those ideas we see them to be there much more symbolically represented in this unique Kashan that was made by Zamthingla Ruivah. So initially when she started making them and then there were also community members we see they came forward and started making songs about this sad demise of Luingamla. Then, at the same time, we see that these songs, the textiles, all of them became part of a larger performance by the community members (the Thangkul women) in Manipur. So from this time we also find that how there is a particular day in a year and that is around 24th of January (and in the left side of the screen we have the Thangkul Women's Association singing songs that Zamtingla wrote for Luingamla. This is something we see that I mean how all the women they from the Thangkul community they have gathered in a particular place to commemorate the death of Luingamla. It's not just the death of Luingamla but it's a reminder for all the women to be resilient, it is a reminder for the kind of atrocities that take place on women, particular community members, the minorities and everything. So those kind of aspects we see them to be there as when the textile initiated this discussion and the community members when they gather all of them they wear similar kind of this cloth that is understood as this Luingamla Kashans. The women come, and they wear this particular kind of Kashan, and then they gather, and it's a symbolic way of sort of being in solidarity with the deceased one, also with all other women who are still struggling. So, this is how we see how textiles, making textiles and then sort of involving the entire community to take part in activism is something that is exemplified in Zamthingla Ruivah's practice. So her practice was not necessarily meant

to be displayed in the gallery spaces but then eventually we see after the recognition of her work, after years of her work, then certain platforms they sort of decided to display this her discussions in the gallery spaces. If we compare these two images that we have on screen that one is during the performance and one is there displayed on the gallery walls. During the performances it gets a different kind of meaning when we see that the women from the community they embrace this Kashans, they also sort of embody this sad story and of course this empowering story of Luingamla. Then when all those textiles are then sort of separated from the community members and displayed in the gallery space, they gain a different kind of meaning in which in this white cube we see this bright red color, it sort of almost makes this ghostly presence of the ones who are not present there in person but almost that how their resistance that sort of resists the traditional display scheme of the galleries and then it sort of takes us in terms of understanding that how the community and art making and the contemporary art practices whether they can be hand in hand or there are frictions between them.

Now with these things we also see that when this kind of works are displayed in the gallery, it is not only about the differences between when the same object is used by the community and then when this is completely disassociated with the community and then displayed in a gallery space. But when they are displayed in a gallery space then it sort of attracts a different kind of audience to them and that is how we see that the resonance of this kind of stories can be sort of circulated outside of the community. In that way, like I mean, certain stories are then suppressed by the authority or particular kind of ... hegemonic system, we see that ... those ideas can also be spoken about in a different space when this kind of objects are displayed in the gallery space. So, in these issues, we see that what is the advantages and disadvantages of displaying certain kinds of community textiles or objects which are part of community practices in the gallery space. So there are pros and cons in both cases. Then what also happens in this case that something like Ruivah is someone who was not trained as a metropolitan artist. Something that I have already mentioned in the part of our discussion very early this week is that there will be people [I] will be talking about [among] some of them are metropolitan trained artists and then someone like Ruivah is not really trained in the

metropolitan art sphere. But then practices something that had resonated with the kind of activities and the endeavors that is prioritized in the contemporary field of art making and generating discussion about communities. That is how we see how certain kind of practices are then made part of ... the contemporary art making in India and abroad.



So this is another display of something like Ruivah's Kashans. Here we see these Kashans are there and then like I mean of course this is this very characteristic Luingamla Kashans and then later on she also came up with this rose Kashans and that was also in memory of another community member and who had also suffered the atrocities of the authority. So this is something we find that how certain kind of ... textile making and with this embedded idea we do not see that I mean there are figurative motifs that sort of narrates the story of this women this valiant women but then we see there are symbolic gestures in which like there are lines there are particular kind of motifs there is a particular way of arranging the composition and then the color balance and everything they come to signify the struggles of these women in a way that those are not really sort of spoken about in any other ways. So in this way, we see that Zamthingla Ruivah's practice did not completely depart from this traditional way of making the cloth for the lower body of the women in their community, but then it certainly made a departure. Because in the traditional set up, if we see that the fabrics are made for the entire community and then the motifs are something that is shared by a lot of community members. But then in this

case we see there is an almost personalised way of customising these motifs and making them much more contextual to a specific context. I mean it is not just about something that the entire community resonates with in terms of, like if there are deity figures, if there are belief systems and so on, but this is a very specific moment that happened in the late 20th century and that event is then commemorated by the way of lines, colours and the arrangement of motifs those are then implemented in these textiles. So this is how we see how there is Zamthingla Ruivah's position is almost in between an individual artist as well as someone as a community member. In the Dhaka art summit in 2018 when her Kashans were displayed we see that to be there in side by side with unnamed drawings by the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. In this once we see that some of these drawings that we have in the left side of the screen in which we see that there are figurative depiction of people I mean either they are in pain or like I mean the part of their survival is shown in by this very minimalistic way of drawing them. So this kind of like, I mean these issues that is still there a prevalent issue about survival, struggle, atrocities by authority and then like I mean the kind of the struggles especially there for the minority communities. So all those ideas are not just there in this Kashans but also there in other forms of art works for example, these drawings by the Rohingya refugees they are all sort of put together in one space so that one the viewers can see that there are parallels between people. Perhaps they are separated by the boundaries of nation state, perhaps they are separated by linguistic and cultural differences, but then there are also certain kind of shared experiences we see and to sort of people to understand that I mean this the relevance of one particular art object that can be the Kashans. that can be the drawing is not something that is just limited to these objects but when they are sort of put in relationship to one another then their relevance is heightened then we can see their relevance in many different ways something that is not revealed very easily. So this is how we see how this kind of art objects when the or like I mean this kind of objects when they are displayed in the gallery space they generate a discussion that is very different from when they are there in the community setup. Perhaps that is also one of the ways or one of the reasons for what we understand that why incorporation of textile or sort of like I mean having this conversation between textile and contemporary art field is something that is crucial.



Now we also see that this textile is something that has been part of research and practice. Some of the artists have been trained as both art historians and artists. They have incorporated textiles as part of their practice to either evoke a certain kind of memory or revisit certain aspects of history. But then also blurring the line between memory, history and reality. Of course, [including] what is there in terms of the arts' role in ... bridging the gap between them. By that, ... the art practice in this case, almost becomes a historical fiction or a fiction that connects these different dots. ... on the slide we have a display shot from this exhibition project that is called *Rivers of Blood*, and that was executed by artist and art historian Paula Sengupta in 2009, and it was displayed in the Chemould Prescott Road in Mumbai. In this project (*Rivers of Blood*), what we see is that Paula Sengupta had revisited her family history, which again goes back to the time of the partition and how her parents moved from the nation state of Bangladesh today to West Bengal, and then what all happened during this time. She is a second-generation person who had not directly faced the horrors of partition, but then certain things which persisted from their parents' generation, and how that still affects their understanding of identity, the shared notion of culture, and also the divide between these cultures. ... what Paulus and Gupta also sort of discussed is, how people in Bangladesh as well as in West Bengal after the partition [though] in both these places people speak Bangla, people eat fish and rice there are certain ways in which ... [some] intricacies that got involved and

with those ... certain ideas about ... identity are created in the subsequent years (during the partition, after the partition), making this kinds of issues very pertinent to how or where once identity stands. So here we see that ... there are those two closets which were created and in which two textiles were made. one is this army costume which her father owned, and then there is this Nakshi Katha that we see, which was made by her mother. So these two family heirlooms (as we can see) and those were made part of Paulus and Gupta's installation project as making these two closets for one for her father one for her mother and their different experiences about partition and then perhaps something related to domesticity, something related to exteriority and then how those things are then brought together with like I mean the general aesthetics of a cabinet and then all other textiles or the associated objects which are there. So, textile is something, as we know, that can be folded and kept in a bag or a trunk. We see those trunks there as part of this display here as well. So, trunks are something we see that is always carried forward by the people who are travelling, and instead of, like, taking big objects, and for the difficulty of carrying those objects, we see that in a lot of cases, textiles are carried forward with people. So that's the reason we also see how these kinds of textiles are then made part of the family heirloom. When Paulus and Gupta incorporated these textiles as part of her art practice then she did not just show these textiles as part of like history or she did not just show them as like those historical artifacts those are displayed in the museum but then made them as part of the life almost by sort of reintroducing this cabinet like structure and then of course that how the different objects which are associated with these textiles they can give much more context about the lives of her parents and their relevance in the society today. So, by this kind of arrangement, we see that certain objects are there from history, then she recalls specific memories or like I mean, certain oral narratives and makes them part of the display and then the way she sort of like I mean fabricates these cabinets is something that becomes part of making this historical fiction. So, textile plays again a very important role in terms of how this entire historic fiction is created.



She had also carried forward this idea about continuing this kind of historical fiction into her larger art practice. She comes from a background of printmaking. So printmaking, drawing, and layering all those ideas is something we see and how printing on textile is associated with printmaking and all these ideas we see them to be merged together when Paulus and Gupta look into textiles, study textiles and incorporate them into her own practice. So in her work we also see this boundary between something that is strictly utilitarian and something that is non-utilitarian as an art object is again sort of collided and this set of work that came from her ... recent exhibition that is called *The Porcelain Rose* and in this set of work we do not see direct use of textile but they are actually made on this layered rice papers. In this one, we see certain observations and research she had done on the Chintz or the Kalamkari textile or something that is then incorporated and made part of this discussion. Certain ideas about animating figures, certain ideas about movement, certain ideas about boundary, border and margins, all of them are then incorporated in the drawing, those are done on paper. So, on one hand, we see that she is someone who uses textile as part of the work; on the other hand, we see that I mean, how she sort of likes, I mean, after observing the knowledge about textile, how she is successful in terms of translating that on paper as well.

So, these are some of the ways in which we see that the artist today, the contemporary artist, has successfully demonstrated how differently textiles can be made use of in the field of contemporary art practice - for research, practice, activism and many other ways.

Thank you.