

Threads of Visual Exploration: Textiles and Allied Practices

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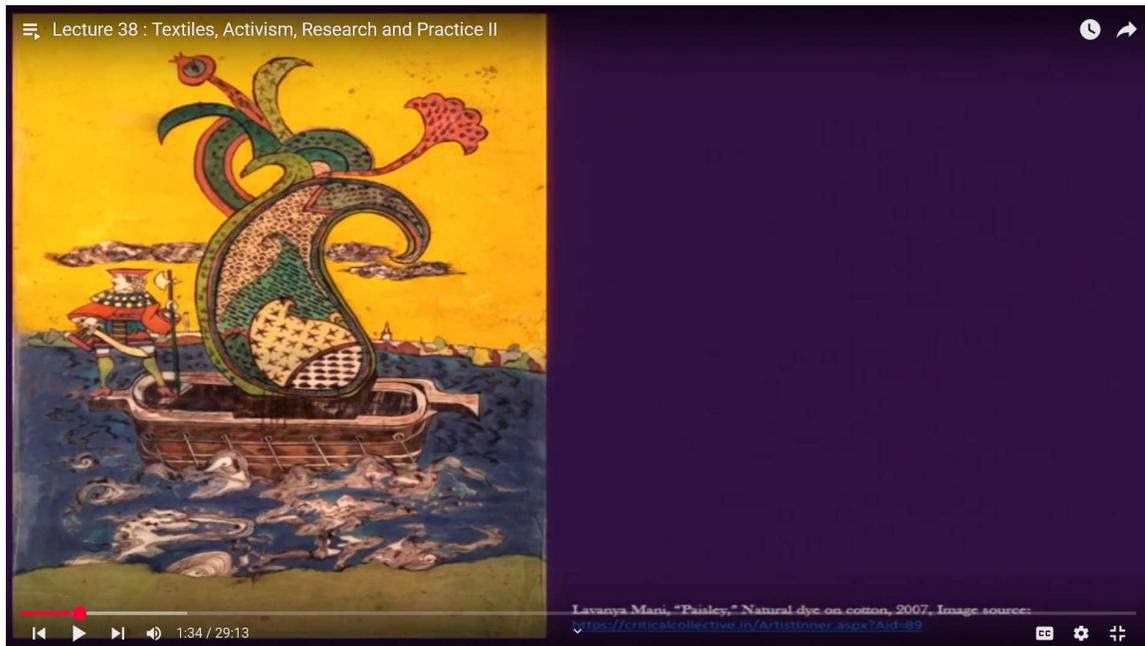
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Week – 08

Lecture – 38

Hello everyone, this is Rajarshi Sengupta and we are here in the third instalment of our lecture or our session on textiles and contemporary art in India. So, we have already started talking about the different approaches in which we see that the contemporary artists in India have incorporated textiles in their practice or have worked on textiles. So, continuing this discussion today, we will be looking into some of the works by Lavanya Mani. Lavanya Mani is an artist who was trained in this prolific art institution that was established in the post-independence era that is Maharaja Sajira University in Baroda and the post-graduation studies and everything which were sort of consolidated after the independence. So, we see that in this institute after studying Lavanya Mani had chosen to venture into certain aspects of traditional textile making. She chose to study in depth the workings of Kalamkari technique, dyeing and then how to paint with dyes or how to incorporate certain kind of textile techniques into her own works.



So the work that we see on screen, on the right side of the screen, is something called Paisley, and this is a work by Lavanya Mani. This is an early work by her that came from 2007. In this work, we see ... this motif, which we have already studied extensively as part of our study material, and in places where we spoke about Kanji Puram saris, we have spoken about the same motif as Manga butta, and that is this mango motif. By the way this word manga in Tamil is the root word for mango in English. So, what we also see that I mean the same motif we also have found in Bengali Kalka design and then also like I mean the same motif we have seen that came up in the Kashmir shawls and everywhere else. So this particular motif that we have, either it is called a mango motif, I mean inspired from the shape of a mango, or it can also be considered as something that is much more of an in-between figurative representation and an abstracted way of expressing ideas. So but this particular motif has always been in discussion. When it came to sort of like I mean the origin of this motif it had always sparked many debates that whether the motif had actually started in the Indian subcontinent or it was an import from the Middle East or whatever it is. Because we also see that during the early modern period and so on this particular paisley motif or this mango motif is also found in Middle East and one of the prolific or like I mean one of the most significant motifs that we also find in the Islamic context that is this cypress motif. The cypress motif sometimes is also like I mean the edge of it is sometimes bended and it kind of like I mean also comes similar to this mango motif that we have. So that is the reason there are many confusions for its origin. This idea of origin is also something we see theoretically that had been in much discussion during the colonial period because of the origin of races, origin of communities were something this ideas or this concepts were explored in depth in the colonial documentation. That was definitely not just for the pursuit of knowledge but it was also because of imposing certain kind of identity on particular groups of people and



the origin story always makes it convincing to make this kind of discrete boundaries for one set of people from the others. So, for those reasons we find that this origin stories have been crucial in the colonial documentation. of course not just in the field of visual studies or the way like motifs and patterns are documented, but it is also about the origin of communities and everything else and about the people. So considering all those complicated histories which are associated with this origin, this idea of the origin and when we map it back to this particular motif which had always been in discussion regarding its origin, so we can see that there are certain kind of overlappings which are happening in Lavanya Mani's work in terms of how we understand that this motif which has already created the confusion whether it started from South Asia, from Middle East and all and then the name Paisley that came from this town in Scotland and then the name of the town became synonyms during the colonial period with this particular mango motif. So that is how like today broadly this term is known in the world of textile studies and design studies. Still, then we know that I mean how does this particular visual scheme or like I mean this pattern that has its perhaps like I mean in roots in some other places than Western Europe. Still, then the name comes from Western Europe and this entire endeavour that comes to sort of represent a particular kind of knowledge making in which we see that there are many different visual signs or there are different kind of knowledge systems and then how those are validated by the Western European knowledge systems. The terms which are then today used for not only just this Paisley motif but then different kind of other motifs and signs and other knowledge bases, we see those terms are very much from the Western European sources and because of the obvious colonial influences. Through this motif we see that Lavanya Mani had ventured into this complicated history of colonialism. That is the reason what we also see here is this motif, it stays on a boat in which we also see that there is this character which sort of like sails the boat and the boat is sort of venturing through in the ocean or perhaps like I mean it is the mouth of an ocean. We see like I mean suggestions of land here and suggestions of land there. It sort of like I mean makes us think about those early modern trade connections through which we see there are conscious efforts in which certain kind of identities were constructed, certain kind of origin stories were constructed, be it community or visual motifs or the other objects. So this is how like I mean this way of

constructing identities, the way of constructing categories, origin stories, all of them we see them to be connected to the formation of this motif. What we also see here is this how the idea of travel and transnational connections which were also crucial to making of this motif or giving identity or shaping this motif in the way we see it today, all those ideas are then sort of put forward and juxtaposed in this image by showing the water body and of course like I mean the shoreline or the river banks and everything else.

So with all this when we also sort of considered that what kind of technique is used here for executing this complex image, we see that Kalamkari is also something that was historically produced in the Coromandel region and ... the Coromandel region had always been active in terms of this Indian Oceanic trade networks. Because of these trade networks we see the influx of foreign traders, foreign ships, for trade goods and cultural exchanges, those were pretty common in the Coromandel region and for that reason we also see this plethora of inter-regional, intercultural images in the Kalamkari textiles. So, this technique of making Kalamkari is already associated with and then Lavanya Mani sort of takes this idea about this intermingling of technique and this complex history of a motif together and explores it further in her artwork. So, by this kind of intervention what happens, we see that certain scopes which are perhaps not fully explored in the field of the utilitarian Kalamkari making, those things can be explored in the artistic explorations when the individual artist they come to sort of intervene. So, these are some of the ways in which we can see how certain textile techniques which are already existing and when the artists they either appreciate it, appropriate it, study it, research on it and then take that into the fold of their own practice. So, this kind of new ways in which the complicated histories of patterns, techniques and motifs, they emerge.

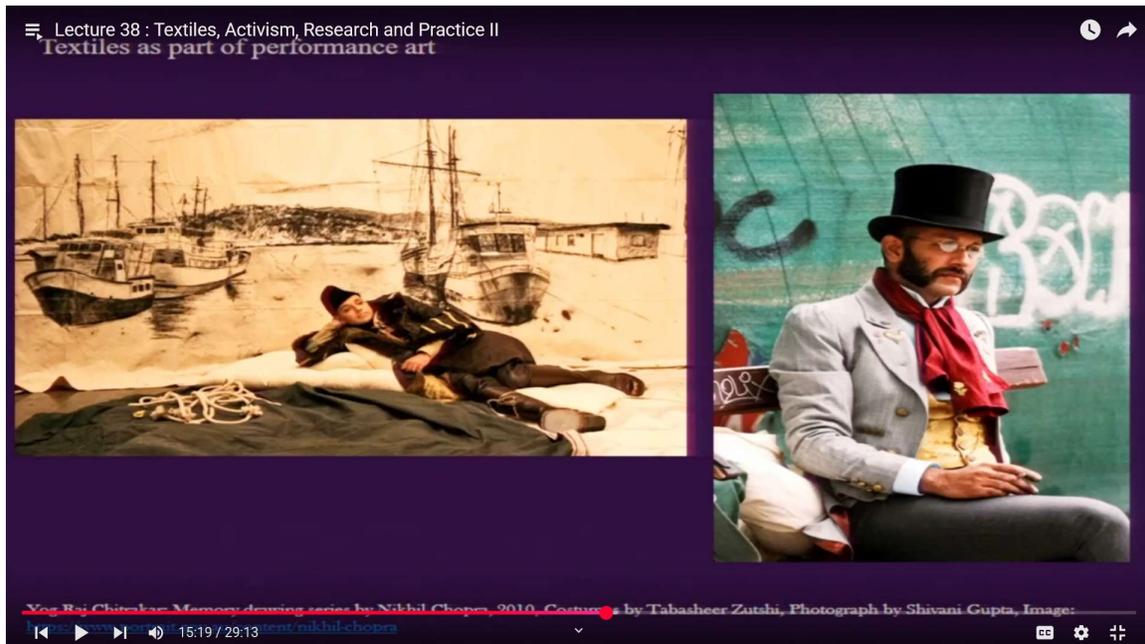


Display of Lavanya Mani's work as part of the exhibition "Stains on my Chintz," The Harrington Street Arts Centre, Kolkata, Image courtesy of the gallery

Some of the other works by Lavanya Mani, as we see, are from this group show called *Stains on my Chintz*, which was curated by Paula Sengupta in Kolkata. In this work what we see that there is this long horizontal panel that we have on screen (in the right side of the screen) and in this one we see again there is a map formation. Map is something we find that was related to the early modern explorers, the ambassadors, the map makers, travellers and traders who arrived in the Indian subcontinent for trading and also, like I mean, for different kinds of exploration and eventually, which led towards colonialism. So we see that how textile trade, trade network, map making, all those things are interconnected when we consider that how textiles like I mean this Kalamkari textiles, this particular dyeing techniques have always been crucial in terms of informing this history, this really intertwined histories of trade and then of course like I mean colonialism and the intercultural exchanges and everything else. So those issues we find them to be again coming up strongly in Lavanya Mani's work in which we see that some representation of topographical maps and then how that is then sort of complemented by other kind of map which we see perhaps in the left side of this image. So here in the left corner of this image we see a particular kind of this, a triangular or a conical formation that we have and this is Deccani rock formation if we remember that some of those kind of rock formations we have already studied when we looked into the Kalamkari textiles. This kind of diamond shaped rocks would be there populating the entire rock formation

and that is how the entire shape comes into being. So in this Deccani rock formation, which we already sort of associate with Kalamkari textiles, mostly with the tree of life motif, or like I mean, those large palampurs. So, in those ones the rock formation becomes an identity about the land. So, this particular way of showing the rocks in this diamond-shaped motifs and then having more motifs inside of each of those boxes and then together, how they construct this conical, this rocky terrain is something that we find to be a cultural representation of this land. It is not strictly topographical, but when we study this particular way of representing the land, it comes uniquely in the Kalamkari making and not in the other forms of textile making. So that is the reason what we find that this particular way of representing land it comes in contact with the topographical map which was also a simultaneous practice. If we consider that this way of representing land through this Deccani rock formation was prevalent for the Kalamkari makers and then if we consider that the topographical map is something that was prevalent for the European traders and travellers. So, we see how these two kinds of knowledge systems come together in Lavanya Mani's work. So, it is not one way or the other but perhaps it is the simultaneity of both kind of knowledges. Then these ideas are then further sort of complicated by incorporating applique. So in this works we also see that there are applique like I mean pieces of fabric which are then sort of made into certain kind of pieces which represent ships, perhaps trade ships and ... we see this compass, we also see like I mean the VOC, the Dutch East India Company motif and everything else. So, we know that I mean how strongly they indicate to the early pre-colonial or early colonial trade history in the Indian subcontinent. So, we see that the overlapping of technique for example the Kalamkari technique that happens on this fabric and then on the top of that we have the applique technique that is added to it. So this overlapping of the technique comes in relation to overlapping of these two ways of representing land. That is one way of representing land that comes from the Kalamkari makers, the other way, of this ... representation of the topographical map that comes in contact I mean that from the map makers, the chroniclers and the traders. So these are the ways in which we see that there is a kind of assimilation that goes on in Lavanya Mani's work. Perhaps this is also something we find that how many different ways in which memory, history, her own experiences, all of those things they come together in the guise of this established

narratives, either those are found in the colonial archives or in these textiles. So, these are the ways in which we see that the contemporary artists have incorporated certain kind of textile making and sort of taken the ideas of this textile making further by their own interventions and their own input.



So, with those issues we also find that there are some of the other ways in which textiles are been part of contemporary art practice and one of the issues would be to deal with the performance art in the Indian context. Now when I say that textiles as part of the performance art in the Indian subcontinent or as part of like I mean this contemporary performance art, I do not mean that the artist themselves, they call themselves as textile artist or something to do with textile, but then what we see in this particular kinds of performances that textile play a very important role. That can be in terms of how certain kind of works are executed or in terms of like I mean how this idea of performance is shaped. Now, if you remember that we have spoken about some of the salient features of performance art at the beginning of this week. So, we have emphasized certain characteristic features of performance art when it emerged in the North Atlantic world. Some of the characteristic features would be to do with ephemerality, which is how performance art is meant to produce a certain kind of work which are not going to stay for a long time. Then we also see that there is a clear distinction between performing art and performance art, and in performing art, we see that theatricality, and then also, like I

mean, all kinds of music practices, singing, dancing, and all percussion, everything that comes under performing art. Whereas in performance art, we see that the artist deliberately sort of makes certain kinds of gestures which are not strictly rehearsed, and that is the thing that, I mean, brings this idea about spontaneity and also a well-thought-out process. I mean this uncomfortable sometimes juxtaposition of spontaneity and a planned execution that comes together in the performance art. And so, we have discussed some of those features so far. Now, when we look into some of the recent interventions today, and at least I mean, of course, in the artist that we will be looking at today in the context. So we see that I mean they do not really strictly follow this kind of idea that the performance art would only create something that is ephemeral and everything will be destroyed afterwards. Or we do not really see that I mean they distance themselves from theatrical performances. But then we see that there is a much more kind of a fluid way in which we see this the tangibility of artwork that is brought together with the ephemerality of performance art. And then we also see that this staged performance is also something that comes up very strongly in this work even though the final result of it or like I mean the way the performance unfolds it does not really represent anything that is a completely orchestrated or rehearsed performance. So, this kind of like I mean similarities, differences between the early ideas of performance and how performance art is then carried out today by some of these contemporary Indian artists. And in all this, you know all the transformations that take place in the idea of performance and this border crossing, if we consider all these things, are somewhat dependent on textiles. So here we look into the works by performance artist Nikhil Chopra ... who also studied in MSU in Baroda. Then he moved to US for his further studies and then we see that he already had this strong inclination for drawing. He incorporates these drawings the way we see them here on the left side of the screen, there is this large drawing that is there in the backdrop of this man who is lying on the ground, and of course, this man is the artist himself. So what we see here in terms of that he is someone who does the drawing and making the drawing becomes his entire performance, and that is how he has been performing in various different places in India as well as parts of the globe. So this entire exercise of making the drawing, staying in a place for an extended period of time, visiting the studio for drawing each day and then going out, seeing the city or observing certain kinds of activities,

coming back to the studio and drawing them from memory is something that is exemplified in his performance. Now Nikhil Chopra's work also sort of looks into this idea about colonialism and how, during the colonial period, we find that this figure of artist travellers or the chroniclers emerged. Then how this artist travelers or chroniclers they seem to be much more sort of invested in documentation; [where as] ... we do not really see that kind of responsible act of documenting the people and everything that should have happened in the colonial context is missing. So, when Nikhil Chopra takes on this role of the artist chronicler or artist traveler then he sort of reverses this role and pays a critical eye on this kind of like this figures of artist travelers or artist chroniclers. So, with those interventions we find that he is also almost like a shape shifter that with each performance he sort of embraces a new identity and all these identities we find them to be there which are sort of like I mean shaped by his makeup and most importantly by his costume. So in this the set of works that we have on screen so the in the left side and the right side of the screen and all these works they come from this series that is called *Yog Raj Chitrakar: Memory drawing series*. Yog Raj Chitrakar is this fictional character he had sort of came up with and Yog Raj Chopra was his grandfather who was a landowner at the same time he was also a landscape painter and drawer. So what we see that he sort of embraces this identity this fictional identity of Yog Raj Chitrakar who travels to different places and embraces this different identities and then like I mean sort of carries out these drawings. So here we also see if we see the details of the work that the costumes are designed by Tabasheer Zutshi and then photographs are done by Shivani Gupta. So this is kind of in one hand we see that it is a staged performance in certain ways in which when the artist sort of embraces this identity and walks around in the city to reach his studio and then eventually gets to the work we see that the entire process is then documented and these costumes are also very carefully designed to suit particular kind of context and the context identity everything changes. For all these changes textile play a very important role.



This other performance that Nikhil Chopra carried out and it was a much more a recent one and that is called *Land, Water, Skies*. It happened during 2019-2020 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and then a follow-up performance and a presentation that took place at the Chatterjee and Lal Gallery in Mumbai. So what we see here is not just about his costume that is made of textile but then we also see that this large piece of textile he had sort of installed within this museum space in New York. Which by the way is a unique way of working which we have not really seen earlier and in which this artist stayed in the museum for nine consecutive days in 2019, studied the collection and then this way of documenting, separating or arranging the artworks in the entire museum space, [a] colonial mode of display and then what happened after the colonial period and so on. He sort of interacted with the viewers (the visitors) and then he embraced again different kind of identities. In this performance of course we see ... how he sort of embraces this identity almost like a chameleon or an animal, with this costume and walks around with the viewers and then picks up his drawing tools and start drawing on this piece of fabric and then the entire process of drawing making as (I have already discussed) is something that is experienced by the viewers. Then, at the end of the process, this entire drawing emerges. So we see that there are certain tangible outcomes of this process but at the same time that the drawing is not something that is displayed in the gallery or the museum as a separate art piece but the making of the drawing is

something that draws the viewers attention and it makes the viewer cognizant about the process instead of the final result. So this kind of ideas we find them to be there in Nikhil Chopra's work. In some cases we find that the tent like setup is also done and he had also sort of explained that why he likes this idea of a tent and that also relates to his idea of this travelling artist in which we see the travelling artist would perhaps put up a tent in a desert or a barren landscape to cover himself to give him protection and then sort of there he moves on. So, this idea of a tent or a travelling home which is made of textile is also something that is equally important to him as his costume or his identity. So, all those things that we see that I mean the tent, his costume and then like this large piece of textile which is then would be painted during this entire performance that he carries out. So, all those things are related to textiles. Considering those aspects, we can see how textile plays a very important role, a crucial role in terms of shaping Nikhil Chopra's performances.



The other performance I want to mention it here and that would be by Shilpa Gupta and which was displayed in the Venice Biennale in 2015-2016. In this one, we find how Shilpa Gupta had looked into the border line again, going back to the Radcliffe line, which came up in Nalini Malani and Iftikhar Dadi's work. So, in this one, what we see is that a fraction of this border was then executed by the making of hand-spun, hand-woven textile in the border town of Phulia in West Bengal. So Phulia sort of like if we consider

there is a borderline between West Bengal and Bangladesh, then Phulia remains in the West Bengal side, which is very close to this borderline and which is also very well known for making hand-woven textiles, mostly cotton textiles. So, we see how hand-woven plain textile that is there and then, which comes from this border town of a town which is there in the frontier in Bengal and then this plain hand-woven textile which does not have any stain or any line that comes to represent land for Shilpa Gupta. Then we see there is this performer, who is seated there with a table with a chair and a desk. It's almost like a colonial cartographer and who would use this carbon paper or tracing paper for drawing lines on the top of this fabric and this performance continued for more than a month and so this is something we find that how the idea of the textile is then incorporated as part of land and then this endless piece of textile that also comes to represent this thin border that sort of separates these two lands which are much connected through their culture and language but still disconnected by this border. So, this is how we find that the contemporary performance artists have also incorporated textile as a significant part of their exploration in India. Thank you.