

Translating Orality



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

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Talking Threads, Embroidering Memories: 'Phulhari' as Historical Narrative of Punjabi culture.

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And even I can remember

A day when the historians left blank in their writings

I mean for things they didn't know.

Ezra Pound (Draft of XXX Cantos)

No doubts, the voices recorded by the historians, the images captured in the historical documents provide a comprehensive perception of past. The outline of social and cultural spectrum of human civilization is framed objectively in historical narratives. Yet, the wide expanse of human reality in its myriad forms cannot be documented in historical texts. There are some silent spaces which speak only through the arts and crafts. The treasure trove of folklore, arts and crafts fill the gaps and speak volumes about the shared cultural experiences of a particular community or region.

The historical narratives provide a panoramic view of the socio-political systems and mechanisms which govern the human behavior, human relations and events. Meanwhile the preservation, restoration and interpretation of the heritage sites is the key concern of the study of cultural history.

Translating Orality



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2019-2020

The cultural history examines the culture of the time in order to explore how people made sense of the world they inhabited. The notion of culture as studied under cultural history is a symbolic representation of important events and practices as taking place in particular time. It also denotes the objects codifying cultural values and plays an important role in defining the cultural milieu of a particular community of region.

A simple artifact whether it is a vase, a painting or a little piece of sculpture or an embroidered textile represents a powerful connection to history due to its affinity with the historical context and background of the story that needs to be told. Selection of the proper artifact can transcend time. The storytelling power has nothing to do with the value, age or beauty, instead it is about making an emotional connection by displaying an object that crossed both time and space. We use these narratives of the artifacts to connect the dots of things that have happened, to identify hidden meanings within the series of events. As a matter of fact, the study of arts and crafts provides an opportunity to plunge deeper and deeper into the lives of ordinary people offering the potential for a richer study of human experience in the past. Memory joins hands with cultural history when traditional artifacts become the vehicles of memory to narrate the stories of shared cultural experiences. The paper attempts to explore ‘Phulkari’, an ancient needle craft of Punjab as a site where history and memory converge to give a comprehensive view of Punjabi culture.

I

Traditional creative arts and crafts have allured the world since time immemorial. Like many other crafts, textiles came into existence as a matter of necessity, but they have served as an evidence to

Translating Orality



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2019-2020

identify the cultural roots of a particular community. Underscoring the significance of clothes as repositories of history, Nobel laureate French Novelist Anatole France observed so minutely:

If I were able to choose one book from among the many that will be published during the hundred years after my death, do you know which one I would choose? No, I would not select a novel from the library of future, nor a history book...No my friend, I would select a fashion magazine to see how women will dress a century after my demise. And those bits of fabric will tell me more about the future of humanity than all the philosophers, novelists, commentators, scientists and scholars.¹

Like historical documents, the fabrics interpret and reflect the social and cultural milieu of their times. The colorful world of textile art has fascinated the scholars, art historians, anthropologists and textile experts to study enormous store of myths, symbols and imagery hidden in the weaving patterns, embroidery stitches and motifs. Indian textile art especially the art of embroidery tells innumerable stories which mirror the contemporary way of life. It has been practiced for centuries not only to adorn textiles for temples, houses, clothing and drapes for animals, but it also has a symbolic and traditional purpose. There are several specimens nurtured in the different corners of India like colourful Kutch embroidery of Gujrat, delicate and intricate Chikankari of Lucknow. Kashida and Aari of Kashmir, Kantha work of Bengal and Odisha, Phulkari of Punjab. Embroidery is a form of ornamentation which is the richest mode of expressing emotions and aesthetics through the usage of needle, thread and fabric. The historical documents do not speak much about the true source of this textile art. There are some scholarly accounts like W. G. P. Townsend's *Embroidery or the Craft of the Needle* (1907), K.S.K. Dongerkery's *The romance of Indian embroidery* (1951), S. Das's *Fabric Art: Heritage of India* (1955) Kamaladevi Chattopadhyia's *Handicrafts of India* (1975) R. Crill's *Indian Embroidery* (1999) J. Harvey's *Traditional Textiles of Central Asia*

Translating Orality



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Combined Volumes (3:2 & 4: 1)

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2019-2020

(2002) Jasleen Dhameeja's article "Embroidery: an expression of women's creativity" included in *Asian embroidery* (2004) which record the details about the art of embroidery which requires the use of needle, a primary tool either ordinary or of some special type. An ordinary needle though not of steel for its origins goes back to Paleolithic Europeans. Tools such as bronze needles as well as sculpted and painted representations of textiles enable us to trace the Indian embroidery tradition back to at least Mohenjo-Daro and the Indus civilization. It is interesting to note that in Vedic times the needle was considered an important item in the lives of people and it served as a symbol of joining and strengthening. In the most primitive times, the needle craft was practiced to mend and strengthen which later led to ornate and finally to the beautiful craft of embroidery.

Embroidery with its talking threads tells a lot about the aesthetic emotions, social and cultural values. Like a poem, the overall creation of an embroidered fabric tells a story that is larger than individual parts. Mittal and Kaur explore needle craft as the repository of the cultural heritage valorizing the labor of hand over the labour of machine. In imagining the nation as a community. Craft has played a crucial role to encapsulate a timeless tradition.² An intensive study of such traditional handicrafts holds the clues to the life in past. To quote Kamladevi Chattopadhaya, "to understand Indian life is to understand Indian handicrafts, or vice versa to understand Indian handicrafts is to understand Indian life."³

II

Heritage textiles like Phulkari, ancient needle craft of Punjab carry rich stories of cultural history. The word 'Phulkari' may conjure up a mental image of something 'flowery', a divine blessing

Translating Orality



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Combined Volumes (3:2 & 4: 1)

(ISSN 2454 -9495)

2019-2020

from the world of nature or something of ecological relevance but when it is read through the lens of cultural history, it become a powerful tool for bringing a historical narrative to life. The word Phulkari comes from two Sanskrit words “phul” which means flower and “kari” which means technique, denoting the technique of making flowers with needle and thread. Taken together, Phulkari means ‘flower work’. It is a form of craft in which embroidery is done over shawls and dupattas which were called Phulkaris and Baghs. A shawl with sparse patters of Phulkari work is called ‘Phulkari’, the shawl with dense patters is called Bagh, which literally means a ‘garden’, is a type of Phulkari. The word ‘Bagh’ (a garden) was used for embroidered cloth made in Peshawar, Sialkot, Jhelum, Rawalpindi and Hazara, which are now in Pakistan. The difference between the Phulkari and Bagh is Phulkari cloth is ornamented with embroidery and the base fabric is visible, in Bagh the fabric is so closely embroidered that the silk threads cover almost the entire ground, so the base is not visible. Traditionally, Phulkaris and Baghs were given to a bride as a gift at the time of her wedding. Kaur and Gupta observed that the Phulkari and the Bagh were used and embroidered primarily in rural Punjab. However, the traditional art of phulkari was more popular in the districts of Peshawar, Rawalpindi, Hazara, Jhelum and Sialkot in West Punjab, now in Pakistan, as well as Amritsar, Jalandhar, Ludhiana, Kapurthala, Hoshiarpur, Ferozpur, Bhatinda and Patiala, in East Punjab in India. Phulkari was also popular in the districts of Rohtak, Hissar and Ambala in Haryana.⁴

The actual origin of Phulkari is not known, some scholars refer to Phulkari being brought to India by the ‘Jats’ of Central Asia in ancient times. S.S. Hitkari, an eminent scholar and passionate advocate of Phulkari refutes this theory and believes that the khatri community of Sikhs and Hindus originated the phulkari. There are references to phulkari in *Guru Granth Sahib* and Punjab

Translating Orality



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

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2019-2020

folklore. Guru Nanak Devji in his recitations gives prominence to embroidery as an integral part of feminine duty. He recites in his scriptures -“Kadh kasida pahreh choli tan tu jane nari” implying that a woman establishes her feminine identity only when she knows how to embroider her own costumes.⁵ Historically, embroidery was perpetuated and formed as a part of social rituals. Wearing of symbolic phulkari embroidered odhini (head scarf) by the women of the household was part of the rites de passage of the Punjabi household. It was this ritual component that sustained historical tradition of embroidery.

In its present form, phulkari embroidery has been popular since the 15th century AD, but the art probably reached its zenith in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when it became the commercial. According to Beste Michael, “The commercial work only began in 1882, when Maharaja Ranjit Singh agreed the first export contract for phulkaris.” The dating of these embroideries poses a great difficult. In a seventh century text called *Harishcharitra* authored by Banabhatt there are references to people embroidering flowers on the reverse side of the cloth. The earliest available articles are Phulkari shawls and handkerchiefs embroidered in the Chamba style during the fifteenth century by Bebe Nanaki, the sister of Guru Nanak Dev ji (1469-1539), the first guru of the Sikh religion. These articles have been preserved in Sikh holy places in Punjab, at the Gurudwara Dera Baba Nanak in the district of Gurudaspur. Another shawl has been preserved in the Gurudwara Mao Sahib in the district of Jalandhar. It was used by the fifth Sikh Guru, Arjun Dev ji (1563-1606), when he married Mai Ganga. According to these theories and existing articles, it is difficult to trace the exact origin of traditional Punjabi Phulkari embroidery. There are several opinions about the origin of this craft. One school of thought opines that it is originated in Punjab

Translating Orality



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Combined Volumes (3:2 & 4: 1)

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2019-2020

in the fifteenth century. Another thought is that it belongs to Persia where a similar craft called ‘Gulukari’ was existed. There is no certain way of knowing which of these accounts is true since there is no proper documentation of Phulkari as a craft in history. The history and origin of the Phulkari are not well- known due to a lack of evidences and documentation. It appeared in written record for the first time in the seventeenth century when it was documented in the Punjabi folklore, Heer Ranjha by Waris Shah. The reason behind this could be that Phulkari was never used for commercial use. Baghs were never sold in the markets as they were only woven by the women of the house for their personal use. Initially Phulkari was a home-craft, a leisure time activity, crafted with passion for personal use or to gift it to near and dear ones and was never meant for sale.⁶ During colonial rule, these became part of gift basket locally described as Dali that were presented to the British and other high officials on Christmas and also as gesture of gratification. The Phulkari was often showcased in various international exhibitions across the world and was regarded as a treasured item when given to westerns as gifts. It is at this juncture that a domestic craft acquired commercial attributes as heavily embroidered pieces were brought by traders to be sold to the affluent at a heavy price. Some Scholars and textile historians attempted to collect and record the lost history of the magic of the Phulkari. In 1888, Mrs. Flora Annie Steel, a novelist and longtime resident of British India published an article in Journal of Indian Art about Phulkari textiles, its unique visual features and the social circumstances of the women who were engaged in this needle craft. Among other written records, Rampa Pal’s *The Phulkari, a Lost Craft* (1955) S.S. Hitkari *Phulkari: The Folk Art of Punjab* (1980), Harkesh Singh Kehal’s *Alop Ho Riha Punjabi Virsa*(2006) Neelam Grewal and Amarjit Grewal’s *The Needle Lore* (1988) M.Maskiell’s, article “Embroidering the Past Phulkari Textiles and Gendered Work as “Tradition”

Translating Orality



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Combined Volumes (3:2 & 4: 1)

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2019-2020

and “Heritage” in Colonial and Contemporary Punjab”, published in *The Journal of Asian Studies* (1999), Shabnam Bahar Malik. “From Silk to Synthetic Phulkari: The Long Journey of a Period Textile” published in *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* ; Michael Beste’s “Hopes and Dreams-Phulkari and Bagh Embroideries of Punjab”, First Published in *Hali Magazine* (2000) and Rajinder Kaur and Ila Gupta ‘s article “Phulkari and Bagh folk art of Punjab: A Study of Changing Designs from Traditional to Contemporary Time” published in *American International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* (2013)are to name a few.

Based on the available historical evidences and Punjabi folklore, it has been argued by an eminent textile historian, Jasleen Dhameja that this art might have been prevalent since the seventh century and somehow managed to survive in Punjab. With time, the phulkaris became closely interwoven with the lives of the women of Punjab.⁷ The main characteristic of Phulkari is the embroidery is on the reverse side of the cloth, so the design is automatically embroidered on the right side of the cloth. There were no pattern books or catalogues from which designs could be copied. Rather, these were passed from generation to generation by word of mouth and example. Thus, each family had its own characteristic style, and, with practice and experience, each woman was able to develop her own repertoire. Specially created designs varied from village to village or region to region in Punjab and were given suitable names descriptive of their form. The joys, sorrows, hopes, dreams and yearnings of the young girls and women who embroidered the phulkaris were often transferred onto cloth. For generations, they have been creating motifs into their costumes to tell the ancient histories. To quote Rajender Kaur and Ila Gupta, Phulkari “is a symbol of happiness and prosperity

Translating Orality



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Combined Volumes (3:2 & 4: 1)

(ISSN 2454 -9495)

2019-2020

and ‘Suhag’ (marital well-being) of a married woman. The traditional Phulkari symbolizes the hard and tough but colorful life of Punjabi women.”⁸ The maternal grandmothers take a great deal of, care, attention and pride in embroidering ‘Chope’ Phulkari to make it an exclusive gift for their granddaughters wedding. Being a daughter of jat sikh family, a pair of beautiful Phulkaris which I inherited from my grandmother brings forth feelings of cultural continuity and becomes a site of memory which reminds me not only of my grandmother’s narrative, but also of all those mothers who embroidered their care and compassion in a piece of textile and all those mothers who have treasured and are still treasuring these thread masterpieces for their daughters.

Traditional Phulkari was made of hand-dyed and hand-woven spun cloth called “khaddar” using high quality untwisted silk thread called “pat” with bright colours like red, green, golden, yellow, pink and blue. Black and blue shades are not preferred in West Punjab, whereas white is not used in East Punjab. The women preferred hand woven ‘khadi’ because the embroidery involved the counting of threads while doing the straight darn stitch. The coarse weave made this task easier. I observed that the pieces of small width, about 45 to 60 centimeters, were worked on separately and the two or three strips were joined together to form the required size. For embroidering a single Phulkari, an average of 50 to 100 gram of ‘Pat’ is needed and for Bagh 100 grams to 150 grams are required. The silk thread came from Kashmir, Afghanistan and Bengal and dyed in Amritsar and Jammu. Only a single strand was used at a time, each part worked in one colour. Shading and variation were not done by using various colours of thread. Instead, the effect was obtained by the dexterous use of horizontal, vertical and diagonal stitches. This resulted in giving the illusion of more than one shade under the play of light and when was viewed from different angles.

Translating Orality



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Combined Volumes (3:2 & 4: 1)

(ISSN 2454 -9495)

2019-2020

I visited many Punjabi families and had interesting conversations with elderly ladies. With a nostalgic charm for this craft, they shared their stories which had been told by their great grandmothers. They told me that the women used to make the traditional Phulkari of Punjab after completing their household work. They used to sit together in a group called ‘Trinjan’ where all women engaged in embroidery, as well as in dancing, laughing, gossiping and weaving. There are few women alive who can tell us what significance these lush fabrics actually had in their lives.

Recollecting her memories about Phulkari (which She called ‘Resham wala Kamm’ (work with Silk)), my grandmother used to tell about her daily spinning cotton yarn on ‘Charkha’ for weaving ‘Khaddar’ that used to be dyed and embroidered. She also told how the ladies used to select the colored silken threads ‘Pat’ bought from itinerant Afghani sellers, before deciding on the designs to be embroidered. She also narrated that as a young girl, embroidery had been a daily ritual. Each day, after completing the household chores and tending to the buffalos that each family had in their homes, she, along with her cousins and sisters, would sit in the village courtyard, singing and sewing. The time it takes to make a Phulkari also depends upon the design, pattern, and the expertise of the embroiderer. In the past, a single shawl took six to twelve months to

Translating Orality



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

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(ISSN 2454 -9495)

2019-2020



Dr. Kiran Deep with a phulkari artist

complete, which involved painstaking needlework by elder women of the household. When the girl got married, phulkari formed a part of her bridal trousseau. If a son was born to her, her mother would start preparing a *vari da bagh* (bagh of the trousseau), a gift she would present to her grand daughter-in-law. The bagh was considered a symbol of marriage; among the wealthy families, as many as fifty-one pieces of various designs were sometimes given to the bride. She, in turn, wore them on auspicious occasions. In some parts of the Punjab, it was customary to drape the new mother with a bagh on the eleventh day after the birth of her child, the day she left the maternity room for the first time. Phulkaris were also made for religious ceremonies or to be used on other festive occasions. A phulkari is also sometimes used as a canopy over Guru Granth Sahib. Many folk songs grew out of this expressive combination of skills and intense feeling.

Translating Orality



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Combined Volumes (3:2 & 4: 1)

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2019-2020

The embroidery was done in long and short darn stitch, which is used for innumerable designs and patterns. It is the skilful manipulation of this single stitch that lends an interesting and characteristic dimension to this needlework. While the stitch itself is uncomplicated, the quality of the Phulkari depends upon the size of the stitch. The smaller the stitch, the finer the embroidery is. Punjabi women created innumerable mesmerizing patterns by their skilful manipulation of the darn stitch. The geometrical motifs were used such as triangles, squares and vertical and horizontal lines with changing directions and the darn stitch with various color combinations. This enabled them to express their emotions in a visual form. The wonderful forms and shapes created by the simple lines and circles carry a meaning that lies deep in the embroiderer's heart. Kaur and Gupta discuss the symbolical significance of these geometrical motifs.⁹ The triangle symbolizes the holy trinity. The triangle represents the number three, which is a symbol of the past, present, and future, and the nature of universe in terms of spirit, mind and body. The circle represents the sun, moon and the earth because a circle has no beginning and end. It also represents the divine character. The multicolored abstract square of harmonious growth symbolizes the simple figures of peasants and has many variations. A square superimposed on a circle symbolizes reproduction, growth and fertility. The square and the rectangle represent equality, conformity and peacefulness. Several squares together look uneven, but it is a very significant design that is considered auspicious. Parallel lines create an effect of repetition and create an illusion. A curved line symbolizes water. A zigzag line symbolizes excitement and lightning. Maskiell also notes, "The embroidery ranges from striking geometric medallions in reds, shocking pinks, and maroons, through almost monochromatic golden tapestry-like, fabric-covering designs, to narrative embroideries depicting people and objects of rural Punjab."¹⁰

Translating Orality



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Combined Volumes (3:2 & 4: 1)

(ISSN 2454 -9495)

2019-2020

Nature provides many motifs for creating art. As the name Phulkari suggests ‘growing flower’, many floral motifs were created by women from their own imagination. Genda (marigold), Surajmukhi (sunflower), Motia (jasmine) and Kol (lotus flower) were commonly used for Phulkari and Bagh. Sometimes, the field of phulkari was embroidered with small patterns called “Butian”. Among the different fruits, santaran (orange), anar (pomegranate), nakh (pear), bhut (muskmelon), mango slice, and chhuare (dried dates) and among the vegetables, women used replicas of karela (bitter guard), gobhi (cauliflower), mirchi (Chili) and dhaniya (coriander). Jewelry and articles from the kitchen were also used as motifs. These included the velana (rolling pin), gadava (brass urn) half filled with water, and ghara (pitcher), the necklace, Kangan, Karanphool and Jhumka, different types of earrings, guluband different types of bracelets, nose rings, Tikka, Shingar Patti, Phools, and Rani Har with a pendant. All these articles were embroidered in a yellow-coloured thread to show they were made of gold. Other Phulkari motifs were taken from rural life, - For example, Shalimar, Charbagh and Chaurasia Bagh depict the Mughals and other gardens. Bagh that was embroidered with a red and yellow coloured flower was called Asharfi (mohur or gold coin) Bagh. “Ike” (ace of diamond design) came from playing cards. There were Dhoop Chhaon (sun light and shade), Lahriya (waves), Patedar (stripes), Chand (moon), Patang (kite), Saru (cypress tree), Pachranga (five coloured), Satranga (seven coloured), Dariya (river) and Belan (Chapati Roller) baghs as well. I met a eighty two years old woman from Mukatsar district Punjab who has Belan Bagh and she told that her grandmother in law presented her as ‘Vari da Bagh’.

In the conventional discourse on this traditional form of embroidery from Punjab, The four distinct styles are recognized: Phulkari, Tool di phulkari (on a lightweight fabric called tool) ; Chope

Translating Orality



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Combined Volumes (3:2 & 4: 1)

(ISSN 2454 -9495)

2019-2020

(embroidery done on red khaddar, which is identical on both sides) and fourth is Bagh. Chope and Suber were wedding Phulkaris embroidered by the maternal grandmother (Nani) when her granddaughter was born. The chope was made to wrap the bride after her last bath before her marriage. The bride wore suber at a particular stage of marriage ceremony known as “phera”. These were slightly larger than other types of Phulkari. They were a symbol of love, care, passion and happiness, were embroidered with red and orange color with bright golden yellow color. ‘Vari-da-Bagh’ was a gift to the bride by the mother-in-law when she entered their house, her new home after her marriage. It was always made on an orange and red colored khaddar with a single golden and orange colored pat. Vari means the clothes and jewelry presented to the bride by her groom’s family. The staunch advocate of Phulkari S.S, Hitkari collected more than one hundred specimens of this embroidery. There are different patterns of Sanchi Phulkari, Wari da Bag, Neel Patra, Sheshedar Phulkari etc, in his Collection. Other patterns of Baghs as Explored by SS Hitkari are: Bawan Bagh in which the base cloth was divided into fifty-two boxes with embroidery. Each of these boxes was embroidered with a different design made with bright colours. Darshan Dwar or Darwaza Phulkari used to be embroidered to offer at Gurudwara.

I would like to share one more interesting thing, a blue colored small motif on a Phulkari which I came across while exploring my Grandmother’s collection. Dr. Malik also found a proof in the book *Tana Bana*¹¹ and she notes, “in old Phulkaris and baghs, the use of colour blue in the form of a small flower to ward off the evil eye called Nazar Battu was also evident.”¹² All the colours and motifs used by the women for embroidering had a symbolic significance. . It can be concluded that the embroidered Phulkari and Bagh are the symbols of happiness, prosperity,

Translating Orality



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Combined Volumes (3:2 & 4: 1)

(ISSN 2454 -9495)

2019-2020

energy, fertility, peace of mind, harmony in creativity, purity and sincerity of a woman's mind, freshness of mind, pleasure of life, simplicity of women, a reflection of rural Punjab, liveliness and devotion.

III

The forgoing exploration bear witness to the fact that Phulkari is not merely a beautifully embroidered cloth but was an essential component of the life of an average Punjabi woman. Punjab, the land of five rivers, India's bread –basket vibrates on the cultural map of the world where its agrarian abundance is synchronized with its rich cultural heritage. The handicrafts like Phulkari serve as mnemonic triggers to initiate meanings associated with the status of women in society, their means of entertainment, the narratives of emotional bonding in families and the geo-cultural coordination. There are plenty of historical documents which record the inception and growth of Punjabi culture and provide a comprehensive perception of its glorious past. The memories wrapped in these Phulkaris and Baghs become the part of cultural memory. Phulkari as a site of cultural memory brings back the time of mystic origin of the story of talking threads, crystallizes the collective experiences of women folk of ancient Punjab and last for millennia. As a repository of Punjabi Society's collective memory, Phulkari preserves what the factual historical narratives cannot; it shows how it is felt to exist in a particular culture at a particular time. A meticulous analysis of the motifs, colours, threads and stitches rewinds the time and experience and this journey into the memory lanes inspires to bring back the lost vibrancy and vitality.

Translating Orality



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Combined Volumes (3:2 & 4: 1)

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2019-2020

Notes

¹ Anatole France cited in Robyn Gibson ed. *The Memory Of Clothes* (Taipei: Sense Publisher,2015), xiii.

² Ashima Mittal and Navjit Kaur . “Narrativizing Phulkari: changing Notions of Work Ethics and Apprenticeship (A Case Study of Punjabi Embroiderers)” Accessed February 18, 2019, <<http://cdedse.org>>

³ Kamaladevi. Chattopadhyay, *Handicrafts of India* (Indian council for cultural relations: New Delhi, 1975) 12..

⁴ Rajinder Kaur, Ila Gupta . “Phulkari and Bagh folk art of Punjab: A Study of Changing Designs from Traditional to Contemporary Time” *American International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*.5(1), December 2013-February 2014, pp. 35-43

⁵ S.S. Hitkari. *Phulkari: The Folk Art of Punjab*.(Phulkari Publication, New Delhi, 1980)23.

⁶ Flora Annie Steel ,”Phulkari Work in Punjab (.Journal of Indian Art 2(24) London,1988)

⁷ Jasleen Dhameeja’s “Bagh ,Phulkari and Sainchi: The Punjabi Women’s Creativity “ in *Indian Horizons* Vol,63 (2). April-June 2016.82-87.

⁸ Kaur and Gupta. “Phulkari and Bagh folk art of Punjab: A Study of Changing Designs from Traditional to Contemporary Time”. 37

⁹ Ibid 39.

Translating Orality



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Combined Volumes (3:2 & 4: 1)

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2019-2020

¹⁰ Maskiell M., “Embroidering the Past Phulkari Textiles and Gendered Work as “Tradition” and “Heritage” in Colonial and Contemporary Punjab”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 52 (2) 1988 , 361-388

¹¹ N. Bilgrami (Ed.), *Tana Bana: The Woven Soul of Pakistan*. Karachi: KOEL Publications, 2004.

¹² Shabnam Bahar Malik. “From Silk to Synthetic Phulkari: The Long Journey of a Period Textile”, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Bahria University, Islamabad, Pakistan. Vol 1 No. 16; November 2011
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