

The Poetry of Thread



*Guru bechara kya kare sabad na lage ang
Kahe Kabir maili gajji kaise jaage rang*

- Kabir

Thread as a metaphor has been used to speak of the universal truths of life in many philosophical texts of India. The Rg Veda spoke of the music of the shuttles used for weaving, and in this *doha*, Kabir suggests that the poetry of life cannot be awakened in us, if our garb is dampened with stains of shame.

The exploration of thread, especially in the Indian subcontinent, is aplenty. From tying threads with thread to resist the hue, or tying fabric with thread to prevent the dye from taking root, to knitting, knotting and hooking thread to create and embellish fabric, the repertoire is vast. One of the early marvels of thread, for me, was weaving fabric. That I could hold, fold, drape, cut, sew and more – from just thread and thin air was as fascinating as watching threads submit to the manipulation of a loom; moulding themselves to each other and hugging the space in between for comfort and cloth was poetry indeed. But the thread of embroidery is my passion. As I learned this art and worked with it, as an artist, for two decades now, I began understanding how and why embroidery has played such a significant part in traditional societies, and continues to charm the contemporary world.

The practices of making embroidery have changed, and more and more work is being done by the machine. I work primarily with hand-embroidery using techniques like Kantha, which have a long history in the embroidery tradition of the subcontinent, along with cross-stitch, couching and other sewing techniques. Thread-work or embroidery, for me today, is not so much about the perfection of technique as it is a medium of expression.

A few years ago I was mesmerized by marks in my tea cup; left behind after I had drunk a cup of *masala chai*. These marks came to represent feelings of embarrassment, guilt and shame that can mark the mind, and as Kabir says, prevent us from relishing the poetry of being. For the last seven years I have been using fabric, thread, photography and embroidery to explore this concept of stains. About a year ago, while teaching children art and making Christmas decorations, we made snowflakes. At the same time, I also read about the research of the Japanese scientist Masaru Emoto where he spoke of the perfection in snowflakes as being evocative of the purity of being¹. I delved deeper and discovered that this was also linked to the way our chakras respond to sound. While cutting out hundreds of snowflakes to decorate the room, I found my spirit being lifted by each unfolding of the folded and cut paper. It made me consider that if sound could alter the chakra formation, heal and recreate symmetry to align the being with higher consciousness, then the converse could also be a possibility – it seemed to account for my change in mood while creating those complex and symmetrically perfect snowflakes.

Working with this idea, I began cutting fabric that had been stained with tea, in the same way that I had folded and cut the paper to make snowflakes. And as I worked with this fabric, tacking it and then sewing, going round and around the fabric in concentric circles, with repeated, mindless movements of needle with thread, emulating the stitch of Kantha, I let the process unfold without pre-conditioned ideas of what would emerge. The running stitch in concentric circles led to the resultant fabric acquiring a strange tactile quality that was almost eerie. I didn't like the way it looked, I didn't like the way it 'felt' when I flattened it out and tried to imagine it framed as a piece of art. It was disturbing.

I pondered upon it as I stitched the layers of *mulmul* day after day and as its 'ugliness' grew with the stitching treatment. The slow process of sewing with its repetitive motion of needle piercing into the fabric and pulled out with the gentle hiss of thread – a ritual akin to meditation, allowed me to consider possibilities. I wondered what this ungainly fabric would look like if placed inside the tea-cup. Since the fabric had evolved from the concept of stains left behind in the cup, I was intrigued by what would happen if the dregs that inspired this project were returned into the tea-cup – albeit processed through a thread of engagement with warp and weft.

When I did this, it acquired a quasi-flower-like form. But, because the fabric had been cut in a square format, it didn't 'flower' effortlessly. As I wasn't too fond of the texture that had emerged with the Kantha stitching, I did something that I would otherwise be most reluctant to do. The hours spent painstakingly working with needle and thread on that 12 inch square fabric, were no longer precious. I was willing to destroy it. So, I lit a candle, and while the fabric was still arising from within the cup, I burned the edges where it seemed to appear 'flower-like'. The soot of burned cotton added to the ridges of layered Kantha. The brown hues of tea were smudged with the grey and black of soot. It should have made it look uglier, but ironically I found that this emerging form resonated better with me. Thereafter the formalization of the flower came into being, where I cut and sewed and wired it to hold up the 'petals'.

It was interesting to see the '*chai ke daag*' thus blossom. Evocative of stains on the mind, the '*daags*' had transformed through an intuitive process of stitching, cutting and burning. Now, not unlike a flower in bloom, the stained fabric seemed to have evolved beyond judgement of self, with a potential to transcend cloth per se.

The marks remained; soot and charred cotton were added to them, but what had changed was the way that these 'stains' were now capable of being perceived. In being able to present them as a

¹ The Hidden Messages in Water

'flowering' form, opened up the possibility of considering that in themselves, words of judgement meant nothing. It is what we feel about ourselves, when words are spoken that diminish us, giving rise to the ideas of embarrassment, guilt and shame, which are the essential stains.

Through this process of exploring stains of shame, through my art, I found myself also being liberated by marks that had till then inhibited me and my being. It hasn't been a miraculous process, but one of consciously working with the idea, with me as the specimen of the experiment and also the laboratory. Gradually, as the mind healed it expanded in consciousness, and so did my potential as a human being.

Thread as a metaphor, inherited and passed-on through the wisdom of the Vedas, Kabir and many other poet-saints, inspired this exploration of '*daag*' or the '*maili gajji*' in contemporary times. 'Patterns of Transformation' is a flower in 'bloom' which, though still bearing the marks, has evolved. Where, through the poetics of thread, the fabric embraces its stains and thus transcends the inhibiting limits of them.

Who'd ever have thought
this cloth stained
would fashion a flower

It's a blossom, no less
yet in fragrance
waft the dregs of shame
The marks never fade
but in perceptions' change
the spirit blooms
again
and again

Gopika Nath

IMAGE DETAILS:

Title: Patterns of Transformation

Size: height 7 inches x width 9.5 inches [framed 8 inches x 11.5 inches]

Material: Mulmul fabric, cotton-polyester thread, ceramic cup and saucer [store bought]

Technique: Layering, cutting, stitching, burning

