



Somedutta Mallik is a curator and researcher currently pursuing a PhD programme at Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur, India. She received her post-graduation degree in Art History and Visual Studies from Sarojini Naidu School of Arts and Communication, University of Hyderabad in 2017. Her current research interest lies in the embodied knowledge of handloom weaving, the transmission of artisanal knowledge, and the role of sensory experiences and non-verbal communication in learning artisanal skills.

She designed and curated several exhibitions as the curator of Dhi Artspace Gallery, Hyderabad. 'A Voice to a Voice', the seventh edition of the International Print Exchange Programme (IPEP) India, was curated by her.

Speaking through Objects

How weavers remembered and recollected their everyday narratives at Suraiya Hasan Bose's Workshop in Hyderabad

Somedutta Mallik

Abstract

My ethnographic study at textile entrepreneur late Suraiya Hasan Bose's weaving workshop in Hyderabad, between 2016 and 2017, entailed observing the weavers at work and listening to their narratives related to the workshop, which were, more often than not, fragmented and inconsistent in nature. *House of Kalamkari and Durries*, as the weaving unit was named, was a house not only of female weavers, apprentices and master weaver Omer Sahab, but also of a number of handlooms, tools used in weaving and spinning, cotton, silk and zari yarn and several old fabric pieces of himroo, mushroo and jamawar weave that served as reference for new designs. The human entities spent their time in the workshop in connection to the material objects and the former developed a complex, layered relationship with the latter over the years, which is the focus of my study in this paper. Some of the concerns I will address here are: How do the sensory engagements with the objects and tools develop the material understanding in the weavers and gradually create their material memory? In which ways are objects with collective or personal attachments instrumental in evoking specific memories and bridging the gaps between fragmented narrations? Drawing on anthropologist Alfred

Gell's idea of agency of artworks and oral historian Aanchal Malhotra's proposition on the connection between material memory and senses, I will explore the above-mentioned issues and questions in my essay.

Key words: *Material memory, objects, sensory experience, weaving, narratives.*

Introduction

Sitting under the architectural grids of the draw looms, surrounded by the spools of cotton and silk yarns, while the rhythmic beats of the reeds filled the otherwise noiseless room, I started my journey as an ethnographic researcher of artisanal practices in Hyderabad.⁸ This was in August 2016, in the Durgah locale in Hyderabad, when the weaving workshop of the *House of Kalamkari and Durries*, run by textile revivalist and entrepreneur late Suraiya Hasan Bose⁹ (or Suraiya Apa as she was fondly called), was still a must-go place for every textile enthusiast visiting the city. Beginning from 2016 to 2017 and later from 2018 to 2021, until the last days of the workshop, I visited that place time and again in short intervals and conversed with the different stakeholders there, initially as a student-researcher and later as an old acquaintance. My study entailed observing the weavers at

⁸ *I did this ethnographic study as part of the MFA programme (2015-2017) at the University of Hyderabad under the guidance of Dr. Baishali Ghosh.*

⁹ *Suraiya Hasan Bose was born in an elite family in Hyderabad in 1928 to Badrul Hasan and Kubra Begum. Her father and uncles were greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's ideas of self-sufficiency and joined the Khadi movement. Cottage Industries Emporium in Hyderabad was established by Badrul Hasan where Suraiya Apa later started her career in sales. During her time in Delhi, she closely worked with personalities like Pupul Jayakar. In 1970s, Suraiya Apa's uncle Abid Hasan Safrani, who was a diplomat and close confidant of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, bought a vast land in Hyderabad and invited his niece to join him. Suraiya Apa then moved back to Hyderabad and started agriculture and a few years later an export business of Kalamkari textile and durries. Gradually, her love for handloom weaving directed her into textile revivalism.*

work and listening to their narratives related to the workshop, which were more often than not fragmented and inconsistent in nature. *House of Kalamkari and Durries* was a house not only of female weavers, apprentices and master weaver Syed Omer¹⁰ (or Omer Sahab), but also of a number of handlooms, tools used in weaving and spinning, cotton, silk and zari yarn and several old fabric pieces of himroo, mashru and jamawar weave that served as the reference for new designs. The human entities spent their time in the workshop in connection to the material objects and the former developed a complex, layered relationship with the latter over the years, which is the focus of my study in this paper. Some of the concerns I will address here are: How do the sensory engagements with the objects and tools develop the material understanding in the weavers and gradually create their material memory? In which ways are objects with collective or personal attachments instrumental in evoking specific memories and bridging the gaps between fragmented narrations? Drawing on anthropologist Alfred Gell's idea of agency of artworks and oral historian Aanchal Malhotra's proposition on the connection between material memory and senses, I will address these questions in this essay.

A house for people, a house for things

Coming from a family that followed Gandhian ideologies and actively took part in the Indian nationalist movements, Suraiya Apa was always an advocate of handloom weaving. The enriching experience of working with legendary figures such as Pupul

¹⁰ Syed Omer was a master weaver of himroo weave, who learned the craft as a young boy from the weavers from Aurangabad and practiced throughout his long career of nearly six decades. His expertise was recognised by the Government of India when he was awarded the National Award for Master Craftspersons and Weavers in 2005 and Sant Kabir Award in 2009. Syed Omer, Master weaver, interview by the author, Hyderabad, August, 2017.

Jayakar and Martand Singh shaped her career in textiles. In the mid 1980s, Suraiya Apa, alongside her successful business of kalamkari fabrics and durries, set up a weaving workshop in the Dargah locality near Golconda, Hyderabad. This allowed her to revive the weaving traditions of handwoven Indo-Persian textiles like himroo, mashru, paithani and jamawar in her workshop. Starting with a few paithani and himroo looms Suraiya Apa invited Abdul Qadir, Munaf, Ajmal and Omer Sahab, the skilled himroo weavers to work at her workshop and take charge of training the girls and women of humble background from the neighbouring locality. Over the years, more looms were installed, many women joined the workshop, and the old masters retired as their advanced age did not allow them to continue the tedious practice of weaving. When I first visited the weaving unit back in 2016, uncertainty about the future of the space and the business was looming over already. Most of my interactions during that time were with experienced weavers like Nasrin Begum (or Nasrin Apa), Sheshamma, Hashmat Begum (or Hashmat Apa), D. Shobha (or Shobha Aunty), Jasmine, the young apprentice, and Omer Sahab, the old master weaver who was trying hard to outdo his age and keep the weaving unit alive by guiding the weavers with his decades-long experience.

The workshop that welcomed the textile enthusiasts, researchers, connoisseurs and students alike was an intriguing space for making, learning and sharing knowledge. The imposing wooden structures of the looms used to partially conceal the figures of the weavers engaged in weaving, warping and spinning (Fig. 1). With their vertical and horizontal wooden poles and planks the looms appeared to be small structures that quite literally and metaphorically sheltered the weavers by offering them a respectable and modest livelihood. The weaving instruments and tools in the workshop, therefore, became a part of these weavers' professional life and practice. During one of my many recorded conversations with Nasrin Apa, I inquired about the history of a draw loom lying idle next to hers and her recollection of that himroo loom, which previously served as a jamawar loom, was full of technical details and her material



Fig. 1 Nasrin Apa and Shobha Aunty work on a draw loom, November 2016, Hyderabad, photographed by the author.



Fig. 2 Omer Sahab in front of the collection of old fabrics in the workshop, March 2017, Hyderabad, photographed by the author.

engagement.¹¹ For instance, she considered that the main difference between a himroo and jamawar weave was that in the previous technique, the pressure was shifted from one pedal to another by pressing it with toe only after the cotton

weft passed through the warps, while in case of the latter, the pedals are pressed after passing the silk yarn, used for design, as well as after throwing the shuttle of the cotton weft. This penchant of craftspeople to remember and articulate things through their material engagement is what historian of Science Pamela H. Smith termed as "material language". "[A]rtisans might see reality as intimately related to material objects and the manipulation of material, which could be thought about and understood as a "material language"."¹² These sort of narratives with material specifications were very common while the weavers at Suraiya Apa's workshop told their stories. Another weaver Sheshamma shared her journey: from growing up in a weaver's family, learning to weave *pattu* (silk) saree as a girl and then joining Suraiya Apa's weaving unit and getting trained in himroo weave (made with cotton and silk yarn) and finally trying her

¹¹ Nasrin Begum, interview by the author, Hyderabad, April, 2017.

¹² Smith, *The Body of the Artisan*, 8.

hands in weaving cotton durries when the durrie loom was installed in the workshop.¹³

Objects that speak While the women weavers and apprentices were busy in different phases of the weaving process, Omer Sahab, the national awardee master weaver, would be seen sitting at a small wooden frame and engrossed in making *jala* (graph for the designs). Then in his 70s, Omer Sahab was always surrounded by the old fabric pieces, which he used to refer to for developing new designs. Most of these old himroo, mashru and jamawar sherwani, pajama among other costumes and fabric pieces were collected by Suriya Apa and Omer Sahab from old markets of Hyderabad, and aristocrats acquainted with Suraiya Apa (Fig. 2).¹⁴ Some pieces also came with Omer Sahab as he collected them from his earlier workplace at the Furnishing and Allied Fabrics Industrial Co-operative Work Centre Ltd. (henceforth Centre) in Amberpet, Hyderabad. Every conversation with him at some point led to picking up certain old pieces, running fingers on the tattered threads and discussing their designs, colours or history. In Fig. 3 Omer Sahab can be seen holding a himroo sherwani and his right index finger points to the small woven motifs of the fabric. Both the sides (inside and outside) of the piece are visible in the photograph, which gives a precise idea about the technique of extra weft weaving of himroo fabrics. Omer Sahab had the habit of going back to his collection of historical pieces and old designs whenever asked about the techniques, designs or the source of the collection. Even while sharing his journey from being a young apprentice to a master weaver or any other personal narratives, he would often refer to certain pieces to recollect the chronology of events. In the middle of one such conversation he picked up a himroo fabric, which, he informed me, was woven for Zhou Enlai,

¹³ *Sheshamma, interview by the author, Hyderabad, April, 2017.*

¹⁴ *Syed Omer, interview by the author, Hyderabad, November, 2016.*

the Premiere of the People's Republic of China.¹⁵ During his visit to India before the Sino-Indian War (1962) this fabric was presented to him. Exclusively woven for this foreign dignitary in the Centre, Omer Sahab recollected the enthusiasm with which it



Fig. 3 Omer Sahab holds an old himroo textile, March 2017, Hyderabad, photographed by the author.

was collectively designed and made in his former workplace and how he managed to save a piece of that special fabric with him all these years. For a moment I am not considering the factual history of this event, rather considering it as

an anecdote. Fig. 4 shows the remaining piece of the himroo textile. It had a repetitive motif grouped with a Latin 'C' and a crown flanking a tree. In some cases, the 'C' appears in its mirror-image. The border is also visible in the photograph which looks like a mesh pattern with red dots at the crossing points. Though Omer Sahab mentioned that the piece was woven with the threads of seven different colours of the sky (he might have meant VIBGYOR of the rainbow) I could only see six colours including the white of the base. ^[OBJ]This particular conversation with Omer Sahab shows how individuals often create narratives around objects, and the biographies of the latter merge with those of the former. Philosopher Elizabeth V. Spelman writes in "Repair and the Scaffold of Memory", a chapter from the book *What is a City?*

¹⁵ Syed Omer, *interview by the author, Hyderabad, August, 2017.*

Rethinking the Urban After Hurricane Katrina edited by Phil Steinberg and Robert Shields, "Objects provide a scaffold for memory, in the sense that they provide a kind of platform through which memories are reached for guiding structure through which the past is recalled..."¹⁶ And thus, they hold certain power or agency. The reason why^[OBJ] anthropologist Alfred Gell considered the artefacts or objects as secondary agents "Art objects are not 'self-sufficient' agents, but only 'secondary' agents in conjunction with certain specific (human) associates."¹⁷



Fig. 4 The himroo fabric that was exclusively designed and woven for Zhou Enlai, October 2016, Hyderabad. photographed by the author.

While Spelman acknowledges an object's ability to trigger memories and create narratives of the past, oral historian and author Aanchal Malhotra takes a step further and considers the physicality and the sensory experience of an object as a catalyst

¹⁶ Spelman, "Repair and the Scaffold of Memory", 145.

¹⁷ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 17.

for forgotten events. In her debut book *Remnants of a Separation: A history of the Partition through Material Memory*, Malhotra writes, "Thus we see that as the years have passed, memory has settled into objects in such a way that they have become the only physical evidences of belonging to a certain place at a certain time. The object expands to transcend its own physicality, creating a tangible link to an intangible place or state of being."¹⁸ Omer Sahab's way of using the textile pieces as tools in his storytelling not only connected these objects to his biography or the workshop's history of nearly four decades, but also put them in a much broader context of the history of these Indo-Persian weave.

Conclusion

After Omer Sahab's and Suraiya Apa's demise, now that the workshop ceases to exist, these stories shared by the weavers about the workshop appear more significant in order to remember and recollect the history of the *House of Kalamkari and Durries* as well as Suraiya Apa's immense contribution to the revivalist project of Indo-Persian textiles. The old looms, tools used in weaving and spinning, spool of yarn and other objects have been sold and distributed, which makes it impossible to reconstruct the past through tangible objects. But the stories and photographs that I collected over the years can still provide an idea about the character of the workshop, and the complex relationship between the human agents and the objects in the setting of the weaving unit.

¹⁸ Malhotra, *Remnants of a Separation*, 27.

References

Gell, Alfred. Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Malhotra, Aanchal. Remnants of a Separation: A History of the Partition through Material Memory. India: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2018.

Smith, Pamela H. The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Spelman, Elizabeth V. "Repair and the Scaffold of Memory." In What Is a City?: Rethinking the Urban after Hurricane Katrina, edited by Phil Steinberg and Robert Shield, 140-153. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2008.