The fashion diplomacy and trade of Kashmir shawls: Conversations with shawl artisans, designers and collectors.

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We travelled to the semi rural outskirts of Srinagar in Kashmir to the home of Muneer, a kani shawl weaver. In a small room on the third floor of his house Muneer sat side by side with his friend Hamid at their loom. Each weaver worked pulling small sticks wound in pashmina threads through the weft while carefully referring to a paper tucked under the warp threads on the loom. The woven design on kani shawls is formed by the manipulation of small wooden sticks called tojis that interlock different coloured threads to complete each weft of the shawl. The pashmina threads are used to work the ‘twill tapestry’ pattern. The design plan is on a piece of paper called a talim that is placed beneath the warp in view of the weaver. Each line on the talim consists of numbers and symbols (a shawl alphabet)\(^1\) representing each stage of the weaving: the increase or decrease of colours, or the changes in their places necessary to produce the required patterns and motifs of the design.

Muneer and Hamid weave a kani shawl together
*Photograph by Deborah Emmett*

Muneer learnt the skill of weaving kani shawls from his uncle. Although he has completed a formal school education he prefers to pursue this traditional weaving craft. When we visit Muneer and Hamid they are working together on one shawl but at other times they work on separate shawls. About one inch of a shawl is woven each day and will take a year to complete. A wealthy Indian woman, a collector, has commissioned the kani shawl that Muneer is currently weaving. The skill of weaving kani shawls had almost been lost in Kashmir but due to their

increased popularity as a fashion accessory in recent years there’s been a revival in kani weaving from government-supported and private enterprises.

In the same locality as Muneer lives Raja with his wife and two young children. We walk through rice fields to his small home where in one room he sits working on his shuttle handloom weaving a pashmina shawl. It takes him up to five days to thread up the loom, the warp in either natural or dyed pashmina threads. Raja weaves around four inches per day and he will make the entire shawl to maintain weaving consistency. Raja was at school during the 1990s but due to the militancy unrest in Kashmir he left and followed his father and grandfather in learning the skills of weaving.

The acquiring of skills for particular textile techniques from family members or by apprenticeships is not uncommon throughout the traditional textile communities in India. But while from my earlier research I found many textile artisans feared that their craft would be lost due to diminished markets and lack of interest from their educated children the handcrafted shawl industry in Kashmir continues to thrive. Historically there has been extensive documentation about the shawls from Kashmir and those who collected them but I am also interested in the contemporary Kashmir shawl industry: the artisans who design and create them and those who still value the acquisition of a hand woven pashmina shawl.

Kashmir shawls have always been textiles that epitomize luxury, quality and exclusivity. This association is primarily because of the softness and fineness of the pashmina fibre itself while practically providing warmth for the wearer. Unwoven pashm fibres are bought from Changpas (goat herders) who live in the eastern regions of Ladakh. The Changpas comb the fibres from the goats once or twice a year depending upon growth. The finer the fleece the whiter the fibres are. Brokers go to the herders’ villages and buy the raw pashmina that is then taken to Srinagar and bought by pashmina shawl merchants. Pashmina is also known as cashmere.
The relationship between luxury and value varies driven by market forces and is rooted in cultural conventions. In ‘The Kashmir Shawl’ Frank Ames suggests that Kashmir shawl weaving was not derived from a folk art like nomadic carpets, kilims or Indian embroideries but for an expanding commercial market that developed over three hundred years when Kashmir had four different consecutive periods of foreign political rule – the Moghuls, the Afghans, the Sikhs and the Dogras. Each period had its influence on the designs of Kashmir shawls.

Existing shawl fragments suggest that the shawl industry in Kashmir came into existence in the late sixteenth century developing under the rule of Mirza Haider Dughlat. He encouraged many of the arts of Kashmir and is said to have introduced the concept of using pashm from Ladakh to be woven into shawls by the expert craftsmen of Kashmir who had previously used sheep’s wool. During the Mughals rule (1586-1753) Kashmir enjoyed brisk trade in shawls being geographically situated along the trade routes of Central Asia. Emperor Akbar, son of Mughal dynasty founder Babur, invaded Kashmir in the late 1500s. The Mughals introduced the paisley or buta motif to artisans in northern India at this time. During his 19-year rule Akbar took a personal interest in the Kashmiri shawl weaving industry. The shawls, woven by men for men to wear, had plain centres with buta border designs. Fine pashmina shawls were draped over the shoulder, a fashion started by Akbar. Court records show that he presented pashmina shawls as prestigious gifts to nobility and other dignitaries, a custom that continues until present day in India.

The influence historically of the ruling nobility on fashion cannot be underestimated and perhaps can be compared with celebrity endorsement selling power on fashion today. A new shawl design that caught the eye of an Emperor often found immediate popularity among his followers and the nobles of the court. According to Frank Ames, “When the Mughal ruler Muhammud Shah (1720-1742) was presented with a shawl of a fascinating floral design he ordered 40000 rupees worth of this design be provided to him annually… the shawl came to be called ‘Buta Muhammud Shahi’.”

Parul Bhatnagar observes that the meaning of motifs used in Indian textile designs varies in accordance with changed historical circumstances therefore it reflects tastes and preferences, fashions and requirements of the groups of patrons, through variations in forms and styles. In her article ‘From Pinecone to Paisley: The Ubiquitous Boteh’ Christina Sumner discusses the evolution of the boteh (buta or paisley) in Kashmiri shawl designs. Later during the Sikh rule of Kashmir (1819 – 1846) shawl designs became more crowded and the paisley motifs “became elongated and sinuous, and the colours rich and dark.”

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3 Ibid., 17.
4 Ibid., 24.
6 Christina Sumner, “From Pinecone to Paisley: The Ubiquitous Boteh” TAASA Review Vol. 23, No. 3 (September 2014), 11.
After Runjit Singh’s conquest of Kashmir in 1813 the Sikh love of colour and grandeur was reflected in the rich tapestry designs of the kani shawl industry. This was in contrast with the earlier Afghan period where kani shawls were only produced in Kashmir for the foreign market. During the Sikh period long shawls with large cone motifs and border designs were sought after on the market, they were woven on two looms and the seams stitched together by a rafugar or invisible mender. At the same time embroidered shawls gained prominence.

Kashmir shawls became fashionable in Europe around 1770. Napoleon’s officers returning from the Egyptian campaign are said to have bought their womenfolk pashmina shawls while General Allard, a former general for Napoleon who joined Runjit Singh’s army established the first direct link between Parisian shawl manufacturers and those of Kashmir. Soon after writes Monique Levi-Strauss in ‘The Romance of the Cashmere Shawl’, “The general feeling was that shawls from the Indian subcontinent had become a public necessity, along with coffee, tobacco, pepper and cinnamon. French dealers knew what their customers wanted and set off for Kashmir to order shawls from the weavers.” The fact that the number of French paintings illustrating the Kashmir shawl during the Empire period exceeds that of any country is indicative of the unique status that the French nobility had bestowed on it as an object of fashion. Empress Josephine’s

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wardrobe contained hundreds of rare Kashmir shawls. When buying she was reputed never to ask the price.  

Trade established by the English East India Company imported ever-increasing quantities of tea, spices, silk and cotton from India. Dresses made from Indian cotton muslin became fashionable in the late 18th century as part of the Neo-classical style. Kashmir shawls were ideal accessories for these dresses. They became immensely sought-after in Britain.

The constant demand for Kashmir shawls in Europe resulted in sophisticated imitation shawl techniques being developed in France and Britain from 1800. During the same period Kashmiri weavers modified shawl designs to satisfy European tastes. The invention of the jacquard loom in Europe reduced labour costs and increased productivity of imitation Kashmir shawls causing fierce competition for the weavers in India. But mainly changes in Western fashion contributed to a sharp decline in the Indian and European shawl industries from 1869. The wearing of a bustle in dresses to accentuate the curve of the back made shawls look ungainly.  

This with the onset of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 put an end to the Indian shawl industry’s European export market resulting in a greatly diminished Kashmir shawl industry.

Nevertheless the shawl industry continued to survive in Kashmir. At that time the industry had already been suffering through British control under the Dogra prince, Raja Gulab Singh who imposed exorbitant taxes and harsh, unfair working conditions on Kashmiri artisans and weavers.

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Many weavers left Kashmir and established businesses in Amritsar and Ludhiana in the Punjab. In contemporary times unsettled political conditions caused by India and Pakistan’s impasse over control of Kashmir has resulted in restrictions on everyday life affecting all Kashmiris including the shawl artisans.

I return to my visit to Raja, the pashmina shawl weaver. He discussed his position in the current Kashmir shawl industry and provided insights into how the industry operates. Like most weavers Raja is supplied his work by a wustikar or master weaver whose renowned reputation as an artisan results in orders from customers. The wustikar supplies the either natural or dyed spun pashmina threads to Raja and pays him for the completed shawls. As the handloom shawls take so long to complete usually the weavers are given financial advances by the facilitator that are then subtracted from the final payment.

Although there are many artisans involved in the creation of each Kashmir shawl overall pashmina merchants control the industry currently in Kashmir. Brought to Srinagar from Ladakh, the raw pashmina is purchased by the merchants. The fibres are washed and graded into colour and quality. Women spin the pashmina fibres in their homes; traditionally widows did this, but not now. The pashmina threads can be sold to individual weavers but usually the merchant has a team of weavers that he supplies with work and materials while they work from their own homes. The money received by the weaver for a handloom shawl is very competitive because of competition from power loom shawl production. When a shawl is to be embroidered the price is negotiated between the merchant and customer and will depend upon the required design – the amount of embroidery and colours to be used.

Although the designs woven and embroidered on pashmina shawls have varied over time reflecting the tastes of the customers the basic motifs used by the shawl designers or naqash have remained the same. Two reoccurring motifs used are the cone shaped cypress tree or pine motif, thought to have been imported from Persia when the Mughals came to India as well as the previously mentioned buta or paisley. Designs of flower and vine motifs are also used by the naqash no doubt inspired by the abundant flora seen in the Kashmir valley during the summer months. These motifs evolve into different forms. From my own experience of working with textile artisans in Kashmir I have learnt that there are various buta motif designs referred to with different names. But basically, the motif designs remain relatively unchanged because they are considered classic with a tradition of continuity in fashion. Variations of designs from subtle tones used only on the lengthwise border, hashias and ends, pallas of the shawls with plain centres are juxtaposed with brightly coloured more modern designs with large abstracted buta.

While the designs of kani shawls rely upon a plan put on paper, a talim by the naqash that is then followed by the weaver embroidered pashmina shawls have the design printed on them ready for the sozni embroiderers. In June 2015 I visited the workshop of Farooq Ahmad Naqash. It is common for a person to have the surname of their profession. One wall of the workshop was lined with shelves filled with woodblocks that are used to print stencil designs onto shawls ready for embroidery. Alternatively Farooq traces the motif designs onto tracing paper. After perforating the paper he rubs the designs onto the shawls using a mixture of kerosene and carbon.
Head embroiderers will often distribute the work to other embroiderers in the same way that shawl weaving is distributed. In Srinagar I am introduced to Nisar Ahmad who manages his family business that includes weaving of pashmina shawls and sozni embroidery work. The fine needlework of sozni embroidery is suitable for pashmina shawls and is described as jali, less heavy, neem jama, some areas of the base fabric are visible or tuki jama, full embroidery. Only men learn sozni embroidery skills from family members or as apprentices particularly in Srinagar and central Kashmir.
Nisar brings a master or *wustikar sozni* embroiderer, Abdul Ahad to meet me. Abdul is from Magam, Beerwah, a village 35km from Srinagar. He first learnt *sozni* embroidery from a neighbour in his village twenty-five years ago. His embroidery work is very fine and looks the same on both sides of the fabric. Abdul demonstrates to me how he embroiders small sample areas on the stencilled designs of each shawl so the customer can check how the colours work together. I remark on how closely he holds the embroidery work to his face as he is working. Although he does not wear glasses his distant vision is blurred as a result of spending up to ten hours a day doing this close-up needlework. The time taken to complete the embroidery on a pashmina shawl will depend upon the amount of embroidery in the design; usually it takes two to three months.

It is a prerogative that affluent Kashmiri women receive a collection of pashmina shawls when they marry. The number and quality of the shawls will depend on the woman’s economic position. Usually at least one shawl is given by the mother of the girl and one shawl from the husband’s parents. The future husband may also give his fiancée a gift of a shawl. Farheen Hakim showed me her pashmina shawls that were gifted by her mother when she married. Her mother arranged to purchase the shawls through a relative whose family were involved in the production of shawls. Farheen noted that Kashmiri women don’t often wear their wedding shawls but they are worn on special occasions.

Najaf Bazaz discussed with me how shawls are passed on from one generation to the next, from mother to daughter, but a woman receives new shawls when she marries. In her family there are three daughters so her mother bought a roll of handloom pashmina and gradually had the shawls made ready for her daughters’ marriages. She took the shawls to be embroidered by a master embroiderer who showed her sample embroidery designs from which to choose. Both Farheen and Najaf’s pashmina shawls have traditional designs consisting of *butas* and cone motifs either as a border design with plain centres or all over, *jama* embroidery. Colours can be decided by the mother but are usually left to the master embroiderers who have a good sense of colour combinations. They commented that now the colours are selected to match the bride’s wedding outfits and vary according to fashion. The shawls received by Kashmiri girls are subject to fashion trends. Currently *kani* embroidered pashmina shawls are in fashion for girls to wear to their husband’s family home at their wedding, a positive development encouraging the resurgence of *kani* shawl weaving in Kashmir.
Through my research of the contemporary Kashmir shawl industry I have observed that designs are influenced by the demands of the market. Indeed they always have been from the time of Emperor Akbar when his admiration of pashmina shawls made them a sought after fashion item. The many artisans involved in creating a pashmina shawl including the spinners, weavers and embroiderers previously relied upon the patronage of nobility for their livelihood that now has been replaced by the shawl merchants who finance the shawl industry in Kashmir.

Nowadays wealthy Kashmiri shawl merchants called mehajans have collections that reflect the continued influence of fashion on the commercial market for these luxury items in and beyond Kashmir. On my visit to the home of mehajan, Qayoom Beigh he showed me his traditional sozni embroidered shawls, jali and jama designs and kani shawls, but as well pashmina shawls in stripes, checks and double sided pashminas while commenting on the increased use of zari or metallic thread woven with pashmina favoured by the middle-eastern market. The value of a handcrafted pashmina shawl as a luxury accessory as well as its adaptability to shifting fashion trends by the shawl artisans and designers enables this traditional industry to survive.

Bibliography


