

THESIS REPORT 2020

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CHAPTER 1

KEYWORDS -

Visual Communication Design, Visual Culture, Diaspora, Material Culture, Material Memory, Material Objects, Memories Associated with Objects, Cultural Artifacts, Archival, Family Archive, Storytelling, Perspectives, Narratives, Third Narrative

ABSTRACT –

Belonging to Kashmir while also having sparsely experienced the place, I have always remained interested and curious in learning more about it. I have tried to immerse myself into the experiential aspect of it through stories about objects, traditions and cultures of Kashmir. These narratives are what have helped me in developing my particular connection with my roots and I have always wished to explore it further.

For my thesis, I have built upon my connection to Kashmir by trying to communicate how the area is perceived subjectively by other Kashmiri individuals through the narratives they tell associated with the area. These stories

are focused around material objects from Kashmir and how each object can carry its own significant understanding of the area that also relates personally to the narrator. These stories originate from the circle of my family and relatives who all have varying perspectives and experiences related to 'being Kashmiri'. While narrating these experiences, I also start to shed light on how cultural artefacts can be more than display items and have the ability to carry deeper meanings related to their physicality. I want the people to become the other narrative of Kashmir, where they tell the human stories of the Valley themselves.

PASSION –

Our existence on this earth is not an isolated phenomenon; it always has traces to some incident of some people meeting somewhere that culminates to you eventually existing. This also is how cultures and traditions are generated, connected to how these people consequently behave in each other's presence and start having unique attributes and characteristics. This web of 'connectedness' translates itself in specific histories and geographies and starts having branches that spread out but remain connected at the root. This root becomes our identity, the

answer to who and why we are and where do we stand in the context of the world.

Speaking about this from my own perspective, my root lies in Kashmir, specifically the Indian Occupied part of it. My grandparents moved from Kashmir to Pakistan roughly 70 years ago but the way of living, values and traditions that they brought along with them still is a crucial part of our lives. Our home has always been sprinkled with the presence of Kashmir, whether it is the paper maché ornaments decorated around the house, the beautifully embroidered gifts our relatives bring from their visits to Kashmir or even the indecipherable Kashmiri that my mother fluently speaks; these little evidences of Kashmir are how I became aware about the culture my grandparents left behind.

Although I have spent my entire life in Pakistan and have visited Kashmir no more than twice, the existence of these two cultures side by side has made me fairly distant from each of them in some way. While being present in both places physically, it had never felt as if I fully belong to any one place because of the influence of both cultures in my life. The line **ہوں بھی اور نہیں بھی**¹ fully encapsulates my turmoil; the sense of not belonging always prevails wherever I may be.

SIDE NOTES

1. 'I am but I am also not'

PROJECT SCOPE –

The perception of Kashmir in people's minds stops at its landscape, beauty and political climate, and the depth that is needed in providing a truer understanding of Kashmir lies in understanding the people and their stories. Being part of two different cultures also gives one an intimate experience of both and I aim to describe the Kashmiri aspects me and my family are surrounded by through the unique material objects we interact with on a daily basis.

DESIGN STATEMENT –

The intent of my thesis is to communicate aspects of Kashmiri culture through the visual journal I have created. I want viewers be familiarized with the particularities of this culture while also get an idea of the subjective associations of different people to the same culture.

Choosing a visual journal as the final product for my thesis came from my intention to make storytelling as a crucial part of my work. The medium reflected my intention to transform it into something very personal. A journal is a person's record of significant life events or experiences, a physical representation of one's thoughts, feelings and reflections. This medium successfully combines my need to emotionally connect the viewers to the stories while also

providing a visually rich layout to correspond the same stories.

The stories I want to communicate are personal to each person they belong to, making each narrative very layered and complex. The emotions, feelings and depth that each story carries may not be easily conveyed or justified by a single medium. My intention is to make my visuals reflect not only the material culture of Kashmir but also make apparent the personality and values each narrator carries within themselves. This complexity of source material can thus be successfully conveyed by using two different mediums, illustrations and photographs.

My role in this work is to act as a vessel for these stories. The stories demand specific demonstrations and I act as the instrument providing it, by reinterpreting them in a visual medium while also extracting new meanings from them that best reflect my personal understanding of them. Illustrations thus give me that creative freedom to provide an imaginative take on those particularities of the stories that don't always have a photographic companion to accompany them, while also liberating me from the hyper-realistic aspect of photographs.

Stories are essentially a person's memory, a description of a particular time or place. The reality of photographs can

be helpful in transporting us to those very specifics in time which language is not entirely able to, becoming an easier and simpler mode for conveying extensively descriptive scenarios. Photographs for me became the material that grounds a story in its setting and lets you imagine further on top of it.

TARGET AUDIENCE –

My project aims to target individuals that wish to study cultures more from the aspect of narratives. This project can become a window into the daily lives and the perspectives of the very people involved in or associated to the turmoil of the Valley and can serve to prove that we have more commonalities among each other than differences. I aim to start a conversation about how topics like cultures, traditions and stories can become a middle ground for all of us to come together and understand each other a little better.

CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH QUESTIONS –

1. How to learn about one's culture through stories that people tell?
2. How do people associate memories with material objects?
3. What is the meaning of objects beyond their physicality and their role in a person's life?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK /CONCEPTS –

Since the beginning of my thesis, my interest was in putting forward the culture of Kashmir. Therefore, I dived into the field of Cultural Anthropology to study about it and learn about how human function and what forms a person into who he is. Culture when viewed as a part of anthropology talks about values, beliefs and way of living are learnt from other members of a society and the differences in culture creates distinct societies. This is very well defined in the words *“the knowledge people use to live their lives and the way in which they do so”* (Handwerker 2002)²

Generally, the theories that deals with evolution tries to explain the behavior of human, specially the way they live.

2. Handwerker, W. P. (2009). *The Origin of Cultures: How Individual Choices Make Cultures Change*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

A theory of evolution that concerns culture is known as the Cultural Evolution theory. It talks about the concept and

role of cultural inheritance. This means the act of humans learning from other individuals by transferring information or behavior patterns by teaching. It focuses on how also the human traits, like behavior and ideas can be learned by interacting with fellow members.

The concept of ‘Oblique Transmission’³ is very important to understand when dealing with culture. It deals with the idea that the process of learning does not just happen through parents but also through other people such as peers, colleagues and so on. Thus when talking about culture and learning how people acquire knowledge about various certain actions and practices, the presence and role of every type of individual is crucial.

This leads us to accept Darwin’s theory of Evolution which explains changes that are adapted by communicating with other members of the society or even the outsiders.

While looking into human culture, one aspect that anthropologists incorporate in their studies is the material culture of the people. It is very common for anthropologist to closely study objects when learning about a certain culture or society. An individual’s interaction with it gives insight into what his thinking process and his way of dealing with things beyond an object.

3. Lewens, T. (2018, May 1). Cultural Evolution. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evolution-cultural/>

LITERATURE REVIEW –

When it comes to stories, objects are an important element, no matter if the story revolves around it or it has a supporting role. Sometimes they tell the story and while other time they help in carrying it forward. People tend to associate their memories with certain objects because it is easy to be reminded of that memory when it is linked to something physical. Its presence is a reminder to that person of a moment in time or a particular instance. When a story is attached to an object, it becomes something more than just a physical item, it starts to carry those stories within it. These memories and stories linked to an object makes the object itself very important for someone because of their association with it. The topic of objects and the memories they carry is also the center idea of Aanchal Malhotra’s book ‘Remnants of Separation’⁴. This book revolves around the importance an object holds in one’s life because of the emotional attachment that person has to it. Therefore, an object can be linked with anything that you consider close to you. To an outsider it may seem like a mere object but for someone with an attachment to it, they know its importance. Interaction with objects hold as much importance as does it being a reminder. How one holds it or uses it gives away a great deal about the owner.

4. Malhotra, A. (2017). *Remnants of A Separation: A History of the Partition Through Material History*. Uttar Pradesh, India: HarperCollins Publishers India.

An individual's personality is visibly displayed with how they communicate with the physical item. In the article 'Reflections on Visual and Material Culture: An Example from Southwest Chicago'⁵ by J. Ulbricht also goes over material objects and what role they played in her upbringing. Material culture is usually considered an ordinary object but when the concepts of race, culture or class are attached to it, the meaning of it changes hence also changing how a child views it.

The presence of a person is very vital for a story. In order to make the viewer or the reader to connect to it, it is very important to make the characters relatable. A simple relationship or a background story is sometimes enough to form that connection between the reader/viewer and the character. Sharing a very mutual human experience with the person in the story unifies the character and the audience to one another. A very common technique that is used to build that relatability element is to introduce relationships that are known to almost every human being.

Relationships between a child with their parent is the most common when creating a relation between audience and character. 'A Thousand Splendid Suns'⁶ by Khaled Hosseini focuses on many relationships throughout the book. But what makes the reader connect with one of the protagonist is her relationship with her mother. It is a very

5 Ulbricht, J. (2007). Reflections on Visual and Material Culture: An Example from Southwest Chicago. *Studies in Art Education*, 49(1), 59–72. doi: 10.1080/00393541.2007.11518724

6. Hosseini, K. (2007). *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. New York: Riverhead Books.

common relationship that everyone can relate to in some way thus making the reader understand and feel for the lead character. Knowing how that person feels, having a good understanding of what they are going through makes the viewer more invested in the story. This gives birth to the concept of empathy and in it a prime role is played by understanding. Having relatability and empathy in a story pulls the audience towards it.

Perspective is something that varies from person to person. Differences in upbringing, history, education results in various point of views and influences how we approach our lives. When seeing it from the point of view of Kashmir, perspective has been a prime reason for it being in the situation that it is in to this day. When talking about anything concerning Kashmir, two viewpoints always come forward and that is of India and Pakistan while the critical perspective of the Kashmiri people is unacknowledged. Therefore, perspective is a key element to understand any situation, employing the need for understanding the point of view of everyone involved. The current image of Kashmir has been built because of the lack of human perspective present in the media. As mentioned before, it is all about the landscapes, the constant war or the textiles. Hence a very narrow view is being projected since a long time. A few movies that came

out in the recent time and that does justice to Kashmir with their genuine display of what that place is, is Haider (2014). It shows what every other movie has shown before while including the people and what they actually go through. It incorporated relationships that makes it easier to relate to and therefore understand.

The point of view that a narrator might want to show, influences how the audience might take it. It is in their hand how they might want to show the story. Perspective and intent it very important in this case. A story can take any direction that the narrator wants the audience to know, it can be either negative or positive. This, at times, can end up with the audience not knowing the reality of what actually happens because of the narrator's vision. The topic of a story is very malleable in the hands of the narrator. It is their call to either keep the story true to its form or to give a whole new direction to it. The one who is most impacted from this change or lack of is the viewer as their perspective is built upon what they are shown. For example, the storyline that the directors have gotten are varying in nature. Many movies have emerged from Bollywood that have shown Kashmir in an unfiltered way. They have shown the state of Kashmir with heavy military, what impact it has had on the lives of the Kashmiris, the way people are going through it while trying to live their

lives fully. One of the movies that have showcased a very raw image is Hamid (2018). It revolves around a boy who is unable to comprehend what happened to his father and tries to communicate with God to bring his father back. This movie shows the directors intent. The intent to present a view that is far away from that shiny image that Bollywood tries to create. across in the films and ads revolving around Kashmir has Same goes for when it is the narrators personal story to tell, when they are the one narrating it. What they want to share and what not to, builds the narrative that they are presenting. While in the same, the way they decide to tell it is very important and critical in putting their point across.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS EXPLAINED –

Oral tradition has remained a very prominent part of several societies since the beginning of time. It is a channel for communicating knowledge about several different topics like culture, arts, music, stories, poetry etc. This tradition has served itself as a means for passing down information from one generation to another and before the emergence of print media, stories of the past mainly survived through word of mouth. Most of the above mentioned fields/subjects have shifted to print as a medium for transmission of material. Despite this, cultures

of various places or societies are still highly dependent on oral tradition to carry them on from one tier of a generation to another. Stories can be attributed as the entity keeping cultures alive and propagating them forward, having far deeper meanings than initially perceived. Culture is something that is not tactile, material present within it can be tangible, but the culture in itself is not.

Memories are something that are not physically present in front of us. Material object in that case act as physical reminders of those memories. They bring back that memory that is not in material form. Souvenirs are an appropriate example of objects as reminders. These small versions of great monuments take a person's mind back to the trip to foreign lands.

They are more than just objects, they play a role in the culture and in someone's life. As said before, they are reminders of memories, events or a person. Them being physical items matter but what they carry within them is way beyond.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY –

My thesis research was qualitatively carried out, consisting of individuals' personal accounts and stories. Qualitative methodology has a more personal and

humanistic approach to research which made it very fitting to my approach to the thesis topic. This methodology also gives one the opportunity to reinterpret data in creative terms to enhance the impact of the data without wavering away from the exact point of it.

DATA SOURCE/S –

Research methodologies requires data collection and initiating the research required me to approach people similarly familiar with Kashmiri culture for collecting said data, which made my family members the most appropriate interviewees. I approached them first hand and recorded their accounts in both audio and script formats, to retain the personality of each interviewee as much as possible. This was important because my further interpretation of the stories required that they retain the individuality and uniqueness attributed to their respective narrators, in order to distinguish the subsequently made visuals from each other.

Keeping the interviewees among my family circle proved necessary as I aimed to convey the perspective of Kashmir that I am the most familiar with. Having perspectives easily relatable to myself allowed me to understand them on a personal level and then consequently justify my reinterpretation of it. Bringing very foreign perspectives in

my research and visualizing it from my own judgement may have been dissimilar to the narrator's actual intention with the story.

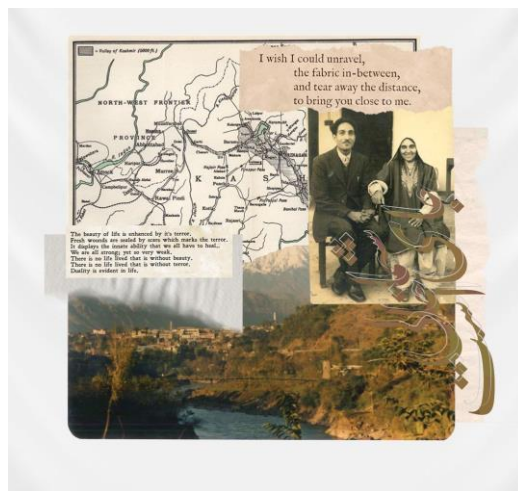
This thesis is a personal memoir to the connection I have with my motherland. Third party perspectives may have enhanced the subjective richness of the thesis idea but they would also take away the personality I myself can add to the interpretive aspect of it. I intended to choose these stories as an extension of how I personally relate to Kashmir while also not take away from the informative and celebratory intention of the thesis.

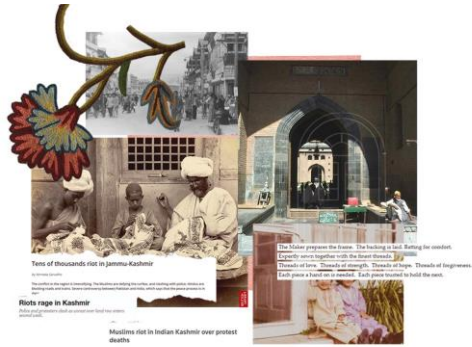
CHAPTER 4

MEDIUM OF PRESENTATION/PRE-PRODUCTION–

In the beginning, when planning on how to go about the visual aspect of my thesis, I chose to make mix medium collages that were more focused on photographs of my family that were at my home. These photographs were combined with other archival materials such as postcards, letters, passports, as well as resources like paintings, drawing maps and text. As I was working with communicating memories therefore I decided to go with

material that themselves held some memories within themselves. My intent was to project memories through material that also held memories of their own. The visuals formed from the stories varied from one another whether it was the different materials or composition, depending the stories focal point and the general plot.





As time passed and I kept working on these visuals, what stood out for me was my lack of perspective present in them. The visuals had the story clearly depicted therefore they felt more like visual summary.

From that point forward I started to go over ideas that would make the visuals less impersonal. What could be edited in or out that can make them more personal. Thinking over these questions ended up with me changing my visuals in terms of material completely shifted.

I went on with my choice of combining different mediums and rather than mixing various mediums, I decided to use combination of two. The visuals that I created from that point forward were collages of illustrations and photographs. Illustration was the medium that I used to add my own personality and understanding of the stories into visuals.

The approach that I adapted when forming visuals were to break down the stories and take out what emotions and feelings are being carried throughout the story, while also jotting down any scenario that enters my mind that can be incorporated into the final visual.

Before the lockdown took place, my display played a key role in what I was planning visual wise. The idea was to not rely on just one final product to convey the stories and the visuals but rather use these two and create a space that offers experience to whoever visits.

While in lockdown, everything became unclear but still thesis was something that we had to keep working on and on top of that change the whole dynamic of our displays. Finding out that our physical display is now being shifted to online display was hard a hit but nevertheless we had to figure it all out. My idea then started to develop in a direction that would be suitable for the virtual display.

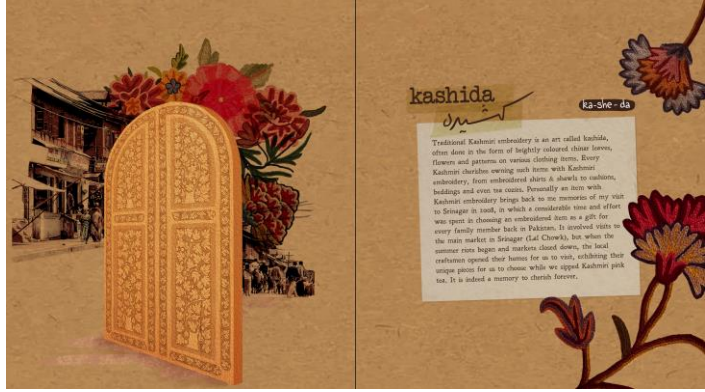
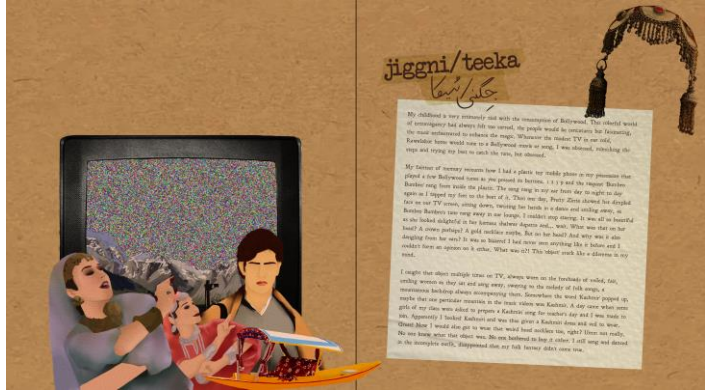
The main challenge that I faced in terms of the new display was now how to combine stories, some were in audio form while some were written down, with the visuals. Thinking over this I came up with the idea to create a visual journal. The reason for this was because as I mentioned before, I wanted to create something that hold personal association with it and as journals are used by people to write down their thoughts and ideas therefore I chose to go with it.

As for my stories that were in audio form, I decided to turn them into text form. These stories were in Urdu, hence to cater to a larger audience that might not be able to understand them, I translated the story in English for their understanding.

In the end my final product is a visual journal that has one spread dedicated to each story. the page on the left has the story while the right page displayed the visuals that I made related to the story.

CHAPTER 5

PRODUCTION –



CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION –

When starting with my thesis, I aimed to bring forward different narratives concerning Kashmir. Narratives that were based on Kashmiri objects and the memories that people attach to them. My purpose was to put forward stories of people who belong to Kashmir. Stories that can explain to the audience that the valley is much more than what is presented to us through news and movies. There are people who experience more than just violence and the beauty.

I believe I have been able to touch the basis of what this project can turn out to be hence I would like to carry this forward so that I can further explore this topic.

For me this thesis is just a starting point for my future in working towards showing to the world a different narrative, a new perspective of Kashmir. Showcasing the land that I belong to.