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### **TOPIC**

## **TRACING ISLAMIC MOTIFS THROUGH THE LENS OF BHERA WOODWORK**

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## Tracing Islamic Motifs through the Lens of Bhera Woodwork

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### Abstract

The art of Subcontinent was influenced by many art forms from different areas of the world including Persian and Modern art. Islamic Art has strong influence on the Muslim art of Subcontinent and Islamic motifs are a prominent part of Muslim artworks created before and after partition. Mughal miniatures have geometric and floral border designs which are borrowed from Islamic patterns previously found in Islamic architectural decorations and manuscript illustrations with border designs.

After partition, the art and craft of both India and Pakistan have many diverse influences which may be traced through comparative and analytical studies. Bhera, a town in Punjab, Pakistan, is famous for woodwork, practiced by artisans of the city in the form of multiple crafts including combs, tazias and wood carving on furniture and wooden balconies and doors. Among the distinct crafts of Bhera, wood carving on doors and architectural structures is of significant importance of all. The motifs carved by craftsmen of Bhera draw a link back to Islamic art patterns, found in Islamic architectural structures and painted manuscripts.

**Key Words:** Islamic Art. Design. Patterns. Motifs. Wood carving. Balcony. Doors. Craft. Architecture. Decorative. Symbolic. Manuscript

### Introduction

Going through the history, we come to know that some of the old towns were washed away by the rivers and replaced by new towns on a safer ground. Bhera, near Sargodha, used to be a flourishing place long ago. It was an ancient town where Sher Shah Suri built a beautiful mosque. Islamic motifs and patterns were a part of decorative design involved. There were shrines which attracted pilgrims and for the said reason, Bhera was a center of Mughal local government as well. Due to the historical background, Bhera has a strong relationship with Islamic art and patterns, which are assimilated by old masters in their woodwork carvings. Woodwork is a prominent craft of the city until now. The town was raided by Durrani, where later on Sikhs settled and prospered under the British and it became the most important city for neighboring areas far beyond. Later on, as the canal colonies flourished and other towns abandoned, the old city of Bhera declined due to certain reasons. Bhera has now become a ghost town after having sustained a lot of damage during 1947. (Holiday, 1990)



Plate.1. Recent situation of a street in Old city of Bhera. Image by Researcher.

Bhera is also known as the graveyard of buildings, due to the ruins of wood worked houses present all over the city, and scattered in different Mohallas and Streets. The wood work in domestic architecture is among the significant specialties of Bhera. Situated on the bank of river Jhelum, Bhera was a principal source of timber in the region. This led the town to produce some finest examples of urban architecture using brick and timber wood in jharokas, balconies and elaborated doorways. One of many attractive features, was a wooden carved walkway built to link two houses belonging to same family across the road.

Woodwork is a versatile and time-honored craft which involves both skill and creativity to produce functional furniture, domestic and commercial building architecture and elaborative fine woodcarvings used in diverse perspectives. Carpentry and wood carving includes building structures like furniture, cabinets and doors and then decorating them with intricate and ornamental designs. Geometrical patterns having a connection with Muslim design patterns and design elements are a significant feature of Bhera woodwork as a whole.

Bhera was known as the living museum of the craft of wood carving, not long ago but a few decades back. There was hardly a mohalla or street in the town without multi-storeyed houses with carved wooden facades. Beautifully carved doors are one of the major example of Bhera wood work, still present in old houses. Even in the ruins of left buildings, one can see the best examples of wood craft in the doors of the houses, which most of the times carry a floral or geometric pattern in

the middle of the door. (Hussain, 2011) Some of the streets are covered with wooden structures with carving present on them. These are decorative remains of the glorious history of the craft of wood carving in this region.



Plate.2. Covered street in Mohalla Firashan wala. Image by Researcher.

The geometric pattern on the façade of the street, draw a close similarity with Islamic patterns. Localities like Mohalla Khawajgaan, Mohallah Firashan wala, Saadaat wali Gali, Kohliyan wala Mohalla, Mohalla Imlı wala, Mohalla Pakistani, Mohalla Pirachgaan and the area of Maari are some of the places left where still some preserved remains of wood work examples are present in the buildings, especially in balconies and doors of houses. These localities are distributed according to the financial status of the residents. The wood work and the quality of both material and craft vary from area to area. Many wooden structures in houses have collapsed due to lack of maintenance and many are about to collapse for the same reason. Furthermore, at many places one can find heaps of mud and bricks and carved doors buried in that, presenting the glorious history of wood craft in the region but also focusing it as a dying craft of the area. The zig zag and floral pattern in plate.2. have a strong influence of Islamic art present on it. The same zig zag continued pattern can also be seen in plate.3.

In addition to doors and balconies, another example of wood carving from domestic architecture of Bhera are the carved wooden panels fitted at the top portion of walls as ventilators and known as ‘pinjra’. Craftsmen of the region have created innumerable patterns for pinjra work. Additional unfolding the details of pinjra, the technique describes that a certain piece is created by carving

numerous small pieces of wood and then adjusting them and fixing into a frame without the use of any glue or adhesive material. This form of wood work is now distinct in Pakistan and even no example of this kind is well preserved. (Khan, 1993)

Some examples of wood work, emphasizing the wood carving of Bhera are presented here.



Plate.3. Wooden Balcony of a house. Image by Researcher



Plate.4. Wooden windows of a house. Image by researcher.

The balconies and other building structures are made by wood along with an addition of brick and hints of metal present in it. In windows, two types of wood work is found, i.e. one with whole wooden carved structure and the second one carved with spaces made hallow and filled using glass fittings in the windows, as visible in plate. 4. The pattern draws similarity with Islamic stain glass patterns, comprising of intertwined geometric shapes creating complex pattern as a whole. Wood carving of doors of Bhera involves different types and design styles, so different parts of the door need to be discussed individually, as present in the plates.5, 6 and 7.



Plate.5. wooden carved door of a house. Image by Researcher.



Plate.6. closer view of the motif of the door presented in plate 5. Image by Researcher.

In plate5 and 6, the geometric pattern involves shapes and lines in a symmetric manner and creates a link with the harmony and balance present in Islamic art motifs and geometric designs. Geometric motifs are one of the strongest elements of Islamic art. Both geometric and floral designs are used in Islamic art collectively, to create a better aesthetic quality involving unity, rhythm, symmetry as well as eternity all together.

Both simple and complicated geometric design are found in Islamic art, which add to the aesthetic value of the building structures. Repeated Geometric patterns along with floral motifs create a feeling of continuity and process in the decorative patterns, which is the spirit of Islam found in round mandala designs created by geometric patterns in Islamic patterns found all around the world in Muslim Architectural decorations. (Dariyadi, Baydoun, Kamarudin. 4, 5)



Plate.7. Central raised part between two doors, known as beeni by locals. Image by Researcher



Plate.8. The Arabesque walls and architecture of the Alhambra;





Plate.9. Carved patterns on both sides of wooden frame of door. Image by Researcher.

The carved doors of houses have many panels and parts, including the different panels of door, all carved skillfully with both floral and geometric motifs present on them. There is an observable influence of Islamic design patterns and Islamic art motifs present on the wood carvings of bhera. There is a block raised with a carved motif, placed on the central panel between the double doors. Carved motifs of different designs are also present on the bottom corners of the wooden frame of doors. In the door present in Plate 5, there are geometrical patterns used by the craftsman to create this art piece of unique quality. The double panel door is divided in further 8 panels by design, and each square is decorated by different geometrical lines and patterns, by using the technique of wood carving. At the inner edge of the upper panel of the door, there is a raised panel which is again occupied by a rectangular raised structure in the Centre, which is decorated by carving an eight-petal flower in the centre, along with geometrical patterns and motifs on upper and lower sides of the rectangular block. This central panel is known as “beeni” by locals of Bhera and it is mostly decorated with six or eight

petal carved flowers. There is an iron star shaped nail to fix the rectangular block with the panel of the door. Star motif is a noticeable influence of Islamic art, which is found in many geometric patterns of Islamic art present all over the world.



Plate.10. Star shaped iron nail. Image by Researcher.

The frame of the door is carved with floral pattern at all four sides, and on the bottom right and left corners, there are floral motifs, with three petals, which resemble lily as well as Greek column's base patterns. The spirituality of Islamic art is again presented through lily and floral motifs present in the door motifs of Bhera woodwork. Moreover another interesting similarity can be drawn from the legs of local beds (paye of charpayi) and it would be the most nearest influence drawn in resulting this carved pattern present commonly on doors and wood carvings of Bhera.



Plate.11. 8-pointed star tile, luster technique, glazed. Ilkhanate period, 2nd half of the 13th century CE. From Kashan, Iran

While discussing the floral and geometric patterns of Bhera woodwork in comparison with Islamic art motifs, one should know about the Islamic design concisely. Islamic art is known for the rich motifs, designs and patterns that have a history over centuries. The geometric motifs in Bhera wood work are inherited through Mughals having a connection with subcontinent. Star motif has a significant importance in Islamic art all through ages. Several Mughal monuments have star motif as a part of surface embellishments. The presence of geometric motifs all over the world also represents the splendor of Islam and Islamic art through centuries. Being the vital element of the Islamic decoration, the star motifs have continued to be used in South Asia since the Mughal Era till the present day.(Faraz, 102) The design motifs are found in different forms of Islamic art including architecture, textile, ceramics and some others. The types of Islamic design and pattern include geometric design, floral and arabesque design, calligraphy and Islamic script. Geometric patterns comprise of square, rectangle, polygon, hexagon and star shapes. The shapes are overlapped and interweaved to create complex patterns adding to the depth of the design. The repetition of patterns is not for the sake of beautification but it symbolizes the infinite nature of the universe and its Creator. It also presents the value of small deeds in Islam, while the connection to the one central point in many motifs represents the

concept of “Tauheed” through art. In Islamic art, geometric patterns are used to represent spiritual Arabesque and floral patterns in Islamic art involve detailed and continued vines and flowers and intertwined foliage. Stylized floral motifs and flowers and plants in decorative manner are also found in Islamic Art. The motifs used in Islamic art, are used for aesthetic purposes as well as to present symbolic meanings through art. A continued design with a center of interest, most common style of Islamic decorative pattern, relate with the sovereignty of all mighty Allah. The symmetry and unity of Islamic geometric patterns portray the unity present the elements of universe.

The use of wood in building structures has declined in present age due to the demand of more functional and durable building structures and the use of bricks and cement has replaced the use of wood in building structures. Though wooden doors are still used but now they are prepared commercially by preparing plain doors and then added prepared patterns made out of factories. Thus the only way in which the wood carving of old Bhera is still alive is the wood carving in furniture, where still some fine wood carving is being done during the present age. But it is also being influenced by the modern techniques, but still some fine wood carved furniture is still being produced in Bhera, keeping the art of wood carving alive in the region.

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