

# STORY TELLING THROUGH NAKSHI KANTHA: A SEMIOTIC STUDY ON FOLK ART OF SANTINIKETAN, WEST BENGAL

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## ABSTRACT:

*Nakshi Kantha, the customary needle art of Bengal, India shows a rich vocabulary of themes. These themes are profoundly established in solid religious convictions and underlay a solid symbolism. These themes connote the craving for self expression and indication of the artisan's desires. Nakshi Kantha is more than only an improving bedcover; they were the Canvas for self-expression, their qualities and convictions. The state, that had individuals taking after Hinduism, weaved themes in view of their religious convictions. Moreover, utilization of these symbols show a sharp desire to build up their own particular personality and position in the general public and the inclination to show their desires through religious imagery, direct delineation and stylish presentation. Tree of life, Lotus, and Fishes have been three of the most mainstream and carefully picked themes. This paper is an attempt to think about the semiotics of these three themes on Nakshi Kantha of West Bengal of mid 19th century to late 20th century.*

**Keywords:** *Nakshi Kantha, Designs, Symbolism, Self-expression, Semiotics, Embroidery*

## 1. Introduction:

Santiniketan is a small place of tourist attraction as it was the abode of Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore. Basically it is situated in a predominantly tribal belt in one of the backward districts of West Bengal known as Birbhum. Kantha stitch is a traditional thread work of the area, the skill passed down through generations. In the beginning the women worked as individual labour and worked for family members, relatives, neighbours and employers. Kantha has overwhelmingly existed in the rural Bengal family since time immemorial. This stitch has been a flawless case of imagination. Kantha started in the hour of need when financial states of a normal rural household unit were testing and the family was confronted with a troublesome cool climate or was set apart by a labour that required security.

According to Dhameeja (2004) Kantha, the poor man's quilt, displays extraordinary creativity, curious motifs and immense amount of patience. The old and torn Saris mostly the unstitched lengths of fabrics, draped by Indian women as traditional clothing were put to use. These ragged saris were layered and quilted together with patterned running stitches. The threads used for quilting were drawn out from the colourful borders of the saris.(Zaman:1993). Eventually Kantha graduated to patterned embroidered motifs on the surface of the quilts. These quilts were the canvases for the women and have got intermingled in the lives of the people (Das:1992). K Padmaja beautifully conveys this in her paper by saying that 'the most endearing gift exchanged at birth, death or marriage, the seat of honor offered to welcome guests, the mark of respect for the dead, the wandering fakirs drape, the personal wallet for carrying little valuables or a wrap for any other precious possession, Kantha in Bengal is not any frozen art stored behind museum glass, it is an integral part of the lives of the country folk.' (Padmaja: 2006).

Before partition, India has been known for their society needle specialty of Nakshi Kantha. East Bengal, now Bangladesh and West Bengal, now a state in east India have weaved Nakshi Kantha. Nakshi Kantha, the poor man's quilt, shows unprecedented creativity and inquisitive themes. Nakshi Kantha has seen different impacts

but then kept up its uprightness. There have been Portuguese and British as well as partition (of East and West Bengal and partition with Pakistan) influence on the motif vocabulary. However religious and mythological influence has been the strongest and has survived till date (Zaman: 1993). Lotus, Fish, Earthen pitchers, Tree of life, Mouse, Peacock, Elephant, Bull and so forth have stayed in the designs vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha quilts and other Kantha articles. These designs have been found to have a semiotic essentialness and discover their roots in religion and mythology. The paper tries to highlight the underlying semiotic in motif vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha of West Bengal during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century and how it is use in the purpose of storytelling.

## 2. Story Telling Through Kantha: A Review of Literature:

Since time, women have been telling stories through art and music. In Bengal, these stories are told through Nakshi Kantha, a sort of people where brilliant examples and plans are weaved into a blanket with a running line called "Kantha stitch". Nakshi Kantha narrates the tale of life in country Bengal. It narrates the account of the delights, distresses and the fantasies without bounds. In the beginning Kantha was produced for the use of the family. Nakshi Kantha has seen a revival and is now produced commercially.

According to Niaz Zaman (1993) the most poetic reference of Kantha has been found in Poet Jasimuddin's Poem 'Nakshi Kantha Maath'. The notable mention about the Kantha of Bengal was also found in the book, 'Sri Sri Chaitanya Charitamrita' by Krishnadas Kaviraj which was composed around five hundred years back. Zaman also mentioned that about the famous artist Abanindranath Tagore, who seemed to have encountered a woman in a village in a district of Srihatta of Bangladesh, who recorded her life story in her Kantha spanning a period starting from her marriage to old age.

Padmaja (2006) mentions that expert are of the feeling that its starting point goes back to ancient India and that the Kantha has references in the Rig Veda, Upanishads, and in Panini's writings.

Dr. Stella Kramrisch (1983) has portrayed a legendary story to demonstrate the beginning of this artistic expression. As per this story, there was a master by the name of Kanthalipa (putting master). By station he was a sweeper. He used to gather old clothes and torn fabric which he found while clearing. One day a needle pricked his finger; it hurt so much that he began crying. Listening to his crying a dakini (witch or soul) showed up before him. "She rebuked him: 'In the event that you cry at such little agony, how you would have the capacity to hold up under the poignancy of resurrection again and again? Kanthalipi offered an explanation to her 'That is valid yet I don't realize what I ought to do, 'the dakini prompted him: 'The sky is nothing in any case, an extraordinary void in interminable space. Between the earth and the sky is likewise an unlimited void. While sewing the bits of clothes you ought to accomplish solidarity of soul and reason with every single living animal on the planet. The sewing of clothes symbolizes the utilization of all disposed of things. To do this you require solidifying your profound emotions and learning. Sitting in the void you will need to consolidate your considerations and information with the assistance of the needle of graciousness. The bits of clothes sewn together to make another fabric of new Kantha will transform into a complete piece. So also the entire universe's living things will have the capacity to make their own elements.

In her article 'The Field of the Embroidered Quilt', Sharmistha Saha (2016) articulates about the love of Rupai and Saju from poet Jasimuddin's famous poem 'Nakshi Kathar Maath. The story narrates about a woman Saju who embroiders her longing for her husband/lover Rupai on a *kantha* that she stitches. She dies waiting for him and before her death asks her mother to spread the *kantha* she made over her grave.

## 3. Nakshi Kantha: Interactions and Relationship of the Craft with Society:

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the rural West Bengal were dominated by the activity of Kantha. The population of rural Bengal were ill-nourished in addition to being poorly clothed and housed Kantha was more of a need based craft of that society only that it developed into beautiful art.

The traditional (that is to say, the nineteenth and mid twentieth century) perspective of craft's association with society is most likely best communicated in the compositions of such social commentators as Karl Marx and Thorsten Veblen. For these scholars, the type of work that was embraced by the skilled worker or craftswoman was the most ideal of all human movement. It was seen as ennobling, humanizing and, thus, the perfect means through which people could express their humanity. Images and hues that are viewed as favourable in the religion are sewn onto the surface Kantha upgraded itself from an item of daily use soon enough and started claiming the status for artistic embroidery. Certain Nakshi Kantha was getting commissioned for export and

was pieces of art in itself. They were minutely embroidered and the selection of motifs and placement, choice of colors spoke the language of art. It discovers notice in Nakshi Kantha's Math of Poet Jasimuddin.

Several other folk songs from unknown poets and singers are still being sung at local festivals. These folk songs are now appreciated worldwide. These society tunes are currently refreshing worldwide. Kantha has been a piece of lives of individuals from birth to death in the light of society. Kantha was made for another conceived child to wrap him in clothes to avoid any stink eye. It shows social imagery of shielding the kid from any underhanded soul. A girl would prepare Kantha with carefully chosen symbols and colours as her dowry for marriage.

#### **4. Self Expression and The Art of Craft:**

It found and recognized different mediums of self-expression, articulation of one's own identity, emotions, or thoughts, through any type of craftsmanship can be a medium of self expression. It offers energy to display the representation of self to build up an association with the earth. It is normal for a specific individual or gathering of individuals or period. Craftsmanship and specialty have always been a medium of self expression in Rustic Bengal. This is apparent from the presence of various customized creates like patachitra scene by scene portrayal of narrating through drawings, terracotta (mud craft) and Baul-gaan recitation of Rabindranath melodies and other people tunes with instrumental backing of ektara and some more. All the more essentially, Bengal is viewed as the workmanship capital of India, considering craftsman like Rabindranath Tagore, who was an unbelievable craftsman, writer and a visionary who set up a workmanship University in Shantiniketan meaning home of Peace in country Bengal to advance self expression through workmanship and specialty. The principal Asian Nobel laureate modernized Bengali workmanship by spurning inflexible established structures. Self-expression can locate its subject from, for example, convention, the future, artistic work, music, stories, ballads, nature, made legacy, field outings and journeys, occasions or recollections.

A basic fortifying topic can help with making associations. The sole longing to animate articulation of the self and the feelings connected with a projection of self in various parts that ladies needed to play in provincial Bengal. She would have multi layered parts of an agriculturist, a homemaker, a fashioner, a dealer and some more. The choice of themes, examples and the arrangement of these examples show their desire, discernments and associations with the quick social environment amidst juggling between such a large number of parts, the yearning for self expression found the art of Kantha as a medium. The ladies of country Bengal have never been so fortunate contrasted with their partners in other parts of the nation. The Craft of Kantha, as we have talked about, started amid the desperate need of the ladies to ensure her youngster, family from chilly and extreme climate. The cravings and expressions for the prosperity of the family found a canvas on the surface of Kantha. This was the root of the Art of Kantha.

#### **5. Tree of life:**

A basic tree is an image of continually developing life that seizes to exist. It called the tree of life. It is an image of richness, and thus progression of life. A creeper implies family holding. A love bird lady or a young lady soon to wed is viewed as the bearer of life by bearing the youngster and will take the era and the family name forward. It is viewed as promising if the new lady of the hour conveys with her these promising images. Her yearnings to tolerate youngsters so that life of the family pushes ahead; a great harvest to achieve success in the family are her indications symbolized on the tree of life theme that she weaves in the four corners of the Nakshi Kantha. It associates us to the three universes, composes Jasleen Dhameeja, of the tree that both takes off upward and dives where it counts while standing erect on the ground 2004). The Tree of Life idea is consecrated to generally societies. Its noteworthiness rises above cognizant reality, touching the intuitive and past the indefinable. Regardless of the possibility that the first importance is clouded, the image holds an oblivious connection with our primitive memory and turns into a wellspring of quality.

Images have multi-level hugeness. They might be individual, for example, those happening in the utilization of dialect, symbolism and in the doodling and dream themes of an person. They thusly are gotten from images, which are part of the social gathering and general custom. Besides, there are elucidations, which are connected with social history. At long last, there are general images, which rise above time furthermore, space and search out more profound reality, expressive of the general cognizance. They are a piece of what diagnostic therapist Carl Jung calls our aggregate consciousness. The Cosmic Tree image happens in for all intents and purposes all societies. Its roots dive profound into the underworld branches reach upwards towards paradise and bolster it. The storage compartment is the method for climbing upwards and coming to past, subsequently interfacing three worlds. In Shamanistic custom, the minister rises up the tree, orderly, getting out at each stage the dreams that come to him until he achieves the seventh step, the most astounding. Among the Bhil tribes in Western India, a dead predecessor's spirit is ceremonially conciliated by the minister as he climbs the strides cut into the tree then again a post. When he comes to the seventh stage, the spirit is discharged and the sanitized soul rests with God.



Fig :1 Stylised Tree Motif

## 6. Lotus:

Lotus has been an exceptionally prominent theme in the knitted Nakshi Kantha, as indicated by all the books that discuss about Kantha. A few books discuss 108 petal lotus themes while others talk around 100 petal lotus, called the, 'satadal'. Niaz Zaman discusses 100 petal lotus. Be that as it may, considering the way that he is discussing Nakshi Kantha in Bangladesh, might be the variety was more apparent there. The figure 108 has a religious centrality in the Hindu religion. It is trusted that the lotus on which Lord Brahma sits has 108 petals. It is additionally accepted that sati has 108 symbols. The beaded mala (series of globules) utilized for droning as a part of Hindu religion basically contain 108 globules

The lotus has a great deal of importance in the Hindu religion. Goddess Laxmi the goddess of budgetary prosperity grasps a lotus, so the lotus symbolizes her. Ruler Krishna, who is the symbol then again Lord Vishnu, has his seat on Lotus. Additionally master Krishna's feet are contrasted with Lotus. It is trusted that Krishna could stroll on the surface of the water like the lotus skims on the surface of water, subsequently the examination. Goddess Saraswati likewise grasps a lotus. Other than this imagery, in Hinduism, lotus is thought to be a decent bloom to offer to the Gods Shiva, and goddesses like Saraswati and Kali.

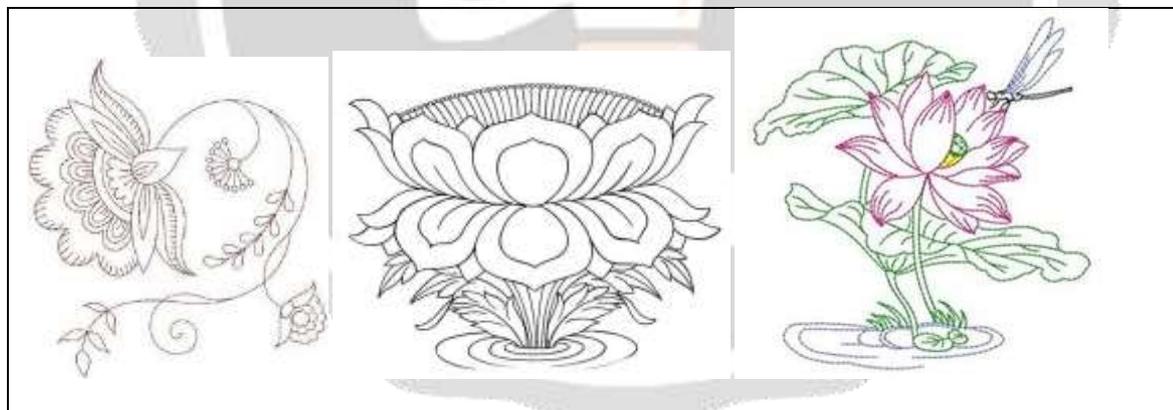


Fig 2: Stylised Lotus Motif

## 7. Fishes: (Matsya Avatar)

Out of the ten symbol (incarnations) of Lord Vishnu, the Matsya (fish) symbol was the first. This symbol of Fish cautions Sage Manu about the colossal surge and spared the humanity from annihilation. Vishnu as a little fish swam in the measured palms of Sage Manu who was Washing his hands in the waterway. Vishnu developed into an extensive fish and cautioned a week ahead of time to construct a vast Ark and spares every single restorative herb, every one of the assortments of seeds, and to bring the seven holy people alongside the serpent Vasuki and different creatures in the ark Fishes are crucial staple eating regimen of country Bengal. The Bay of Bengal and parcels and bunches of lakes guarantees assortment and gigantic amount of fishes in the district in West Bengal, particularly in Santiniketan, Birbhumi region.

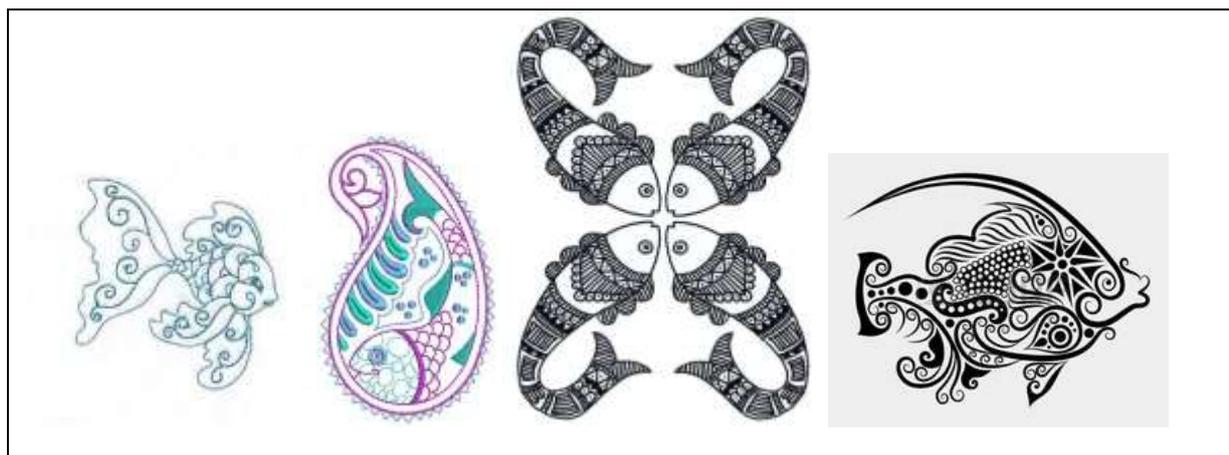


Fig 3: Stylised Fish Motif

## 8. Conclusion

From the point by point survey and the semiotic investigation of the three picked themes, it is comprehended that the themes in Kantha of the mid 19th century till the late 20th century had religious meanings. The themes were not simply arbitrarily picked themes from the nature. They had signs of goals of the artisans. The coverlets were utilized as a canvas to self communicates their longings as weaved themes that were set in a manner that depicted their yearnings. Focal lotus theme had an essence of money related prosperity and that the center of whole prosperity. Tree of Life, were for the most part put in four corners of the blanket and its symbolized evergreen development in every one of the perspectives if living. Fishes were put arbitrarily as they were considered as promising images and were considered as hero from any disaster in life.

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