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Essay

Running Stitch of Hope: The Nakshi Kantha Tradition Embroidering The Future

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Abstract

This essay explores nakshi kantha, the traditional embroidery of Bengal, as a hope-making device. It positions traditional embroidery as a tool for imagining futures in the pivotal moment of Bangladesh's approaching graduation from the UN category of Least Developed Countries. The essay argues that for the craft to achieve its generative potential, it must be liberated from the dictates of market templates, enabling the artistic freedom of the craftspeople. This position is supplemented by Sultana's Dream, the 20th-century science-fiction tale of matriarchal utopia by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. The nature of this essay is that of the running stitch, connecting field work experience, literature and research material. Personal reflections are based on experiences with Threads of Tales, a story-cloth project, re-envisioning traditional nakshi kantha embroidery as a form of cross-cultural storytelling.

Keywords

Nakshi kantha, Development, Science-fiction, Craft, Hope

Introduction

In Bengal, frayed white cotton saris, no longer fit for wear, are saved for the future. Their sari borders will be unravelled and the colored thread spooled. During the dry season, the white cotton will be layered and stretched out on swept ground, pinned in place with palmtree thorns. Women will gather around the cloth to sew, the seed-sized stitches sprouting into vines, blooming into flowers, springing up as beasts. The needles draw figures both familiar and abstract, giving shape to charms and hopes. The needles create wealth.

This essay is a poeticized exploration of hope-making through craft, specifically nakshi kantha, the embroidery tradition of Bengal. It weighs the economic benefits of the craft cottage industry and its adverse impact on creativity and expression. Further, the essay contrasts the realities of development against the iconic 1905 science-fiction satire Sultana's Dream by Rokeya Sakhwat Hosein. Acknowledging embroidery as a document of local female historiography, the essay advocates for the preservation of un-coded, free-hand and free-time craft.

In reflecting on the potential of and the constraints on the craft, I hope to conjure forth a future vision where craftspeople are empowered to follow their artistic visions free from templates, emboldened to evolve traditions and stories. The sinuous movement of this written piece embodies the spirit of the running stitch, meandering between first-hand experiences of nakshi kantha production, a feminist utopian dream of 1905, and the realities of climate change.

As a Ukrainian raised in Bangladesh, I find hope in the absorptive nature of nakshi kantha. Naturally, a textile native to the Bengal delta, would be flexible and assimilative to incorporate the many influences and cultures that have passed through this water land. Nakshi kantha has largely been an unregulated, uncodified craft, more personal diary than a format. The integration of new symbols and meanings is central to its character. The craft continues to evolve, and in the process of creating an embroidered story cloth for the Threads of Tales project, I had the opportunity to experience nakshi kantha symbol-making. Through this piece, I continue to examine nakshi kantha

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from multiple perspectives: material, semiological, traditional, generative and ultimately humanist.

Spinning Golden Thread

"I will make you golden bangles from thread," says Bilkis, a craftswoman from Shatkira, a coastal region of Bangladesh. She will bind one-taka glass bangles with golden embroidery thread, transforming the common into something precious. "Bangles fit for a queen," she promises, holding my hand.

In Bangladesh, where roughly one-third of the 180-million-strong population is vulnerable to economic and environmental uncertainty, thrift is a means of survival. The Golden Bengal of yore, deliberately depleted through centuries of political action, is glimpsed in the fecundity of the agrarian land and traditions. Making use of all parts of all things as a way of life is manifest in the crafts of Bengal. Nakshi kantha, an example of this rarefied resourcefulness, is not simply an answer to necessity but the expression of a deep value of objects, formed by a geography that is in constant flux and a history of migration and return.

Millions of women like Bilkis embroider for a living. Since Bangladesh's independence in 1971, the cottage embroidery industry has expanded rapidly, offering women independent income and flexible work from home hours, unlike the regulated and industrial ready-made garment sector, which also has a largely female workforce. As seen in Figure 1, women gather in embroidery circles and are free to come and go, working as much as time allows. To fulfil big orders from boutiques, they follow templates and colour schemes. While their handiwork and craftsmanship raises the value of the pieces, there is little artistic input from the craftswomen.

Nakshi kantha, the traditional running-stitch embroidery of Bengal, is often translated as 'embroidered quilt' though it is a blanket term for a wide range of embroidered textiles including pouches, mirror wraps, pillow cases, saris, table runners etc. While stylistically diverse, nakshi kantha commonly features swirling patterns, flowers, animals, and everyday objects. Historic examples depict divine figures, satirical scenes, myths, as well as scenes from everyday life, often organized around a central floral motif and contained in a border. Contemporary embroidery designs are secular, featuring village scenes, flora and fauna.

Early nakshi kantha pieces are intimate records of women's largely invisible lives. Through stitch, embroiderers articulated worldviews, desires, and hopes. Often used as a form of spell-binding, nakshi kanthas functioned as magic objects for protection and luck.

Over time, the nature of the craft shifted from intimate to industrial. While the nakshi kanthas of yore were open-ended wish-making devices; the nakshi kanthas of today are a means of wealth-making. The nakshi kanthas of the future are yet to be made.

Craft and Development

The border district of Jessore in southern Bangladesh is a major hub of nakshi kantha production. There, Bilkis and her colleague Moniara manage large orders from urban boutiques, distributing work among local women while ensuring quality and timely delivery. Through embroidery, these craftswomen have built houses, educated children, married, and buried relatives. Each stitch contributes to futures the women themselves may never themselves inhabit, as they work to sustain their children.

"One day we will build a buri bari (a home for the elderly)," Moniara dreams. She envisions a portable, modular structure, where women will live together, free of the demands of family and society.

This conversation unfolds along Jessore Road, memorialized in Allen Ginsberg's poem *September on Jessore Road* (1971). The road, lined by gigantic teak trees, was the main exodus route for millions who fled from the onslaught of the Liberation War of 1971.

Since independence, Bangladesh has been driven by clear development objectives, hosting countless international programmes and spurring the rise of BRAC, the world's biggest NGO. Significant gains have been made in poverty reduction, and the nation is expected to graduate from the United Nations category of Least Developed Countries in the near future. This milestone moment opens up new horizons.

Yet as economic growth accelerates, the weights of reality narrow the imaginative capacity to grasp the open-ended possibilities now available to the youthful population. Air pollution, climate change, environmental toxicity,

political instability, and unemployment constrain both aspiration and future thinking, reinforcing a scarcity mindset and shrinking the collective imagination. Hope-making becomes essential to counteract this tendency and visualise possible directions for the future.

Fig. 1: Women embroidering the Chader Buri nakshi kantha in Shatkira. *Note*. Photograph by the author.

Craft offers an entry point of imaginative freedom. The repetitive act of embroidery allows the mind to disengage from immediate anxieties to rest in the knowledge that the present conditions need not be permanent. In this state there is space to dream. To return to a pre-templated time. This state, if supported and harnessed, will produce surprising and magnificent results. Development also means evolving systemic support that values not solely the skill but the vision and creativity of the craftswoman.

To root the argument in experience, in the next section, I will draw on the example of the Threads of Tales project, which I had the fortune to curate. This experience goes to show how nakshi kantha serves as an imagination tool and how the demands of production constrain the creativity of the maker.

Imagination Devices

Imagining the future is no easy task. The constraints of religious belief, the imposition of inherited eschatology, the pulls of reality, all shorten vision. Asked to look ahead, many turn backwards. Sewing beneath a fluorescent light, Bilkis reflects, “One hundred years from now, we will return to the old ways. There will be no electricity, no phones, only hurricane lamps.”

In graduating into the general category of developing countries, Bangladesh has the unspoken challenge of cultivating imaginative practices to generate hopeful futures. The will to influence large-scale systems to change rises from the belief that change is possible. The “What next?” thought experiment performs well under the conditions of structured hope and understanding of the present conditions.

This activation of agency can be made easier with prompts, tools and stories. We met Moniara and Bilkis during the production of the Threads of Tales project, in which they coordinated the embroidery of 200 story-cloths. Over several months, one hundred women stitched scenes of full-moon and moonless nights, populated with symbols drawn from stories, lullabies, and rhymes. Mythological figures, beasts, plants, and talismanic hands, intermingle with everyday objects that function as shared metaphors: the hurricane lamp as an early form of light, the bicycle and airplane as vehicles of distance, the satellite as connection, and the unsteady clock as a symbol of time's instability.

Fig. 2: Chader Buri, Moon Granny, moonless night embroidered story cloth designed by Ibraheem Palling. Embroidered in Shatkira**.** *Note*. Photograph by the author.

At the center of each double-sided cloth appears Chader Buri, the Moon Granny as seen in Figure 2. Created in the language of symbols, the cloth contains only the bilingual inscription CHADER BURI, enabling it to be read across cultures and generations. Designed to invite continuation of meaning-making rather than preservation, the cloth offers traditional symbols as raw material, repurposing old symbols to make new stories, just as sari thread is recycled to make new textiles.

As Inayatullah writes, "Truth is considered relative, with language and culture both intimately involved in creating the real. Through comparison…we gain insight into the human condition" (Inayatullah, 1990, p. 115). By translating images across cultural and social contexts, imaginative practices reveal possibilities for the creation of new meanings.

The project required uniformity to function at scale, and the craftswomen, however well-compensated, became skilled executors of someone else's vision. This experience sharpened rather than resolved the question: how do you build imaginative freedom into a production structure without destroying the production? No answer is offered here,

only the honest record of the missed opportunity, and the insistence that the question remains worth asking. And the hope that craftspeople in the future will have creative freedom and license to set the course of the thread.

A Place Called Ladyland

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* offers a vision of a future free from production demands. Born in 1880 in Rangpur, British Bengal, Rokeya was a life-long writer, activist and educator. This short-story is a single example of her writing science-fiction. But in all her deeds (as a founder of a Muslim girls school, mentor to countless teachers, etc.) she worked to create an unlikely, resistant, feminist future.

The short story is set in a radical world, so far-fetched it has to be called a dream. Ladyland is a matriarchal society sustained by biotechnology and organized around cooperative principles. The story begins with Sultana (the dreamer) falling asleep in an easy chair and unfolds when she awakens in Ladyland, where flower-lined paths run in place of paved roads, tomato vines frame kitchen windows, rain-harvesting airships nourish the soil, and solar energy powers a sparkling city.

This vision resonates with Willow Pryor's (2025) concept of "inner re-wilding," which describes the dismantling of internalized resistance to partnership with the non-human world. By proposing an alternative social order, Rokeya was "breaking down the internal walls of constraint and control to awaken the fertile and untamed inner self" (Pryor, 2025, para. 7).

However alluring the vision of Rokeya's feminist future, it is part-satire. In Ladyland, the men have taken on the responsibilities of women and are secluded in the mardana, a cordoned off section of the house. This is not a proposal for a future where the gender wars have come to an end, it is a future that continues the familiar patriarchal hierarchy of domination. Whether Rokeya wished to reveal the real risk of inherent patriarchy in women or to illustrate the absurdity of a dominant gender, the feminist future project of Ladyland is thus curtailed. Separately, as Milojević (2024) notes, such visions have found little traction as sustained political projects, perhaps because a matriarchy that mirrors patriarchal structure offers an insufficient alternative to inspire collective investment.

Besides the gender satire, Rokeya paints a dignified and holistic way of life. In Ladyland women work a couple of hours a day, there is no hustle culture, the rest of the time they are free to pursue their creative callings, including embroidery. There are no templates, no production managers - craft for the sake of expression and creation. This, along with access to quality education, is one of the achievements of development in Ladyland.

In reality, Rokeya enacted these ideals by founding the first school for Muslim girls in Bengal, often persuading families directly to educate their daughters. Many of her students later became writers, lawyers, and social organizers, effectively constructing micro–Ladylands within existing structures. Sultana's Dream offers an enduring blueprint for development, one grounded in education, cooperation, and care. By imagining beyond the limits of her present, Rokeya demonstrated how speculative thought can function as infrastructure, translating dreams into durable social change.

The Disappearing Lungi Cloth

As craftswomen sew, their children are glued to screens beside them, all around discarded packaging and plastic bottles rise with the rain water. The cumulative weight of growing pollution, digital consumption (resulting in brain rot and yet to be diagnosed illnesses), and ecological degradation increasingly constrains the capacity to imagine positive, feminist futures.

To halt the unchecked consumption damaging our future, development and abundance need reframing. Rather than equating abundance with endless consumption, it is the ability to create wealth from scraps; pollution as opportunity, waste as resource, glass bangles as gold, worn sarees as enduring quilts.

Take the parable of the disappearing lungi. The lungi is a free-size lower garment worn by men across the subcontinent. It functions as workwear, leisure wear, towel, or coverlet. Once worn-out thin it is repurposed as a towel, then a cleaning cloth, then a floor mop, and eventually as fire kindling. Finally, the ash is used for cleaning utensils, fertilizer or brushing teeth. In this cycle, material value is extended until exhaustion. To see that using a thing to its full potential is not a sign of poverty but entrepreneurship, is a pivotal attitude shift.

As one of the world's largest producers of fast fashion, Bangladesh supplies global demand for inexpensive, disposable clothing. Thrift alone cannot counter the resulting waste without a broader reimagining of wealth and value systems.

Hope, in this context, operates as a practical orientation rather than passive optimism. As Brookfield and Preskill (2005) note, hope sustains engagement with long-term, difficult problems by affirming that sustained effort may yield meaningful outcomes, however incremental. Understood this way, hope becomes an active, regenerative force, one that enables the transformation of excess into continuity and endurance.

Conclusion: Telling New Futures

Accelerated development and efficiency-driven goals leave little space for intersectional approaches to progress. Not all aspirations align, and when a singular developmental directive dominates, alternative future visions are at risk. An outdated model of progress, an old future, conceived elsewhere and long interrogated and dismissed there, continues to haunt the systems in Bangladesh. This outdated vision runs through local policy and collective aspiration.

In an era of tightening borders and rising authoritarianism, sustained hope is an energy source. Craft is a radical practice of hope-making and women's creative labor generates forward momentum, contributing to the collective sense of positive possibility. The nakshi kantha cottage industry represents one of Bangladesh's most significant development achievements. Embroidery has supported millions of women and their families, but the future must support their creative vision and expression. Greater expression is necessary for the generation of more possible futures.

Sultana's Dream offers a counterpoint, a feminist vision in which abundance is measured through time, care, and regeneration. As Musrat Hossain Mithila writes, Rokeya's utopia prioritizes human freedom and leisure over productivity, challenging economic models that equate labor with worth: "an intellect freed from the daily grind is the most potent source of continued innovation, fundamentally challenging the economic belief that labour should consume life" (Hossain Mithila, 2026, para. 3).

"Will you come to stay with us in the buri bari (old home)?" asks Moniara. Hers is tangible hope, a micro-Ladyland of women living together, embroidering their stories, gold bangles glinting in the light of hurricane lamps.

Moniara's imagination moves backward toward a simpler time and forward toward feminist community. Hope under constraint is not a clear path towards something greater, it is a sustained sense of agency, even in the context of a larger pessimism. A hope made real stitch by stitch.

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