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Threads as texts: Connecting Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model to phulkari

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Abstract

The embroidery of Phulkari from Punjab has historically been regarded as a traditional craft, heritage textile, or a form of women's domestic labor. But these perspectives usually overlook its communicative aspect with the embroidery being the means for women to express memory, identity, and feelings. The present paper reframes the Phulkari as a cultural text and employs Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model to go over the production, transmission, and interpretation of meanings through the medium of embroidered textiles. Quoting interdisciplinary literature from material culture studies, feminist theory, and communication studies, the paper claims that Phulkari functions as a non-verbal language where the women artists are the cultural producers who inscribe on their chosen, motifs, colors, and stitches both the individual and the common narratives. Phulkari is not merely a material heritage but an emotional and affective archive of Punjabi rural women. The different parties such as the girls, the communities, the markets, the museums, and the fashion industry, each have their own way to read these meanings, thus leading to prevailing, negotiated, and resistant readings. The paper extends Hall's model from mass media to material culture, thus, presenting a novel theoretical contribution and positioning Phulkari as a living repository of women's memory and power. The study shows that the Phulkari is not only a decorative textile but also an slowly evolving practice of communication that is under-the-zero running majorly through gender, generation, and the changes in social-economic status, among others.

Keywords: Phulkari, material culture, encoding/decoding, Stuart hall, women's memory, communication theory

Introduction

Phulkari has been being studied primarily through the lenses of textile history, folk art, heritage studies, and women's labour in academia. Phulkari has been traced through its changing styles, skill sets, and its shifts due to colonial, national and global influences, among others. However, the works done in this area have often seen the embroidered textile as a finished product instead of depicting a process through which meaning was made with the help of the fabric. Thus, the very potential of Phulkari its ability to manifest and share memory, feeling, identity, and social values has been under-theorised.

Women who embroidered Phulkari hardly ever resorted to written or formal modes of culture documentation. Their daily lives, hopes, and feelings were not placed in textual archives; instead, they were captured in the non-verbal forms. With this, embroidery was a non-verbal language through which women expressed and shared stories of their own and of the whole community. The motifs, shades, stitch density, and layout choices were all meaning-bearers, and it was this means that women were able to express emotions such as love, hope, nostalgia, sorrow, and protection through the cloth. Thus, Phulkari was not just a labor of embellishment, but also an emotional archive a physical medium through which women kept memory alive and shared it with the next generation.

The growing interest in the areas of memory studies and material culture on the other has not, however, led to the analysis of Phulkari as a communication system. Textual, visual, and broadcast forms of expression have been given prominence by communication theory, particularly within the domain of mass media studies, to the detriment of material and craft-based practices which have been easily overlooked and therefore marginalized. As a consequence, while women's domestic arts have been relegated to the status of non-legitimate communicative forms, embroidery remains at the periphery of communication

studies so that its symbolic structure and interpretive richness are still being questioned.

This paper's goal is thus to push Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model further to show how it can be applied to material culture by taking Phulkari as a case study. Paper not only contributes to communication studies, feminist theory, and material culture theory, but also supplies a paradigm in which craft activities can be viewed as meaning and communication systems. It claims that Phulkari is not just a heritage textile or an aesthetic object, but rather a living, evolving practice of communication that is influenced by factors such as gender, age, and socio-economic status.

Phulkari: From Craft to Cultural Text

Embroidery Phulkari plays a vital role in the cultural milieu of Punjab and historically it has been God's domestic practice so much so that it is women's daily life. Textiles of many traditions that were primarily for commercial exchange have lost their originality, but Phulkari has come up in the close-knit family circle of women's world, for their private use, giving rituals, and passing down from one generation to another. The home, generation women's knowledge, emotionality, and social customs determined its quality rather than the market. The production of Phulkari is, therefore, a social and cultural process in which women's past and present take part. This section explores the very emotional, symbolic, and gendered dimensions of Phulkari that led to the transformation from domestic craft to cultural text.

Historical and Cultural Context of Phulkari

The historical and cultural issues of Phulkari are still discussed when it comes to its beginnings in the debate among scholars some trace its origin back to Central Asia and Persia whereas others are in favour of its being the product of Punjab region's heritage. In any case, Phulkari became strongly connected to the agrarian and domestic life of Punjab. Traditionally, embroidery was done on khaddar, a handwoven cotton cloth, using silk floss and was characterized by a unique darning stitch executed from the backside of the fabric. Through careful counting of threads and ceaseless practice, the front-facing patterns came up that not only showed the embroiderer's technical skill but also her close acquaintance with the material and the process.

Phulkari was intertwined with a woman's life from the very beginning of her life cycle stages. Special forms like Chope were made to be embroidered for weddings, mostly gifted by mothers and sisters, while Bagh Phulkaris, heavily embroidered to the point of covering the whole surface, were meant for grand ceremonial occasions only. These textiles were prepared sometimes mothering a daughter, thus, embedding anticipation, hope, and family aspiration within the cloth. So, Phulkari served as a temporal object that not only carried meaning across time but also marked the transitions from girlhood to marriage and adulthood.

Review of literature

Phulkari embroidery has become an attractive subject for the research that was carried out in various fields like textile history, anthropology, gender studies, and heritage studies. The existing literature has provided a detailed account of the technical, historical, and economic aspects of Phulkari while the recent studies have started to highlight the issues of

women's power, memory, and identity. However, even with such a rich and diverse literature, Phulkari has been overlooked by the communication theory. Thus, this part of the text goes over the literature and finds the gap that this study is going to fill up.

Phulkari in Textile history and Heritage studies

Cristin Ruth McKnight Sethi's doctoral dissertation, *Producing, Collecting and Displaying Phulkari Embroidery from Punjab, c.1850 to Present* (2015), is one of the most thorough academic works related to Phulkari. The author Sethi employs a socio-biographical and feminist perspective to follow the Phulkari's transition from private homes to public museums and worldwide exhibition circuits. She contends that Phulkari is not merely an object of heritage but rather a vibrant cultural artefact that is always being modified in its meaning by factors such as colonialism, nationalism, diaspora, and the practices of the institutions involved. Sethi's contribution is very significant in bringing women's work and display politics to the forefront; however, her main emphasis still is on the production, collection, and representation rather than Phulkari being a communicative system.

Gupta and Mehta (2016) ^[16], in their paper *The Effect of Colonisation and Globalisation in the Shaping of Phulkari*, delve into the impact of colonial exhibitions, industrial development, and worldwide markets on the transition of Phulkari from a female-based home craft to a textile product that could be sold. They have traced changes in materials, motifs, and production methods, and have particularly noted how traditional meanings have been diluted and re-contextualised under the influence of the market. Although their study points out the cultural loss and change, it does not propose any theory about the encoding or interpretation of meanings in different social contexts.

Phulkari, Memory, Emotion, and Women's Agency

Another segment of the literature places Phulkari into the context of the discussions around memory, emotion, and women's daily lives. Wardah Naeem Bukhari's research, *The Embroidery of Emotions: Phulkari Bagh's of Punjab* (2019) ^[17], highlights the emotional and symbolic importance of Phulkari, especially Bagh Phulkari. Bukhari sees Phulkari as "emotional embroidery," claiming it reflects women's identities, rituals, and life stories. Her research is instrumental in considering embroidery as an emotional archive; nonetheless, it is still mainly descriptive and does not apply a methodological approach to analyze the process of meaning-making.

Kiran Deep (2020) ^[18], in *Talking Threads, Embroidering Memories: Phulkari as Historical Narrative of Punjabi Culture*, depicts Phulkari as a narrative channel wherein women express cultural memory and history. Deep's work closely parallels memory studies and underscores storytelling through textiles. While this method recognizes Phulkari's storytelling potential, it does not completely take into account the varying interpretations of meanings by different audiences over the course of time.

Anu H. Gupta's research on Punjabi women artisans (2020) ^[19] acknowledges the socio-economic conditions of women workers in the informal sector and sometimes even in exploitative situations. Gupta makes it clear that embroidery gives women just a little economic independence and a certain identity, though their work is still considered

worthless. This study is important in connecting Phulkari to discussions of women's power and liberation, though it mainly deals with work conditions rather than with non-verbal communication.

The overall picture painted by these researches is that of Phulkari being a site for the expression of memory, feeling, and women's work. Yet, they usually push either the physical aspect or the social context and do not consistently analyze how embroidery acts as a communicative practice that creates and carries meaning.

Research Gap Identified

There has been an overwhelming amount of literature dealing with the history, aesthetics, and socio-economic aspects of Phulkari but still, it is rare to find a study that treats Phulkari as a communication system. Most research accepts the existence of symbolic elements and emotional conveyance but they do not go on to theorize the ways that meanings are created by women artisans and are later 'read' by different audiences like daughters, communities, markets, museums, and the fashion industry, for instance.

Furthermore, communication theory especially Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model--has mostly concentrated on the analysis of mass media texts such as television, film, and advertising, while material culture and craft practices have been given only minor attention. This has led communication researchers to overlook the unified territory of women's home arts, albeit their exquisite symbolic structures and interpretive complexity.

The gap in the research has been filled by the current paper which applies Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model to Phulkari embroidery. As an addition to this, Phulkari treated as a cultural text, aims to show the dynamic processes of symbolism and analysis of the production, transmission, and interpretation of meaning. The researchers through this novel interdisciplinary approach, which is the intersection of material culture studies, feminist scholarship, and communication theory, position the Phulkari as an active medium of cultural communication and not just a static

heritage artefact.

Methodology

Through the qualitative and interpretive research approach, this research investigates Phulkari embroidery as an alternative form of non-verbal communication. The study aims to appreciate women's artists' meanings in their embroidery through the lens of communication studies, material culture, and feminism.

The research selected 60 women artisans who are such artists as the primary creators and carriers of the tradition through purposive sampling, where artisans are involved in the Phulkari embroidery process. Primary data has been collected through the administration of a short, semi-structured questionnaire comprising six to seven multiple-choice questions.

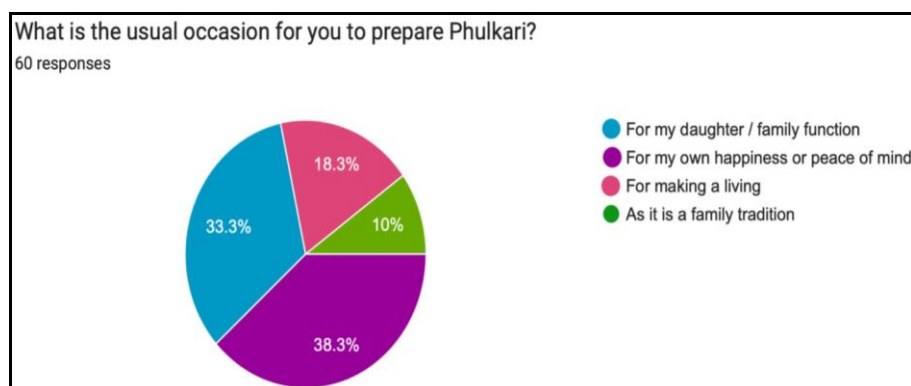
The language used in the questionnaire was simple and easy to understand, and it was sometimes administered orally in situations where the respondents' literacy levels varied. The subjects of the questions included the artisans' intent, emotional involvement, symbolic choices, and their opinions about how Phulkari is perceived in the family, community, and market contexts.

The data were interpreted thematically and integrated with Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model to find out the dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings. Instead of being used as statistical data, the questionnaire responses were used to back the theoretical analysis.

The researchers observed ethical considerations regarding the artisans through voluntary participation, anonymity, and respectful handling of their responses.

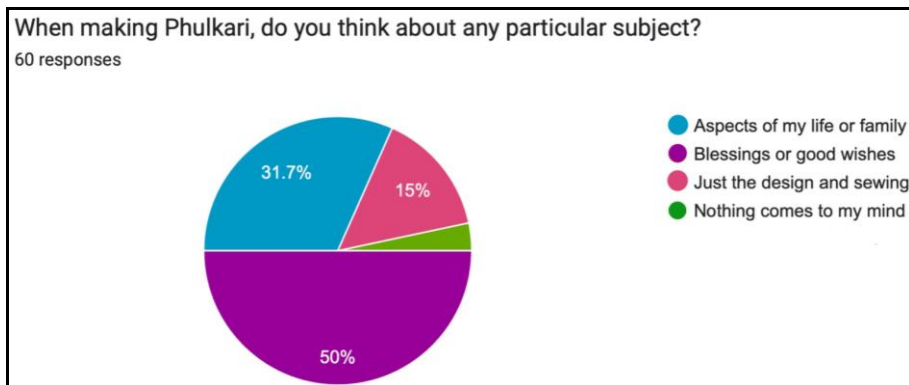
Q1. What is the usual occasion for you to prepare Phulkari?

- A. For my daughter/family function (18.3%)
- B. For my own happiness or peace of mind (10%)
- C. For making a living (38.3%)
- D. As it is a family tradition (33.3%)



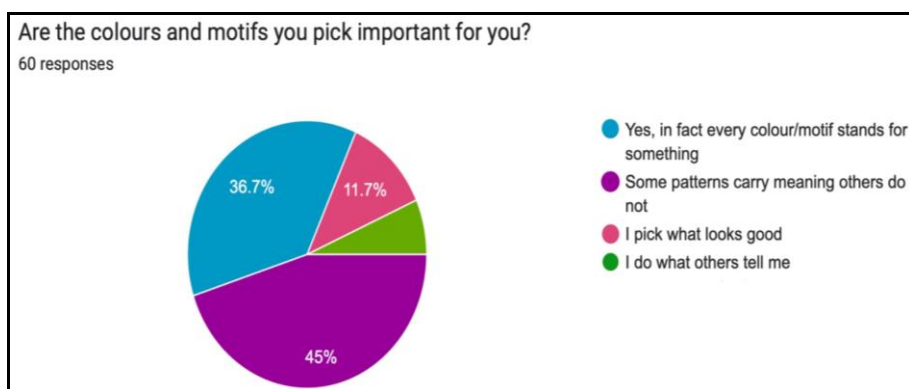
Q2. When making Phulkari, do you think about any particular subject?

- A. Aspects of my life or family (50%)
- B. Blessings or good wishes (31.7%)
- C. Just the design and sewing (15%)
- D. Nothing comes to my mind (3.3%)



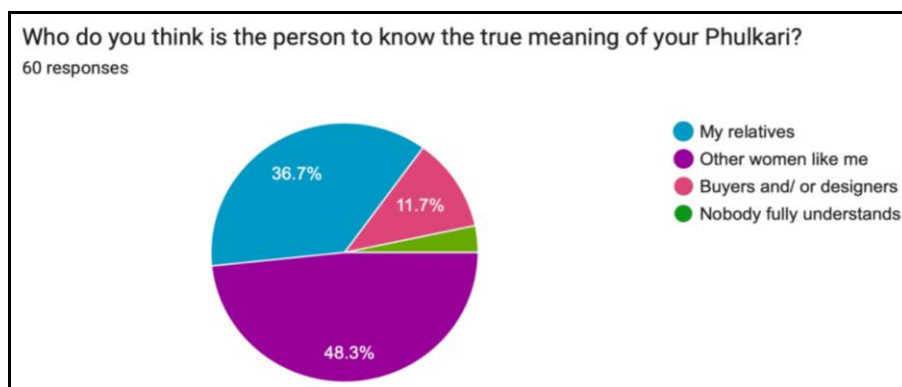
Q3. Are the colours and motifs you pick important for you?

- A. Yes, in fact every colour/motif stands for something (45%)
- B. Some patterns carry meaning others do not (36.7%)
- C. I pick what looks good (11.7%)
- D. I do what others tell me (7.6%)



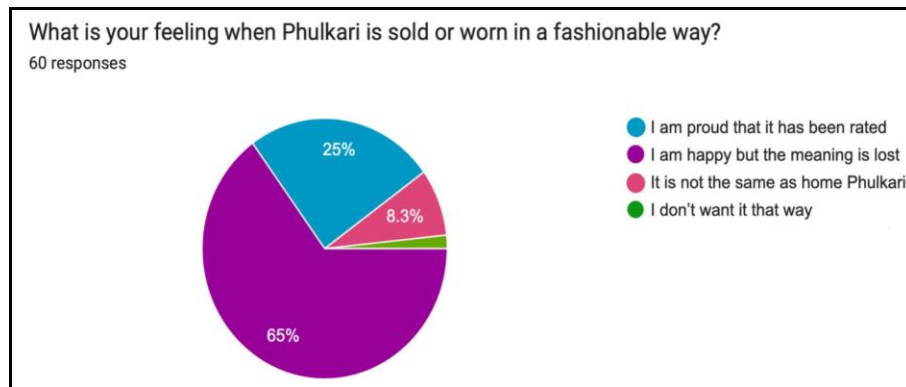
Q4. Who do you think is the person to know the true meaning of your Phulkari?

- A. My relatives (11.7%)
- B. Other women like me (48.3%)
- C. Buyers and/or designers (4%)
- D. Nobody fully understands (36.7%)



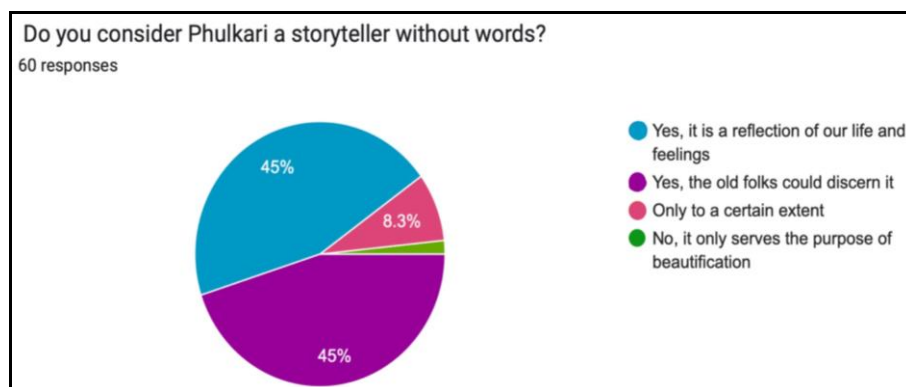
Q5. What is your feeling when Phulkari is sold or worn in a fashionable way?

- A. I am proud that it has been rated (8.3%)
- B. I am happy but the meaning is lost (65%)
- C. It is not the same as home Phulkari (25%)
- D. I don't want it that way (1.7%)



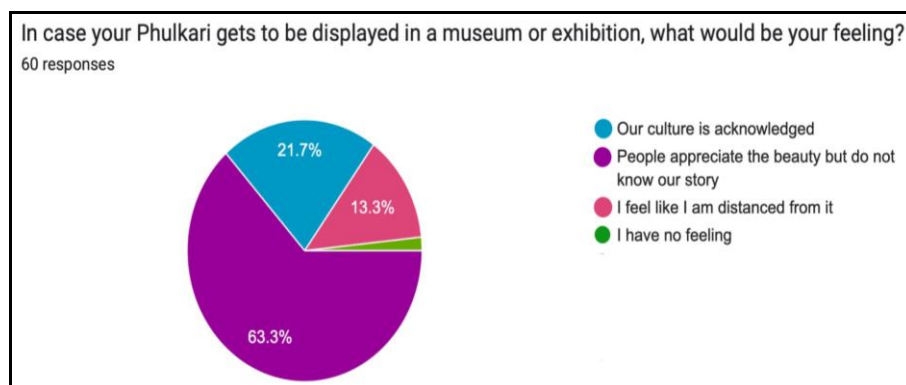
Q6. Do you consider Phulkari a storyteller without words?

- A. Yes, it is a reflection of our life and feelings (45%)
- B. Yes, the old folks could discern it (45%)
- C. Only to a certain extent (8.3%)
- D. No, it only serves the purpose of beautification (1.7%)



Q7. In case your Phulkari gets to be displayed in a museum or exhibition, what would be your feeling?

- A. Our culture is acknowledged (21.7%)
- B. People appreciate the beauty but do not know our story (63.3%)
- C. I feel like I am distanced from it (13.3%)
- D. I have no feeling (1.7%)



Findings and Interpretation of the Artisan Questionnaire

The results of the questionnaire reveal that Phulkari embroidery plays an important role as a communicative practice rather than merely a decorative or commercial activity. Even though a few artisans engage in Phulkari for the sake of making a living, the majority of them connect the practice to family, tradition, memory, and emotional well-being. This indicates that market participation does not erase the cultural intent behind its making.

Artisans shared that they were deliberately reminiscing

about life experiences, family, blessings, and good wishes while doing the stitching. This manifests Phulkari as a kind of emotional and mnemonic encoding. The strong importance attached to colours and motifs further shows that the design choices are not random but rather symbolic and thus, relying on shared cultural codes that have been passed down through generations.

When it comes to interpretation, the artisans mainly think that the real meaning of Phulkari is rightly interpreted by other women or remains somewhat misconstrued, especially by the buyers and designers. This is in line with Stuart Hall's

claim that meanings are dictated by the social position of the decoder rather than being simply and clearly transmitted.

The responses concerning fashion, markets, and museums show predominantly negotiated and oppositional readings, with many artisans feeling that commercial and institutional contexts appreciate visual beauty while ignoring the embedded stories and emotions. At the same time, artisans firmly asserted Phulkari as a storytelling medium without words especially in women's cultural spaces.

In general, these results provide empirical backing to the use of Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model in the case of Phulkari embroidery, showing how women artisans encode memory and identity through the textile, while meanings change as the textile goes from home to market and then to the museum.

Theoretical Framework: Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model

In order to analyze Phulkari embroidery as a communication system, this study takes Hall's Encoding/Decoding model as the leading theoretical framework. Hall's model, developed in the context of British Cultural Studies, challenges linear and transmission-based understandings of communication by focusing on the social production of meaning. Instead of assuming that messages are sent and received without distortion, Hall claims that people involved in the process of encoding and decoding are influenced by their cultural, ideological, and social backgrounds.

Initially conceived in terms of mass media texts like television and broadcasting, the Encoding/Decoding model is a flexible analytical tool that can be applied not only to media but also to various other forms in a similar manner. Its focus on meaning-making, interpretation, and power makes it very suitable for analyzing various material culture practices like Phulkari embroidery, where communication is done without spoken or written language.

Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model

The Encoding/Decoding model was first put forward by Hall in his essay on television discourse, which subsequently was revised and included in a book. Hall's work not only critiques the standard communication models, but also elucidates the process of meaning as packaging, unpacking, and repacking through many routes and at different levels, such as the production, circulation, consumption, and reproduction of meanings.

In Hall's view, encoding is the process where the creators of the content determine the message and language. This is done through the means of a code made of cultural knowledge, social relations, and ideological frameworks that make up the content and the resultant messages are not neutral; they are influenced by the dominant cultural meanings and power relations. Decoding, however, points to the different ways the public perceives the messages. Hall stresses that decoding does not have to follow the same path as encoding, since the audience members are influenced by their own backgrounds, convictions, and societal roles during their individual interpretation.

Identifying these three decoding positions is a vital task for Hall

1. Dominant (Hegemonic) Reading: It is a case where the audience receives the message exactly as intended by the creator. The packaging of the message is

accepted as natural or logical thus supporting the existing cultural values.

2. Negotiated Reading: The audience in this case takes the dominant meaning to some extent but modifies it according to his/her personal experiences or the local context. This reading involves both acceptance and resistance.

3. Oppositional Reading: The audience in this case realizes what the intended meaning is but does not accept it. Then, the audience interprets the message in a way contrary to or resistant to the original. A major impact of Hall's model is its refusal of the idea of passive audiences. Not by an imposition but through a process of interpretation, communication meaning is produced actively.

The result is that communication becomes a place of negotiation and power struggle instead of a one-way flow of information.

Expansion of Encoding/Decoding Over the Cultural Material

Though Hall centred his model on the mass media, the conceptual framework remains valid for non-broadcast texts as well. Since then, cultural theorists have taken the concept of Encoding/Decoding into different areas like advertising, popular culture, and visual media where meaning is conveyed through signs, codes and interpretive practices across cultural forms. This research brings Hall's model one step closer to the realm of material culture as it treats Phulkari embroidery as a kind of cultural text.

Among the material culture researchers are Miller and Appadurai who have stressed that things are not just inert but play an active role in the social meaning being created. They have said that objects keep track of their lives, they are moved from one context to another and they serve as a bridge between people. Using this perspective, one can say that, Phulkari is a communicative artefact that has embedded meanings and opens itself for interpretation.

To use the Encoding/decoding model on Phulkari it is necessary to point out women artisans as encoders who insert meanings in motifs, colors, stitches, and compositional choices. These meanings are the result of personal experiences, cultural traditions, and social norms. The product finds its way into various contexts—family, community, market, museum, and fashion—and gets its messages interpreted by different audiences.

This theoretical shift is of prime importance since Phulkari does not depend on verbal language. It rather relies on material signs and embodied practices for its communication. The Encoding/Decoding model brings forth the analysis of the functioning of these non-verbal codes as symbols and the shifting of their meanings depending on the interpreter and context.

Relevance of the Model to Phulkari

The Encoding/Decoding framework is ideal for the Phulkari study for a number of reasons. First, the making of Phulkari takes place in unequal power relations where women's voices have always been pushed to the background. Hall's model emphasizes the producers but still indicates that the meaning is not entirely in their hands. This reflects the situation of women's craftsmen where their purpose may be misunderstood or taken over in the commercial and

institutional places.

Second, the model lets the cultural object to be interpreted in different and with even conflicting ways. A Phulkari that is signified by a mother as a blessing or protection charm may be interpreted by a daughter as a tradition, by a market as a design commodity, or by a museum as heritage art. These opposite readings do not invalidate the original meaning, but rather demonstrate how cultural texts gain multi-meanings.

Third, Hall's focus on negotiation and resistance coincides with the current changes of Phulkari. As the new generation takes part in the embroidery activity in a selective way or uses it in modern contexts, their interpretations usually end up in negotiated or opposing stands. The model thus offers a direction for understanding alteration without presenting it merely as loss or decline. The use of Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model in the study of Phulkari facilitates the initiative of the analysis that goes beyond the descriptive accounts of symbolism and the traditional view of the craft as that of an ancient communicator, thus raising the more comprehensive issues of gender, memory, identity, and power. So, the theoretical approach makes Phulkari to be viewed not solely as a traditional craft, but rather as a constantly changing communicative practice

Analysis: Encoding and Decoding Phulkari as a Communicative Practice

This article collaborates with Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model to interpret the embroidery of Phulkari in order to look at how the meanings created by the women artisans and how these meanings are either interpreted, negotiated or transformed through different social contexts. As a cultural text, Phulkari provides an analysis that can be engaged with not only through seeing but also interpreting the communicative processes that are embedded in the practice material. The analysis is structured along two closely connected dimensions: artist encodings and audience decoding.

Encoding Phulkari: Women as Cultural Producers

According to Hall, the meaning that gets structured through the production moment of encoding is referred to as coding. In the case of Phulkari, the rural Punjabi women are the principal encoders, and through the use of motifs, colors, stitches, and compositions, they infuse their narratives—individual, familial, and collective into the fabric. The codes are not random; on the contrary, they are based on the participants' collective cultural knowledge, life experiences, and gendered social roles. Some of the most common motifs of Phulkari such as flowers, geometric shapes, peacocks, wheat stalks, and heavenly bodies are symbolic codes. Floral images signal fertility, flourishing, and the prosperity of a marriage, whereas geometric patterns can be a symbol of protection and harmony. Certain designs through their repetitive character reflect the cycle of life and resilience, whereas variations in stitch density or pattern positioning may disclose personal creativity or mood. Colour choices add to the meaning: red and orange are often associated with energy and celebration, whereas the darker shades are likely to be used during the times of struggles or emotional suppression.

Stitching is an example of embodied encoding. Women often during times of transition, for instance, do the Phulkari embroidering between domestic duties, during seasonal

breaks, or at community events. The emotional quality of the embroidery is determined by these temporal conditions. An example of this is a Phulkari created for a daughter's wedding which conveys maternal love, anxiety, and hope that is frequently over a long span of years. These kinds of textiles are like emotional archives that store feelings that could not be openly expressed in a patriarchal culture.

Also, the coding of Phulkari is influenced by the non-existence of written patterns. The designs are memorized, transformed, and created on the spot, which gives women the chance to embed their own lived experiences inside the inherited patterns. This scenario is in line with Hall's claim that production is never neutral; meanings are encoded within dominant cultural structures but also bear the traces of personal intention and agency. Accordingly, Phulkari becomes a medium through which women declare their authorship within the limited spaces of the society.

Circulation of Phulkari: Movement Across Contexts

Once meaning is established, Phulkari textiles are moved in and out of various social contexts and in each context the meaning is differently interpreted. Previously relegated to domestic and ceremonial spaces, Phulkari has now taken over trading places, exhibitions, museums, and even global fashion markets. This circulation of Phulkari is in line with Hall who pointed out that the meanings of cultural texts become tentative in the process of their movement from production sites, thus making them open to reinterpretation. In the family context, Phulkari still has a very strong emotional value. Each time the textile is given from mother to daughter, it brings with it the stories of lineage, care, and continuity. In the community context, Phulkari acts as a sign of Punjabi identity and belonging to the culture. On the contrary, when the textile is laid in commercial or institutional spaces, the artisans' encoded messages may be interpreted through aesthetic, economic, or political nationalist discourses. This winding brings about the situation wherein diverse decoding positions are possible.

Decoding Phulkari: Multiple Interpretive Positions

The use of Hall's three decoding positions demonstrates that various audiences have different perceptions when it comes to Phulkari.

Dominant (Hegemonic) Readings are found to be in place when the decoder agrees with the traditional cultural values and accepts the encoded meaning. Within families and local communities, Phulkari is typically interpreted as a sign of love, honour, and tradition. The fabric is regarded as a major part of the women's care work and cultural responsibility, thus reinforcing its role in the memory of the whole community.

Negotiated Readings arise when the audience gives only a partial agreement to the traditional meanings and at the same time, modernizes them. For instance, young women may see Phulkari as a heritage but still engage with it in a restricted way wearing it only during the special occasions or mixing it with contemporary done clothing. The designers and the buyers can together recognize the cultural value but still place it lower than beauty or saleable. These interpretations are based on a common ground rather than outright rejection.

Oppositional Readings appear to us mainly through the Phulkari's institutional and commercial appropriations. The museums displaying Phulkari merely as folk art or the

fashion industries where motifs have entirely lost their meanings are two examples where the original stories of women's hard work and memory might be altogether hidden. From the artisan's perspective, such interpretations can indeed be conceived as resistant or extractive, for they are completely separating the object from its emotional and social roots.

The different viewpoints validate Hall's reasoning that the meaning is not determined at the stage of production. Rather, the Phulkari textile is a polysemic, multi-interpretational text that depends on the social position, knowledge, and intent of the decoder for the reading to be one of the many possible ones.

Power, Gender, and Silenced Meanings

One of the most important aspects of the application of the Encoding/Decoding model to Phulkari is its ability to unravel the power dynamics in the making of meanings. Women, for instance, are the ones who encode into embroidery the rich narratives but they are the ones who mostly, if not entirely, lack the control over the representation or the valuation of these meanings in the public sphere, that is, beyond domestic spaces. The forces of the market, curatorial practices, and the academic discourses often put emphasis on the visual aesthetics as opposed to the lived experience, thus resulting in the silencing of the women's voices.

However, Hall's model grants the recognition of the subtle forms of resistance that are present in the process of meaning-making. Even when the meanings are reinterpreted or turned into commodities, the trace of the original encoding does not leave the textile. The survival of Phulkari as a cultural practice implies that the communicative labor of women is not completely wiped out but rather transformed and continues to create new meanings through the changing social realities.

This analysis, in framing Phulkari through Encoding/Decoding, demonstrates that embroidery is not merely a decoration but rather an active communicative practice. It is a place where memory, identity, and power come together encoded through women's work and decoded through various cultural lenses.

Discussion: Phulkari as Gendered Communication and Cultural Memory

This discussion section synthesizes the findings from the encoding-decoding analysis and situates them within broader debates in cultural studies, material culture, and feminist scholarship. By applying Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model to Phulkari embroidery, this study demonstrates how a domestic craft practice operates as a sophisticated system of non-verbal communication. The discussion highlights three key insights: Phulkari as a gendered communicative medium, its role in sustaining cultural memory, and the implications of shifting interpretive contexts in contemporary society.

Reframing Phulkari as Communication Rather Than Craft
One of the central contributions of this study lies in challenging the dominant framing of Phulkari as merely a traditional craft or decorative textile. While existing scholarship has extensively documented its motifs, techniques, and regional variations, fewer studies have addressed its communicative function. By positioning Phulkari as a cultural text, this research expands the

application of communication theory beyond mass media and verbal discourse.

Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model enables a shift from object-centred analysis to process-centred interpretation. Phulkari emerges not as a static artefact but as a dynamic site of meaning production, circulation, and interpretation. Women artisans are revealed as cultural producers who encode complex narratives into material form, even when denied formal authorship or public visibility. This reframing aligns with feminist critiques of knowledge production that call for the recognition of women's domestic and creative labour as intellectually and culturally significant.

Phulkari as a Repository of Cultural and Emotional Memory

The analysis also supports that Phulkari is a memory carrier that works personally and collectively at the same time. The encoded memories in stitches, the use of colours and motifs reflect marriage, migration, loss, and the triumph of human spirit. These memories are not documented in writing, but rather scattered through the continuity of materials and the practice of the living.

The communicative aspect of Phulkari is consistent with cultural memory theories, where objects are the bearers of meaning through different generations. Phulkari, through the different readings in families and communities, maintains bonds between the older and the younger generations and strengthens the shared identities. The textile continues to evoke memory even if the contexts have changed, which means that the material culture can be an affective archive that resists being erased.

However, the memory in Phulkari is not of nostalgia nor is it fixed. When meanings are interpreted by the younger generations or outside audiences, memory becomes adaptable. This adaptability reinforces the argument that cultural memory is actively made rather than passively received, which in turn, supports Hall's model in comprehending material traditions.

Gender, Power, and Meaning-Making

The debate further discloses the way power acts in the communicative life of Phulkari. Although women mean by their experiences of life, they are often not in power to decide how these meanings will be interpreted in the institutional or commercial settings. Aesthetic value is often considered more important than social context by museums, fashion industries, and global markets thus causing partial or oppositional reading which keeps women's voices marginalized.

On the other hand, the Encoding/Decoding framework does not limit this situation to only cultural loss. Rather, it brings forward the constant negotiations happening between tradition and modernity. Women's agency remains active in the forms of selective engagement, adapting of motifs, and the practice of embroidery even when meanings are changing. This brings forth the strength of gender communication in keeping cultural practices alive through the shifts in socio-economic conditions.

Through the use of women's encoding practices, this research supports feminist material culture scholarship which aims to bring back the silenced narratives and acknowledge the different forms of knowledge production. Phulkari is viewed as the proof of how women at times communicate their identity and power through their

oppressive social structures.

Theoretical Implications and Contribution

The present paper makes a very powerful theoretical contribution which is the application of Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model to material culture. The model, originally devised for mass media analysis, finds its power in the case of Phulkari, revealing its flexibility to non-verbal, handmade cultural forms. The widening of the model's scope not only creates a different perspective of the study of communication but also provides alternative routes for the analysis of craft traditions as communicative systems.

Thus, the research not only integrates material culture studies with communication theory but also opens up an interdisciplinary framework which can be utilized in studies of other textile traditions and domestic crafts. Considering material objects as texts and makers as encoders, this theory encourages the researchers to rethink the ways in which non-linguistic factors and institutions influence the circulation of meanings.

Conclusion

The study has shown that Phulkari embroidery from Punjab is not just a traditional craft or decorative textile but rather a cultural text and communicative practice. The research, utilizing the Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model, has proved that Phulkari serves as a non-verbal language through which rural Punjabi women materialize memory, identity, emotion, and cultural values. By applying a communication theory originally formulated for mass media to the context of material culture, the research has provided both empirical and theoretical contributions.

The analysis indicated that women artisans are cultural creators who insert personal and communal stories within symbols, colors, and stitches. These meanings that are encoded are transmitted through different contexts, that is familial, communal, commercial, and institutional, where they are decoded in the ways of dominant, negotiated, or oppositional. Such different interpretations highlight Hall's point that meaning is not fixed at the time of production but rather it is constantly reshaped by social position, cultural knowledge, and power relations. Focusing on the embodied labour and creative agency of women, this research adds to the feminist literature which aims at recovering the previously hidden forms of knowledge production. Phulkari is to be seen not just as a part of heritage but an emotional archive, keeping alive the memory of a whole generation and allowing the women to tell their stories that are generally not heard because of the patriarchal system. The original purpose of Phulkari as a form of communication may be nearly gone, but its traces are still present, and so gendered cultural practices are shown to be powerful and unyielding.

The artisan questionnaire findings not only support but also give a practical example of the arguments through the experiences of women Phulkari artisans. The answers granted us the insight that the artisans are aware of putting memory, feeling and culture into their embroidery purposely, mainly via the use of colors, motifs and the act of stitching that is full of meaning. The survey, on the one hand, points out that these meanings are mostly recognized within the women's communities while, on the other hand, they are somewhat debated or lose their significance as

Phulkari goes to commercial and institutional areas. This empirical evidence supports the use of Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model in the interpretation of material culture, which proves that meaning in Phulkari is created and psychologically interpreted in different ways depending on the social context.

Theoretically, this paper shows that the Encoding/Decoding model can be applied not only in the context of mass media but also in the case of material culture as communication with the suggestion of new ways for analysis of the latter. This has been done through the triangulation of communication studies, material culture theory, and feminist critique, which have produced a fertile ground for the application to other textile traditions and domestic crafts. To sum up, Phulkari should be regarded as an embroidered cloth as well as a living text one that encodes the history of women, negotiates their identities in the process of change, and still keeps on adding to its meaning through the passage of time. To view Phulkari as a means of communication is to grant a more profound recognition of women's cultural labour and to affirm its importance in the realms of academic discourse and contemporary cultural life. By considering Phulkari as a communicative act rooted in the everyday lives of women, this research urges the conventional wisdom of craft practices to be reconsidered as the main areas where cultural significance and gendered knowledge are produced.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Q1. What is the usual occasion for you to prepare Phulkari?

- A. For my daughter/family function
- B. For my own happiness or peace of mind
- C. For making a living
- D. As it is a family tradition

Q2. When making Phulkari, do you think about any particular subject?

- A. Aspects of my life or family
- B. Blessings or good wishes
- C. Just the design and sewing
- D. Nothing comes to my mind

Q3. Are the colours and motifs you pick important for you?

- A. Yes, in fact every colour/motif stands for something
- B. Some patterns carry meaning others do not
- C. I pick what looks good
- D. I do what others tell me

Q4. Who do you think is the person to know the true meaning of your Phulkari?

- A. My relatives
- B. Other women like me
- C. Buyers and/or designers
- D. Nobody fully understands

Q5. What is your feeling when Phulkari is sold or worn in a fashionable way?

- A. I am proud that it has been rated
- B. I am happy but the meaning is lost
- C. It is not the same as home Phulkari
- D. I don't want it that way

Q6. Do you consider Phulkari a storyteller without words?

- A. Yes, it is a reflection of our life and feelings
- B. Yes, the old folks could discern it
- C. Only to a certain extent
- D. No, it only serves the purpose of beautification

Q7. In case your Phulkari gets to be displayed in a museum or exhibition, what would be your feeling?

- A. Our culture is acknowledged
- B. People appreciate the beauty but do not know our story
- C. I feel like I am distanced from it
- D. I have no feeling