

Stitched Encounters: An Exploration of the Afghan-European Embroidery Initiative Guldusi

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Introduction

'Each stitch is a reaffirmation of identity, a setting down of the past. Embroidery gives us a sense of belonging, connects us to our land and gives us an identity.'¹

British textile artist Gillian Travis incorporated the French translation of the above quote in a recent textile wall hanging titled *Letter to my Friends*, 29.7 cm x 42 cm (11.7 in. x 16.6 in.) (Figure 1). The screen-printed and free-motion quilted piece was specifically designed for the European wide competition 'Message' (deadline 30 November 2016). This competition required European needlewomen to include a small piece of embroidery designed and completed by women from Laghmani in Afghanistan in their own textile creations. A message of the European needlewomen's choosing was to be conveyed through the final piece. The competition was organized by Pascale Goldenberg, the founder of the Afghan-European embroidery initiative Guldusi. According to Goldenberg, the finished artworks form what she calls a 'four hands project' because each includes one embroidered square from Afghanistan. In these projects, not only different needlework techniques are married but indeed 'two cultures become connected'.² This connection is established through the women's shared practice of embroidering and sewing as well as, perhaps, through their shared gender identity as women. While the quote chosen by Travis originated in a Palestinian context, she believes that a similar argument can be made for the Afghan embroiderers or indeed for needlewomen across the world.³ In this discourse, practices of needlework are closely linked to women's identity, agency, and sense of empowerment. She explains: 'I have worked with different textile initiatives around the world, for example in India, Palestine and Guatemala. The statement [on this wall hanging] shows how important the work is to the women.'⁴

This paper takes a detailed look at the Afghan-European hand embroidery initiative Guldusi. I examine the initiative as a form of cross-cultural collaborative

needlework project that may provide a space for shared cultural encounter between Afghans and Europeans. I explore how both the Afghan and European women's textile artefacts are embedded in discourses of creative agency, empowerment and cultural exchange. As such, I will highlight the need for critical awareness and debate around the reception and evaluation of cross-cultural needlework projects. However, this does not imply the categorization of cross-cultural needlework projects into any kind of binary division such as good and bad or subversive and traditional. Instead, I follow David Gauntlett in suggesting that making always resembles an act of connecting and as such is inherently political.⁵ As a result, similarities as well as differences between the Afghan and European needlewomen become exposed within a shared politics of crafting.

This research contributes to an existing body of scholarship on cross-cultural needlework initiatives within the UK and abroad that is often descriptive and comparative in nature.⁶ The conceptual framework for my work is grounded within feminist postcolonial theory and British cultural studies. This approach implies the recognition of how structures of knowledge have been historically shaped and acknowledges the complex power relations involved in the construction of any kind of knowledge at any point in time.⁷ As such, it is important to become aware of how US and Western European understandings of the East, the West and of so called third-world countries, as opposed to developed countries, have been shaped by Western colonial expansion.⁸ In this cultural narrative, the so called West represents itself as the centre while placing the East and its inhabitants and culture on the periphery.⁹ The East is framed as the 'other'.¹⁰ As a result, any cultural text or artefact always needs to be examined in relation to questions of representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation. In addition, one needs to ask how these interact with each other.¹¹ This research hopes to provide 'new strategies and readings that ... move the debate forward' and 'to pose critical alternatives' to the status quo of cross-cultural collaborative needlework projects in both practice and critical scholarship.¹²

Firstly, I will introduce the Guldusi embroidery initiative in detail. Secondly, I will critically examine how the initiative provides a space for a limited cultural encounter between Afghan and European women. Finally, I will explore how recognition of the limits and power structures at work in cross-cultural collaborative needlework initiatives can provide a space for cultural encounter on more equal terms.

Guldusi – an embroidery initiative between Europe and Afghanistan

Guldusi, named after the local Farsi term for embroidery, was founded in 2004 by Pascale Goldenberg and the German-Afghan Initiative (DAI), a registered charity.¹³ Goldenberg is an established textile artist and tutor based in the south of Germany.¹⁴ Her motivation to establish Guldusi was twofold: 'We aim to provide opportunities for [the women] to generate an income using their embroidery skills and at the same time hope these projects will help to safeguard traditional hand embroidery skills from disappearing'.¹⁵ Afghanistan has always had a rich and varied embroidery heritage with different ethnic groups specializing in distinct styles and techniques. The Hazara, for example, are famous for their use of graphic patterns.¹⁶ The most popular stitch across ethnic groups and all regions is probably the so called *Kandaharidusi*, a fine satin stitch.¹⁷ This type of embroidery traditionally embellishes the fronts of men's shirts or children's clothing.¹⁸ It can also be found on the *tshador* or *burqa*, the full body cover for women, in combination with some drawn threadwork to create tiny stars, rosettes and cross motifs.¹⁹ Besides clothing, decorative items for the home are embroidered. Often, these items have a functional purpose such as protecting a prized possession like a gun, a watch, or the Koran.²⁰ Imagery such as birds, flowers or religious motifs which regularly carried symbolic meaning may be included in these works.²¹ With the rise of the Taliban and the ensuing war, the hardships and challenges of daily life have nearly caused hand embroidery to disappear from everyday life.²² In addition, an influx of cheap manufactured textiles from Pakistan has reduced the need for handmade clothing.²³ Young girls have also stopped showing interest in hand embroidery as they believe it to be 'old-fashioned' and unsuitable to the 'modern' identity they attempt to fashion for themselves.²⁴ While embroidered clothing and textiles were and are still popular, according to Goldenberg, many Afghans now prefer to buy manufactured goods which are regarded as 'better' instead of investing time and effort in making their own.²⁵

At the start of the programme in the village of Laghmani, about 60 kilometres north of Kabul, Goldenberg hired two local women, who were still familiar with traditional Afghan hand embroidery. These women acted as tutors and passed their knowledge on to other women. The stitches taught included the *Kandaharidusi*; the *Pokhtadusi*, which is suitable for filling large designs; *Keshide*, a kind of needlepoint stitch similar to the gobelin stitch; as well as a couple of

other stitch types which are used in combination with the former.²⁶ The women were and continue to be at liberty regarding their choice of design. However, they have always been encouraged to take inspiration from traditional practices and to use more than one colour. Goldenberg only stipulates that the embroidery must fully cover an 8 cm (3 in) square and that the women use the materials provided (Figure 2). The embroideries are worked using Madeira cotton floss on background squares cut from used cotton or linen bed-sheets. Both floss and background are donations that are imported from Germany. The finished squares are collected quarterly and the women are paid for the previous delivery as they hand over the next one. With each collection, Goldenberg receives about 3500 to 4000 pieces of



Figure 2. Embroidered 8 cm (3 in.) squares with cotton floss by Shafiqa from Laghmani in Afghanistan (Credit: Pascale Goldenberg)

embroidery. Volunteers in Germany cut the embroidered sheets into individual squares, sort, bag, price and label the pieces with the name of the embroiderer. The embroidery is then sold all across Europe through the initiative's website, a network of national representatives and stalls at various textile shows.

Initially, Goldenberg's vision for the initiative had been to teach the Afghan women how to process and incorporate the embroidery into finished textile products of their own and to sell these locally. The intention was to support the women in creating a local business network in Afghanistan that would eventually allow them to gain financial independence. However, Goldenberg soon had to accept that this was, as she says, the rather 'naïve vision of a European woman' who believed her Afghan counterparts would be excited about such a prospect.²⁷ Given the reality of the women's living conditions this idea was unfeasible. According to Goldenberg, the women's daily life centres around the everyday challenge of making ends meet and they had neither the time nor energy to spare to design products and to develop a business network.²⁸ In addition, the widely used Chinese sewing machines with their apparently inherent tension problems together with the common coal irons made any sewing activity a very tedious process and the end product was not always very neat. Further, out of the initial more than thirty participants, only two, a young unmarried woman and a widow, were allowed to travel by taxi to the nearest town to offer their goods at the local women's centre.²⁹

As a result, the initiative's focus changed to produce hand embroidery that caters for a European market and is managed by Goldenberg. One of the challenges in this concept is to ensure that the Afghan women produce embroidery of high quality and of a style that appeals to potential buyers while, at the same time, preserving traditional embroidery techniques and motifs. In addition, Goldenberg puts a high importance on encouraging and supporting the women in developing their own individual embroidery styles. This includes going over the women's work and providing them with feedback on composition, stitch quality and colour choice when Goldenberg visits them in Afghanistan at least once a year. The selection process for the embroiderers is necessarily rigorous as the initiative relies on the profit made from the sale of the embroideries. Women interested in joining are told in advance the date of a trial and, on the day of the trial, are provided with embroidery materials and sent home to start working on a piece.

They then return a few days later and complete the embroidery in Goldenberg's presence to prove that it is truly their own work. With the successful applicants, Goldenberg agrees to an official employment contract which highlights the need for high quality embroidery. Translators are, of course, present at all stages of this process and support Goldenberg. The number of squares a woman is contracted to deliver per quarter varies. Besides the quality of the work and its popularity on the European market, social factors are also considered. Women who have to support many children are allowed to deliver more squares than, for example, young unmarried girls.³⁰ However, Goldenberg also always makes sure to employ a significant number of unmarried girls between the ages of 12 and 20, in an attempt to revive this dying craft.³¹ Currently, the project in Laghmani has contracts with about 200 women and a second programme founded in 2009 in Shahrak, in west Afghanistan near Herat, employs 30 women from the ethnic



Figure 3. Hazara embroidery with silk thread by Golafrus from Shahrak in Afghanistan. Individual pieces are approximately 4 cm x 6 cm (1.5 in. x 2.5 in.) or 12.5 cm x 6.5 cm (5 in. x 2.6 in.) (Credit: Pascale Goldenberg)

group of the Hazara. The Hazara women embroider in silk thread only and rectangles or diamond shapes of about 4 cm x 6 cm (1.5 in. x 2.5 in.) and 12.5 cm x 6.5 cm (5 in. x 2.6 in.) in the *Keshide* or *Kandaharidusi* technique (Figure 3).

Since 2009, the Guldusi UK representative, Meike Laurenson, has sold over 2340 embroidered squares across the UK primarily at shows sponsored by the International Crafts and Hobby Fair (ICHF) and mainly to craftspeople.³² In addition, some are being sold at women's groups' meetings. Laurenson is regularly invited by such groups to deliver talks about Guldusi and the Afghan women's embroidery and to sell their work. Goldenberg also regularly organizes European wide competitions in cooperation with sponsors from the textile sector such as sewing machine manufacturers or patchwork magazines. Often, special motifs like leaves, letters or kitchen utensils will be commissioned from the Afghan embroiderers for these purposes. Participants in the competition are required to purchase one or more pieces and to include them in their own textile works. Exhibitions which include a selection of successful submissions are regularly shown across Europe.

In 2007, the EU wide competition 'Afghan Inspiration' assigned 14 European countries a specific embroidered motif and asked for submissions that engaged with it. The UK was assigned teacups, teapots and other kinds of vessels with a nod to both the British and Afghan tradition of tea drinking. In an extraordinary turnout compared to the other participating countries, Guldusi received 77 submissions from the UK which were shown in their entirety in Greenstede Gallery in Sussex that year (Figures 4, 5, 6). 26 of these pieces, each of which measures about 30 cm x 50 cm (12 in. x 20 in.), were selected for the European tour of the competition results which were shown in multiple countries across the EU. In 2016, the exhibition 'Forest for Ever,' also the result of a competition, was on display in Manchester, Glasgow, Birmingham and London as part of the ICHF. Other exhibitions have been on show at these venues in 2010, 2011, 2013, and 2015. In 2018, the exhibition 'Gardens Around the World' will tour the UK.

The power to connect

Part of the concept of Guldusi is to deliberately refrain from selling finished textile products in Europe as is perhaps the norm with similar initiatives.³³ While the embroidered squares themselves, in a sense, resemble finished pieces of



Figure 4. Sue Stone, UK, *A Mug for Maira*, 2007 (Courtesy: Guldusi)



Figure 5. Molly Bullick, UK, *Ways to Communicate-Voices on the Road*, 2007 (Courtesy: Guldusi)



Figure 6. Liz Ashurst, UK, *Tea in the Forest*, 2007 (Courtesy: Guldusi)

embroidery, the way they are cut up and sold encourages and invites buyers to integrate the embroidery into a new textile project. The possibilities for inclusion are endless and the website and Goldenberg's publication about the initiative offer only a small window into these options as do the exhibitions. Among these options, the embroideries are included in quilts, patchworked bags, book covers, 3D mobiles and fashionable belts as well as intricate art quilts that feature screen printing, machine embroidery and felting (Figures 7, 8). For Goldenberg, through this practice of including one woman's work into another's, two different needlework techniques get combined and 'symbolically speaking – two cultures meet'.³⁴ Indeed, her short publication which features a brief history of the embroidery initiative as well as an array of images of embroidered squares and completed textile artefacts by European needlewomen is tellingly titled *Threads Unite* (2009).³⁵ The very first cross-European competition organized by Guldusi in 2005 was similarly named 'Threads Unite Women' and aimed to 'promote curiosity and interest for the other's culture, the act of meeting between two peoples and solidarity'.³⁶

Many of the works created by European needlewomen generally embrace this ideal of the textile artefacts as a dialogue between two cultures and as a connective medium between women. The European needlewomen are drawn to the Afghan embroidery not only because of its aesthetic qualities, but by the context of its production. Uschi Brenner, a quilter from Germany, reports: 'I love the concept [of incorporating the Afghan embroideries into my own works]. (...). It's doing good and having fun at the same time!'³⁷ Liliana Musco Pepitone from Italy adds: 'I was keen to learn more about Afghanistan, the initiative and the embroidery. I love to travel and getting to know different cultures and traditions.'³⁸

A large number of 'four hands projects' clearly show that the maker has put some thought into the cultural context of the embroidery. Pieces specifically made for a competition may do so due to the competition's guidelines and requirements yet this is surely not the case for every completed textile artefact. Recurring themes include: cultural encounters, dialogue and travel; the Oriental in a range of different contexts such as clothing, architecture or myths; women and practices of veiling and, as we have seen already with the piece by Gillian Travis, women, identity, creativity and agency in relation to needlework (Figures 9, 10, 11).



Figure 7. Sample works using embroidered Afghan squares: book covers by Sylvia Tischer from Germany (top), small pillows by Julie Herberger-Dittrich from Germany (Courtesy: Guldusi)



Figure 8. Sample works using embroidered Afghan squares: bag by Anne Bouissiere from France (top) and small patchwork wall hanging by Heidrun Siegler from Germany (Courtesy: Guldusi)



Figure 9. Molly Bullick, UK, *Windows to the World*, 60 cm x45 cm (24 in. x 17 in.)
photo transfer, machine sewing and quilting (Courtesy: Guldusi)



Figure 10. Solveigh Goett, UK, *Magic Carpet Flights*, 43 cm x 47 cm (17 in. x 18.5 in.), machine embroidery (Courtesy: Guldusi)

Naturally, this engagement with Afghanistan and the socio-cultural context of the women embroiderers is, at least partly, due to Guldusi's repeated effort to highlight the cultural context in which the embroideries are produced. The website, which can be accessed in English, German, and French, as well as the national representatives, volunteers and exhibitions provide detailed information about the initiative and the situation of the Afghan embroiderers.³⁹ In regular travel reports available on the website, Goldenberg and her fellow volunteers even recount their experiences of visiting the women in Afghanistan. Only by assuring that the buyer and exhibition visitor know about the background of the small embroideries, can Goldenberg's vision of creating a 'bridge' between two different cultures be realized. The resulting 'four hands projects' form another such 'bridge' in their own right. They invite the viewer at an exhibition, at home, or at a local



Figure 11. Yumiko Reynolds, UK, *Hidden Beauties*, 2007 (Courtesy: Guldusi)

quilt group's 'show and tell' to likewise engage with the cultural context in which the piece was conceived.

In this context, it is, however, crucial to be aware of who is telling a cultural narrative. Arguably, the embroidered squares do, to a certain extent, reflect the reality of the life of the Afghan women. The women often draw inspiration from their surroundings and experiences. Birds and flowers, which are popular in Afghan culture, are recurring motifs in the women's embroidery.⁴⁰ However, it is the European women who eventually place the embroideries within a wider cultural narrative. As discussed in the previous section, the European needle-

women's textile artefacts regularly frame the embroidered squares in relation to a specific theme. This thematic framework is influenced by the Europeans' knowledge, perceptions and fantasies of Afghanistan and the Orient in general. Their own notions of the meaning of needlework and practices of making to women's identity and cultural heritage also play an important role in this framing.

This knowledge and its accompanying fantasies are naturally marked by the European needlewomen's own socio-cultural and historic context which, in turn, is shaped by wider Western cultural history. Western expansion and imperialism as well as the economic, political and social context of this ideological framework have shaped the West's encounter with the East and consequently this history.⁴¹ In addition, this encounter has historically been shaped by a set of power relations in which the West is powerful, i.e. the colonizer, and the East powerless, i.e. the colonized. As Joanna Liddle and Shirin Rai show

the possession of greater power generally invests the knowledges of the more powerful with greater authority than those of the powerless, and this authority facilitates the creation of universalised images of both the powerful and the powerless.⁴²

In his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said famously argued that this practice regularly resulted in the West painting the Orient's cultural, political, social and other institutions and practices in a mainly negative light.⁴³ Formal acts of decolonization and the formation of independent states in Africa and the Middle East after the end of World War Two neither completely erased these power structures nor the discourses inherently connected to them.⁴⁴ Some popular and even scholarly literature recently published on Afghanistan, its culture and history, for example, still reinforce some of these essentialist and reductive discourses. Sheila Paine in her work on Afghan embroidery describes the ethnic group of the Pashtun as 'a proud and aggressive people'.⁴⁵

'Woman', as a discursive category which unites women alongside shared gendered experiences as opposed to the 'historically specific material reality of groups of women', is similarly implicated by these power struggles.⁴⁶ For this reason, discourses on Middle Eastern and/or so called third-world women are often essentialist and developed around stereotypes. According to postcolonial

feminist theorists Chandra Mohanty and Marnia Lazreg, the women are regularly grouped into categories that identify them, among other things, as victims of the Arab familial system and/or the colonial process as well as 'helpless victims forced to live by [Islam's] tenets'.⁴⁷ The Bush administration, for example, repeatedly justified its invasion of Afghanistan with the responsibility to liberate Afghan women. In this rhetoric, Afghan women are framed as basically helpless victims that need to be saved and enlightened by the US.⁴⁸ The Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan (RAWA), however, laments that within this rhetoric Afghan women's wishes and experiences are regularly ignored and overlooked.⁴⁹

For this reason, feminist postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak asks if and how the colonial subject can speak and be heard within past and existing power structures.⁵⁰ Like Mohanty and Lazreg, she argues that the identity particularly of the 'oriental woman' is historically fixed and constructed from the outside rather than by the women themselves. I am by no means attempting to deny the hardships and oppression experienced by many Afghan women through colonial and patriarchal structures as well as by the policies of the Taliban. Nor do I generally object to the practicalities or analytical potential gained through the homogenisation of certain groups. Clearly, I am myself making use of this for the purposes of this paper. I do, however, want to draw attention to by whom and from what point of reference a cultural narrative is told within cross-cultural collaborative needlework projects and how it is embedded within wider structures of power.

Connecting women through thread

In relation to cross-cultural collaborative needlework projects within the UK and anywhere else, this means that practitioners, participants and scholars need to show an awareness of the issues outlined above in order to be able to appropriately comprehend and analyse the finished products as well as the practice of making them. Only then can we hope to give due credit to the individual and distinct experiences of different practitioners of needlework across the world and in relation to one another. Any 'four hands project' which may resemble a tentative encounter between the women of Laghmani and Shahrak in Afghanistan and needlewomen across all over Europe is inevitably implicated by these structures. For instance, it is likely that the visibility of the veil in many completed textile

projects by European needlewomen is influenced by media coverage on Afghanistan post 9/11 which 'relied heavily on the veil as an effective visual shorthand which draws on dress codes already naturalised within the West as emblematic of oppression'.⁵¹ Images that romanticise the Orient as exotic and magical are similarly remnants of orientalist discourses that for centuries have been popular in the West, such as the stories of the Arabian Nights.⁵²

Furthermore, it is important to consider the meaning of practices of needlework and making in general in relation to discourses about women, identity, agency and empowerment. The quote from Palestine cited earlier and featured in the wall hanging by Gillian Travis implies a concrete assumption about this relationship.⁵³ Embroidery is strongly connected to identity as it provides a medium for the women to engage with their personal past as well as the cultural history of their country. Particularly since the publication of Rozsika Parker's seminal *The Subversive Stitch* (1984), much of textile scholarship has focused on embroidery and other forms of needlework as 'a weapon of resistance'.⁵⁴ Parker convincingly argues that for centuries the act of embroidering has provided women with the autonomy to engage with a material medium and themselves.⁵⁵ While Parker focuses primarily on how embroidery functioned as a means for women to negotiate the constraints of femininity, subsequent scholarship has built on Parker's work and looked at practices of needlework in relation to political activism.⁵⁶

In one of her travel reports, Goldenberg writes that she hopes that the regular practice of embroidering might serve the women as a 'kind of therapy' or 'meditation'.⁵⁷ The time spent embroidering would give the women the opportunity to pass a couple of hours in the creative engagement with different colours and designs as well as time to focus on themselves. While the women embroider, they might be able to forget, at least for a little while, their daily challenges and hardships.⁵⁸ The feedback Goldenberg receives from the women appears to support this idea. The women claim that they enjoy the activity very much.⁵⁹ In addition, the Afghan women's works show a high 'potential of individuality' in the design and execution of their embroidery which is indicative of the creativity involved in the process of embroidery.⁶⁰ Even with commissioned motifs the Afghans are always at liberty regarding choice and execution of their design. Some of the women even started to stitch self-portraits, a practice that is very much



Figure 12. This wall hanging by Hella Prinzhausen from Germany features some of the very first (self-) portraits stitched by the Afghan embroiderers. Cotton, mixed media and embroidery (Courtesy: Guldusi)

encouraged by Goldenberg and her colleagues (Figure 12). According to Parker:

the finding of form for thought have a transformative impact on the sense of self ... the experience of embroidering and the embroidery affirms the self as a being with agency, acceptability and potency The embroiderer sees a positive reflection of herself in her work and, importantly, in the reception of her work by others.⁶¹

Goldenberg has attempted to foster this sense of achievement and accomplishment in the women by asking them to develop a personal signature



Figure 13. Wajia from Laghmani has embroidered her own name in cotton along with a flower
(Credit: Pascale Goldenberg)

with which to sign their embroidery as well as for the wages they receive after handing in the completed squares.⁶² To the mainly illiterate women, this appeared to be a strange request since, for many, the concept of a signature, as an 'unmistakable way to be individually identifiable,' was quite foreign.⁶³ This may

perhaps also be due to traditional kinship structures which define the individual primarily in relation to his or her wider relationship to the family, tribe and ethnic group; a practice that is still very common in rural areas across Afghanistan.⁶⁴ Goldenberg observes that the majority of the women from Laghmani all seem to be related in some way or other and that it is common to marry within the extended family.⁶⁵ Women from the same compound may embroider in each other's company but many also work in solitude.

Literacy classes were offered by Guldusi to the women and girls of the village alongside the request to develop an individual signature and, over time, many embroiderers have started to incorporate the written word into their works (Figure 13).⁶⁶ For Goldenberg, the production of self-portraits as well as the inclusion of writing in the embroidery, have been developments of 'revolutionary' character: 'It was as if a rift had been vaulted, as if the shadow of the Taliban had been forced back by a degree'.⁶⁷ To Goldenberg, it appeared as if the women were no longer afraid to embroider anything they wanted to after the abolition of the Taliban's policies which had, for many years, placed restrictions on the women in almost every area of daily life.⁶⁸

For these reasons, it can be suggested that for the Afghan women the practice of embroidering, to a certain extent, has a similar effect on personal wellbeing as

is often attributed to that of their European counterparts. Studies on the relationship between crafting and mental wellbeing in a contemporary Western European context conclude that one should not underestimate 'the significance of craft as an agony- and stress-reducing and mind-calming activity'.⁶⁹ In relation to quilting and American middle-aged women, a demographic similar to Guldusi's customer base in Europe, sociologist Marybeth C. Stalp concludes that

Quilting is carework for the self. Quilting is important for women on a personal level, for quilters garner personal, physical, emotional, and artistic fulfillment from participating in the activity. The actual physical act of quilting benefits women emotionally, because while they engage in quilting, they enjoy the flow of the activity.⁷⁰

Though the Afghan embroiderers may share some of these experiences, there is, nonetheless, one essential difference between the meaning of practices of needlework for the Afghan women and the European supporters of Guldusi. For the Afghan women it is 'not a hobby,' but a job.⁷¹ The women of Laghmani and Shahrak embroider because, for rural Afghan standards, they will be paid a substantial wage for their work.⁷² Similarly, there is also a tradition in Western society of professional lower class needlewomen for whom needlework was the only paid work available and whose families' survival depended on their income.⁷³ According to Goldenberg, by Western standards, the communities of Laghmani and Shahrak are both affected by poverty and the aftermath of the Taliban occupation and the ensuing war.⁷⁴ The embroiderers' wages are a welcome and necessary addition to the primarily subsistence farmers. Widows especially have often no other form of income or support. The women report that they have used the money to buy groceries and firewood or to pay for medical treatments. Some of the younger girls have spent it on new clothing.⁷⁵ While the women's wages are clearly used to supplement any additional, though meagre family income, Goldenberg feels that it is generally the women who decide on how the money is spent.⁷⁶

At the start of the initiative, Goldenberg had been worried that men would not allow women to participate in the programme, would seize women's wages or would be upset about the fact that their wives were earning more money than

them.⁷⁷ These fears, however, have not been confirmed and men appear happy about the additional income. Some have even pressed Goldenberg to hire their wives after they had been rejected during trials.⁷⁸

The embroidery presents an activity the women can practise from the confines of their home and compound and it is, therefore, a convenient kind of work that is not very physically demanding. In addition, it can be worked around their numerous other daily duties that include food preparation, garden and farm work and looking after the home and children. Goldenberg has noticed that over the summer months the quality of the embroidery often deteriorates and the work seems rushed. The embroiderers are so busy looking after their fields and gardens at this time and preparing for the cold winter months that they do not have sufficient free time to dedicate to the embroidery.⁷⁹

While generally, the women claim to enjoy embroidering, they also freely admit that they would not embroider if there were no financial gains involved.⁸⁰ For the average Western needlewoman, on the other hand, needlework is often defined by its non-economic character. In this context, Stalp argues, needlework functions not only as a form of carework for the self but also for the larger family which is often the beneficiary of the finished textile artefacts.⁸¹

The Afghans are required to deliver their completed squares in time for the quarterly collection. For each embroiderer, the amount of squares she is commissioned to produce can vary from ten to 100 squares. The pressure of time, or lack thereof, naturally also affects not only the execution of the embroidery, but also the initial design process. In 2013, Goldenberg attempted to have the Afghan women complete some embroidery projects that had been started in Europe rather than the other way around. The Afghan women had six days to complete the pieces. Despite detailed guidelines to align their embroidery with the work provided to them, many did not do so. Some did not even consider the orientation of the already embroidered motifs. 'It was only then that I realized the sharp contrast to the amount of time the European women had to engage with the project, to design and to become acquainted with the concept,' explains Goldenberg, 'To the Afghans this must appear as a complete luxury'.⁸²

After all, each European needlewoman participated in the scheme because she chose to do so, whereas for the Afghans it was a work assignment.⁸³ Nonetheless, Goldenberg feels that the resulting textile artefacts, which are



Figure 9. *Sunny Garden Watership Down*, 2016 by Judith Pauly-Bender from Germany and Roya from Afghanistan. Hand embroidery and beads (Courtesy: Guldusi)

curated in the exhibition 'Out of the Kitchen', form interesting examples of cross-cultural collaborative textile works in their own rights (Figure 14). They resemble the 'different realities and expectations that collide as two very distinct cultures meet'.⁸⁴ The process was repeated in 2016 with the results curated in the exhibition 'Gardens around the World'.

These expectations also clash in the reception of the completed 'four hands projects' in Europe as opposed to Afghanistan. Testimonials from Guldusi's website suggest a high degree of awareness of the cultural background of the embroideries and interest in the Afghan women on the side of the Europeans. For example, Sylvia Tischer from Germany says

The project made me want to find out more about the country, its history and culture and the lives of its people, especially the women in Laghmani. By now I have an invested interest in them – they have become a part of my world and of our shared world.⁸⁵

Goldenberg has observed that the reaction of the Afghan women appears to be very different:

The Europeans are often disappointed when I say this, but experience shows that the Afghan women are neither very interested in what happens with their embroideries nor do they show much appreciation for the finished works. Their homes do not feature any wall decorations so perhaps they do not connect with many of the pieces from a decorative or artistic angle. Furthermore, even if there are practical aspects to a piece, for example, a bag, they do not understand why someone would invest time and money into making something when its manufactured equivalent could be easily purchased.⁸⁶

As such, the envisioned act of cultural encounter and exchange appears to be primarily one sided and to emanate through the expressive narrative power of the European needlewomen.

Conclusion – ‘making is connecting’

On the one hand, this research has shown that it is certainly possible to draw some similarities between the meaning of practices of needlework between the Afghan and European women. On the other hand, as we have seen, there are also stark limitations to how cross-cultural needlework projects can function as a form of cultural encounter and as a medium for solidarity between different women. The reception and use of the Afghan women’s embroidery is regularly framed within dominant Western orientalist narratives as are the Afghan embroiders themselves. For cultural studies scholar David Gauntlett, however, any act of making is always also an act of connecting. Not only are disparate pieces put together, but ‘acts of creativity usually [also] involve, at some point, a social dimension and connect us with each other’.⁸⁷ Such connections take place, for instance, as Goldenberg advises the Afghan women on their embroidery, European women purchase an Afghan embroidery from a national representative at a quilt show, and as hundreds of people view a selection of ‘Four Hands Projects’ in a local gallery somewhere in Europe. On another level, Gauntlett proposes that making is connecting because ‘through making things and sharing them in the world, we increase our engagement and connection with our social and physical environments’.⁸⁸ As such, Gauntlett concludes, that ‘making and sharing is *already* a political act’ because individual and collective creative practices provide a space for the negotiation and expression of the self in relation to others.⁸⁹

Guldusi provides the Afghan women with a means to relieve their financial hardship as well as a personal creative outlet in which they can negotiate the self. It also invites and encourages European needlewomen to creatively engage with the history of the Afghan embroideries and their makers. Through the making and sharing of the embroidered squares and the ‘Four Hands Projects,’ different individuals and cultures become connected within existing structures of knowledge and power. In this sense, Guldusi provides a space for political acts to take shape and place. A received awareness of power structures and their workings, however, is indispensable. Only then can needlework practitioners and scholars engage productively with cross-cultural collaborative needlework projects as spaces for cultural encounter and as a means to foster solidarity, support and empathy between needlewomen from different cultural backgrounds. As a result, the status quo which places certain cultural narratives over others can be questioned and redefined.

Acknowledgements

My utmost thanks go to Pascale Goldenberg for the support and help with this research. I am also grateful for the help and advice from Gillian Travis, Meike Laurenson, Jane Moore and my supervisors Stella Bolaki and Carolyn Pedwell.

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