

Shades of Henna

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Although henna art is generally considered a means of decorating the body, this ancient art form can also be thought of as a complex literate activity. In this article, Ridita Mizan uses pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory (P-CHAT) to explore different functions of henna art. She analyzes women's use of this literate activity and illustrates how it is employed to define and communicate their senses of self.

A Walk Down Memory Lane

I remember waking up to the mild, indistinct chatter of noise outside and the sweet scent of henna paste before Eid days. I would open my eyes to see Maa quickly move the curtains of the bedroom windows and rush back to the kitchen to switch off the stove. Curling up with the pillow, I would softly close my eyes, trying to smell the raw, muddy aroma of freshly ground henna. We would make the paste ourselves, taking henna leaves off the small plants in our garden. Sometimes the paste would not hold, and we would make it again. Fifteen-year-old me would rush to the garden, swiftly grabbing more leaves and throwing some into the mixture to make the paste less runny. (We used to grind the henna with a pestle, using our hands, but now we have an electric grinder.) I'd wonder whether putting some sugar into the paste would improve the dye's tone and make it last longer. I'd also wonder, "Should I add a few drops of lemon juice instead, or do I increase the amount of sugar and see how it goes?" I would experiment in my head, weighing all the local knowledge that I had gathered from my playmates and other henna enthusiasts. I would not want it to be brown, nor pale orange. I



Figure 1: My henna art on Eid.

would plan for a perfect maroon-red henna art, and that's all I needed for it to truly feel like Eid. After preparing the paste, I would make a nice design and let the dye dry, sometimes for a few hours and, if possible, overnight. I would smell my hands often, smiling at the design and showing it off to all. Our house would also smell like henna, and I'd bask in the henna-flavored air. Soon the dried dye would start to fall off, revealing the maroon-red lines drawn on my hands. With the shades of henna, it would start to feel like Eid.

Henna is used in different cultures to create dye and make art on bodies. Henna dye is prepared by crushing the raw leaves of the five-foot henna plant. After mixing the crushed henna plant with water or oil, a paste is created. The paste is then applied using plastic cones, sticks, or even bare hands to create intricate designs on hands, feet, and other body parts, usually on women.

The earliest use of henna is indeterminate, but its cosmetic use takes us back to Egypt five thousand years ago when people are said to have used it to paint their nails (Roome). Henna has a rich cultural and historical background, making it a common thread in a variety of contexts, including the Muslim and Hindu religions. Henna is considered holy by Muslims, which is why it is a special part of Eid celebrations and other Islamic festivals in many countries of the world (Lesmana). It is used in many Indian cultures, too, making it an integral part of Hindu ceremonies such as wedding rituals (Chaudhri and Jain). Henna art, thus, is a tool that transcends religions, cultures, and borders. It can, therefore, be regarded as a unifying force among women, a common ground that allows women to relate to one another irrespective of their nation, class, or creed.

Around the World

Included here are some images of different kinds of henna art, created for different occasions in different contexts, including for Eid celebrations and weddings (Figures 2–7).



Figure 2: A South Asian bride wears henna during a traditional Bengali Hindu Brahmin wedding (Ganguly).



Figure 3: Alongside a modern white wedding dress, an African bride wears henna tattoos (Msirikale).



Figure 4: On Chaand Raat, which marks the sighting of the moon one day before the Muslim festival of Eid, girls decorate themselves with intricate designs of henna (Zainab).



Figure 5: Brides and bridesmaids apply henna designs on their hands the day before a wedding celebration (Jain).



Figure 6: A Somali singer wears henna while performing at Eid celebrations in Mogadishu (UNSO).



Figure 7: Among Saudi women, henna traditions have been passed down from generation to generation (Thinktech86).

Activity systems refer to “cooperative interactions aimed at achieving a goal” (ISU Writing Program).

Literate activity refers to processes involving reading, writing, learning, and cognition.

The **sensory organs** include the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin.

Henna art is often loaded with deep religious and cultural undertones involving complex **activity systems**. So, when Western celebrities are seen wearing henna on various nonreligious occasions, it sparks debate about cultural appropriation (Stutz). Some consider it problematic, while others welcome henna art as a flexible genre that transcends specific, personal, and communal categories. While there are controversies surrounding the popular use of henna as an art form, it also seems to bind people together, creating a sense of community through its many shades.

The elaborate **literate activity** of creating henna art involves most of the **sensory organs**, which makes it a rather sophisticated tool for connecting and communicating. From the symbols to the shades, to the experimentations, the henna art process communicates and gives meaning. Henna design and application invite rich conversation and laughter among people, oftentimes irrespective of their gender. While women talk about their days, they speak of wanting stronger colors on their skin because it looks better, desiring a particular shade because of its meaning, and relaxing in a familiar setting with their community—men might chime in too, teasing and sharing stories, brightening up the day and having a good time together.

Henna art, thus, is a literate activity through which women express themselves, communicate their values, and connect with others during festivals and special times. It is a code through which women speak of their femininity, the way they own their femininity, and share their femininity with the world. Its symbolism is culture-specific, and meanings are interpreted differently depending on the traditions surrounding the art. As seen in the figures shared previously, it can be used in interpersonal and intergenerational communication as well, where the symbols embedded in the design of the henna may carry meanings of beautification and celebration.

A Multimodal Literate Activity

Although henna art does not always involve actual written letters, it is possible to approach it as a language and, therefore, a literate activity with **literate goals**. Henna dye is used on women’s bodies to create art,

which can be viewed as an alternative means of communication—a new medium fusing the dye, the design, and the body. There is also complex **multimodal composing** going on in the designs, involving the visual, oral, symbolic, and alphabetic modes (ISU Writing Program). The fusion of the animate, inanimate, articulate, and implied modes in henna texts creates a multilayered message, encapsulating the personal, social, cultural, political, and religious, which shows the scope of the genre and the complex nature of henna art as a multimodal literate activity.

Literate goals are targets involving reading, writing, learning, and cognition.

Multimodal composing considers all the modes of human communication, including “Alphabetic (stuff we write using the alphabet), Visual (pictures), Aural (sound), Oral (spoken) and Symbolic (using symbols that aren’t alphabetic, like emoticons or emojis)” (ISU Writing Program).

P-CHAT Terms (Kostecki):			
Production deals with the means through which a text is produced.	Representation highlights the way the people who produce a text conceptualize and plan it.	Distribution involves the consideration of where texts go and who might take them up.	Reception deals with how a text is taken up and used by others.
Socialization describes the interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute, and use texts.	Activity is a term that encompasses the actual practices that people engage in as they create text.	Ecology points to the physical, biological forces that exist beyond the boundaries of any text we are producing.	

In Figures 1 through 7, traditional henna art can be seen where designs are drawn on women’s hands, often as part of a celebration. These images represent both the conventional aspect of henna art as makeup and decoration of bodies, as well as a unifying factor among women where the art is used to **represent** friendship and solidarity. The **production** of these texts involves henna dye, floral designs, women’s bodies, and cameras. The design process of the henna art can be broken down into segments of preparing henna dye, planning the actual design, applying the dye to a body, and drying the dye in the open air. All these segments indicate times when women interact, negotiate, and collaborate with one another surrounding the occasion of making art out of henna and their bodies. The ritual of applying henna is not just an event, it is an excuse for women to connect and relate through art and the process of creating something together. It is a **socializing** event, where along with henna art, relationships are produced and strengthened. Even though the designs drawn on each hand seem somewhat similar, the

subtleties often consist of personal preferences as women usually do like to have a say on the henna designs that they get. Even small details, like whether the design will cover all the fingers or only part of them, can be instances of great discussion and negotiation between the henna artist and the recipient. Such instances represent moments when domestic women get to have a voice, albeit minor, which in some cases may be the closest that they get to the ideas of autonomy and agency. Let's consider Figures 4 and 5, where girls and women show off their henna art together. I can say from my experience that taking these kinds of photos in these very poses is quite common among women. They pose together in glee to show off their dyed hands and take photos during celebrations. I have taken such photos with my friends, and I have seen other women posing in a similar manner to capture their moment of consolidation and camaraderie. The production of henna art in those two photos especially is a complex literate activity where the designs imply a celebration of domestic femininity as well as the bond between women as beings bound by shared experiences. **Distribution**, in this case, involves how henna art is used as a tool for women's communication with fellow women. The art is usually shown off and talked about by women. This is a way women celebrate events, creating occasions for not only adding color but also for being together and socializing. The distribution here signifies quality time, as well as a celebration of fleeting moments of impermanent colors, which can only be captured in photos and not in real life. The transient nature of henna art, thus, problematizes the implications of its distribution. On one hand, the impermanence of henna dye indicates the momentary joys of women. On the other hand, when commodified and sold as artifacts on stock photography websites, the captures can signify objectification of women's bodies on public platforms like the Internet, which is indicative of the further exploitation of domestic women's transitory joys.

A Sociocultural Tradition

As a girl born and brought up in a Muslim household in Bangladesh, henna art is a large part of my festivities. Applying henna, therefore, is not just about fun. There is a sense of auspiciousness associated with henna art, and it is seen as a "good practice" in terms of religion as well as culture. Being a part of this sociocultural tradition, I was introduced to henna art early on in my childhood. I was in awe of those who could draw intricate henna designs. I also learned some rules about henna as well, one of which was that only women should apply henna art to decorate their bodies. If a man applies it, then it's assumed that either he is doing it as a joke or he's "confused." People might question his masculinity or his understanding of the **ecological** context. This henna rule is region- and culture-specific, which

could be considered an element of sexism when it is embedded in a culture with strict gender roles. In my cultural context, only brides apply henna art, not grooms. It is interesting, then, that while “Henna” is a common name for women in many countries, including Bangladesh, the Bangla term for henna, “Mehedi,” is a very common male name, but not a female one, in South Asia.

Thus, like many other things in this world, the arbitrariness of culture-specific henna rules can be used to sustain and perpetuate heteronormative gender roles. I did not see this problematic element of henna art early in my life. Now that I am beginning to understand how it can be another tool that enables internalized misogyny and patriarchal values, I am finding myself questioning my values through my genre research of henna art. This identity crisis involves a growing awareness of conflicting interests and, therefore, contradictory values. On one hand, I have such an intimate relationship with the art form. On the other, I would never like to be someone who enables or even tolerates oppressive power dynamics. I do not think I will ever want to give up henna art, at least not the good things that are part of its ecology. To understand its scope as a literate activity beyond being a means of decoration that “enhances” the beauty of female bodies, I’ll discuss it as a tool for women’s communication and illustrate how, just as any tool, it can be used in both progressive and regressive ways.

The event of India’s #MehandiProtest is a great example in this regard; the genre of henna art evolved into protest signs. On December 11, 2019, the Indian Government authorized the Citizenship Amendment Act (Bhat). It triggered thousands to protest the proposed National Register of Citizens, which did not include any reference to Muslims and refugees from other communities who fled from neighboring countries after 2014 and were living in India for a while (Bhat). As shown in Figures 8, 9, and 10, women used henna dye on their bodies, creating protest signs out of themselves, to raise their voices against unjust governmental policies. The **production** of these texts



Figures 8 and 9: India’s #MehandiProtest (Whitehead).



Figure 10: More from India's #MehandiProtest (Sweeney).

involved henna dye, political awareness, slogans, solidarity, women's bodies, and cameras. The **distribution** of the texts required the Internet, through which the images became part of the subversion, resistance, and activism narrative. Their **reception** included political awareness and assertion of agency, and through creative **socialization**, henna art was transformed from a passive social construct to an active communication tool with the power to challenge the dominant discourse and demand social change. Women's bodies, here, are redeemed from timid object-like backgrounds to subjective selves, capable of having strong opinions and agency. In these texts, women are seen to express themselves not just through soft symbolic floral representations that sometimes contain the initials or names of their partners, suggesting ownership and denoting social status. Although I can't be sure about the decisions these women actually intended to convey with the messages written on their hands, the celebration of solidarity through protest nonetheless positions them as individuals having active political identities and who are capable of contributing as radical social agents.

Aesthetically, the two types of henna art show different sensibilities in terms of production and distribution. In contrast to the henna designs in Figures 1 through 7 (carefully drawn, pretty), the designs of Figures 8, 9, and 10 are hasty and focused on delivering a clear message rather than being pretty. Henna texts as protest signs, therefore, subvert not only the genre of henna art but, in this process, women's bodies too. By using women's hands as platforms to express important messages that have long-lasting implications for societies and the world, it reveals the scope of new identities for women, their bodies, and the genre itself. Just as with any language, the meaning of a particular instance of henna art is built through the way that it is produced, distributed, and received, where both the dye and the bodies are mere media.

The Production and Distribution of the Body

The making of henna art requires two distinct media: one is the dye, and the other is the body. We have discussed production and distribution mainly in terms of the dye, but let us now consider the body as a medium for henna art. Although it is impossible to separate the body from the henna text—the two together creating the art form—it is helpful to think about the implications of the body as a canvas for a communicative text. When the human body is used as a backdrop, an important aspect of the art becomes the question of ownership and control. Does the body own the message, or is it the other way around? It is a critical question, as the meaning of art largely depends on the interpretation of the interconnectedness of the self, the body, and the art. If the self owns both the body and the art, then the message conveyed becomes a vehicle to communicate one's values through henna art. If the body is the vessel that contains the self and the art, then the message is not just the values of an individual, rather it is a shared lived experience, a communication through and among bodies where messages are conveyed not via human language but through abstraction, which involves blurred lines and the fusion of different media. If the art owns the body, then the meaning depends on the artist who applies the dye or who conceptualizes the design. In this way, the production of the body can vary depending on the interpretation, which then creates possibilities of different interpretations based on who owns what and how. The control of meaning, then, lies with ownership.

Through the Internet, the distribution of henna art and its message can now be spread worldwide. The images of henna art can travel to many places without censorship. This creates a broader scope of the art, where it has the possibility to be seen and get interpreted in various ways. This gives henna art, like any other art form, greater ways to inspire people and invoke change. However, the interpretation of henna art in terms of ownership and control dictates its distribution and how much the message will spread. To illustrate this point, let's discuss the multimodal texts of Figures 11 and 12.

Bangladeshi actor and model Shamsunnahar Smrity, popularly known as Pori Moni, was arrested in a case filed under the Narcotics Control Act on August 4, 2021 (“Bangladesh Actress”). Her arrest and the subsequent approval of three days of remand occurred two months after she accused Nasir Uddin Mahmood, a real estate businessman and a presidium member of the parliamentary opposition party of the country, of attempted rape and murder (“Bangladesh Actress”). Pori Moni was denied bail multiple times and remained in jail for twenty-seven days (“Pori Moni Gets Bail”). Figure 11 shows Pori Moni on September 1, 2021, upon her release (“Pori



Figure 11: Actress Pori Moni wearing henna art (“Pori Moni’s Message”).



Figure 12: Pori Moni again posing with henna art (“High Court Orders”).

Moni’s Message”). She flaunts henna text written on her palm, which she uses to communicate a specific message with a specific audience. Her henna text reads, “Don’t ❤️❤️❤️ Me Bitch 🙌.” Here, the use of emojis as loaded symbols, along with English words written in henna dye on the body of a Bangladeshi actress-model, makes the henna text a richly complex, multimodal, cross-cultural, and sociopolitical phenomenon. Figure 12 is an image of Pori Moni after the High Court ordered magistrates to explain the approval of her remand (“High Court Orders”). This time she shares another message written with henna. Here her text reads, “🙌 ME MRE.”

If the body owns the art and the self, then the overall body language is part of the message too. Pori Moni, being a person in show business, created performances after her release from jail, where the henna text plays a central

Antecedent knowledge is “all the things a writer already knows that can come into play when a writer takes up any kind of writing” (ISU Writing Program).

and pivotal role in demonstrating her personal and political agenda. However, the henna texts themselves do not communicate her whole message. It is her body, image, and persona, along with the **antecedent knowledge** of the histories and politics associated with her case, that make the meanings of her henna texts

compelling. Thus, the distribution of a text, as seen in the henna art worn by Pori Moni, is largely dependent upon the production and ecology involved in the making of the artifact. Engaging with henna text, hence, is a multimodal literate activity, the scope of which goes beyond the flat meanings of decorative designs. Its meaning goes beyond what is seen and discussed in this article as well, as any art form can be taken up as a tool in various ways and manners, the limits of which are determined only by the limits of one’s imagination.

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Notes

