



## Sapphire stories: the symbolic representation of blue motifs in Islamic architecture of Pakistan

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### Abstract:

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This article focuses on analyzing and exploring the implication of blue motifs in terms of the representation of Islamic architecture in Pakistan. Architecture holds a great deal of importance within every nation's social and cultural domains. In the same way, architecture has played a significant role in dispensing Islam as a religion. The manifestation and reflection of blue motifs are present in various forms, such as formal, structural, and spatial. Moreover, these shapes carry symbolic connotations when presented in the form of ornamentation, geometrical patterns, floral displays, and arabesque. Furthermore, this study provides a valuable contribution to enhancing the awareness of the significance and representation of blue motifs in the Islamic architecture of Pakistan for the research. Secondary and primary data were collected to achieve the objectives of the study. The study concludes that mosques and shrines in Pakistan are loaded with examples in which the representation of blue motifs within the domain of Islamic architecture is quite evident.

**Keywords:** Blue motifs, Islamic architecture, Mosques, Shrines, Symbolic connotation, Ornamentation, Geometrical patterns, Floral display, Arabesque.

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## 1. Introduction

The research is based upon the blue motifs in Islamic architecture in which the colour blue is a positive, soothing and cooling colour used in many mosques, shrines and holy places located all over Pakistan. These specific places have different arabesque blue motifs with white and blue colour combinations enhancing the beauty of the places; each of the motif is different and special in its way and has symbolic significance to convey to the people visiting there. The shrines with blue motifs in Pakistan are the Tomb of Baha-ud-din Zakriya, Mausolum of Rukhn-i-Alam, Sawi Mosque, Tomb of Sa'id Qureshi, Tomb of Sultan Ahmed Qatal, Idgah, and Tomb of Ali Akbar all these are located in the city of Multan. Other blue motifs architectures are Tomb of Khawaja Ghuman Farid in Dera Ghazi Khan, Tomb of Abu Hanifa in Uchhch, Shah Jahan Mosque in Thatta, Tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar in Muzaffargah, Tomb of Bibi Jawindi in Uchhch, Bhongi Mosque in Rahim Yar Khan, the shrine of Shah Yousaf Ghazdezi, Tomb of Ghazi Khan, Shrine of Jalauddin Bukhari in Uchhch and the Mausoleum of Abdul-Wahab in Daira Dinpanah, these are the architectures which have blue motifs made and embedded on them.

### 1.1 Contextualizing Islamic architecture

Islamic architecture is an architectural way of building and decorating buildings associated with the religion Islam. Architecture is where the meaning is represented in the form of formal, structural, and spatial aspects (Darke, 2020). Islamic architecture originated in Iran in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, it was mainly influenced by Roman, Byzantine, Mesopotamia and Iranian architecture (Hoag, 2004). In the same way, Hoag in his book *Islamic Architecture: History of World Architecture* claims that the Islamic architecture of Pakistan is one of the greatest manifestations of art and buildings that evolved and practiced throughout the world of Islam for the last 100 decades (Hoag, 2004). While talking about Islamic architecture in terms of the construction and decoration of Mosques, Guidetti (2015) is of the view that Mosques are manifest visual beauties and sensible examples of the combination of symbolic forms and deep religious beliefs (Guidetti, 2015). Architecture in Pakistan is based upon Islamic art, Quranic verses, religious formulae, and floral and geometric patterns used to enhance the beauty of the place. Pakistan is an Islamic country with various mosques characterized by diversity, and it has many cultural heritage buildings (Ali, 2020).

Ornamentation is an essential part of Islamic architecture, it is rich in decorative patterns, and the role of ornamentation is to convey the essence of an in-definable meaning or specific message (Pitkar & Dalvi, 2010). Ornamentation in architecture gives a sense of being inside a place with articulation with embellishment of the interior and inspiring notably assets to Islamic art. Islamic ornamentation further divided into four types, that is, Geometric patterns, Calligraphic inscriptions, vegetal/floral motifs and Arabesque (Guidetti, 2015). These motifs and patterns portrayed heaven symbolically, In Geometric Patterns, the use of geometry is thought to reflect the language of the universe and it helps the believer to reflect on the life and greatness of the creation. Bonner (2017) in his enlightening book *Islamic Geometric Patterns: Their Historical Development and Traditional Methods of Construction* states that geometric shapes like equilateral triangles, squares, rosettes and hexagons are used in the architectures (Bonner, 2017).

The infinity of geometric patterns in Islamic architecture portrays the infinity of the Allah, the

Almighty. Geometry in Islamic art creates basic patterns in design uniquely interlacing lines weaved carrying many patterns showing the most amazing imagination and inventiveness. Alashari (2021) in his article *A Systematic Review on Arabic Calligraphy within Islamic Architecture* claims that in Calligraphic Inscriptions different *surahs* and verses from the Quran are applied to the exterior and interior of the architecture along with numerical and passages from the Quran (Alashari, 2021). This kind of representation has acquired special attention and significance through repetition, and it is used as a decoration especially to mention the names of the martyrs (*Ash-shahada*) of Islam (Alashari, 2021).

Zahra's (2022) article *Spiritual Aesthetics of Islamic Ornamentation and the Aesthetic Value in Islamic Architecture* is of great significance in terms of the analysis of floral representation in Islamic architecture. She believes that floral ornamentation has many motifs and designs that resemble plants or parts of plants such as leaves, flowers and fruits regarding Islamic traditional architecture (Zahra, 2022). At times same motifs is repeated over and over again to create a repeating pattern, trees, roses, lilies and lotus flowers are used by Muslims in floral motifs. Different types of trees are mentioned in the Quran like Palm trees, olive trees and the tree that Allah used to provide shade for Hazarat Yunus (R.A), the tree of eternity is considered the "Giver of life" and depicted in the Tree of life motif. The tree symbolizes magnificence, transcendence and divine beauty, the decorative flowers, leaves, fruits and ethereal utopia symbolize paradise.

The last ornamentation type in the domain of Islamic architecture is *Arabesque* which is also known as "Tauriq" which means foliage. Yassin and Utaberta (2012) state that it is a view of nature specific to Islam nourished by Quranic description and it is a design of curved lines going in a rhythm spread over a surface with reciprocal repetition and insertions of geometric interlaying (Yassin & Utaberta, 2012). These kinds of designs are fully aesthetic and balanced obtained by intertwining, different types of petal flowers, Quranic verses, the attributes of God, names of prophets (PBUH) as well as geometric figures done with different techniques (Yassin & Utaberta, 2012).

## 2. Literature review

There is a plethora of research or secondary data that plays a constructive role in comprehending the basic understanding of blue motifs in Islamic architecture. Some of the researchers and their works relevant to the conceptual domain of the study are reviewed in this section of the research. The secondary data, which was given in the form of various books, journals, interviews, essays, book reviews and reports, has been reviewed by the researcher according to the objectives as well as limitations of the present study. Abdullahi and Rashid Embi in their groundbreaking book *Evolution of Abstract Vegetal Ornaments in Islamic Architecture* (2015) state that The Dome of Rock (691 CE), Al-Aqsa Mosque (709 CE), and Umayyad Mosque (709 CE) are among the oldest surviving structures in the architecture of the Muslim world, and these are full of the representation of the blue motifs (Abdullahi & Embi, 2015, p. 31).

In the same way, Bonner (2017) in his book *Islamic Geometric Patterns: Their Historical Development and Traditional Methods of Construction* reflects on the constructive patterns of these buildings and claims that the spatial structures and geometrical patterns of these buildings are adorned with naturalistic floral and vegetal patterns (Bonner, 2017). Flora that is botanically

identifiable in the Damascus Umayyad Mosque are pear and palm trees. Furthermore, he asserts that these patterns and shapes are mostly drawn from Sassanid and Byzantine arts (Bonner, 2017).

Rafsanjani and Safini (2016) in their article *Bistable auxetic mechanical metamaterials inspired by ancient geometric motifs* present a thorough argument on the significance of geometric motifs in the domain of architecture. Both state that many of the auxetic designs in use today are mono-stable and lose their altered shape when a load is removed (Rafsanjani & Safini, 2016). Inspired by traditional geometric patterns structured in square and triangle grids, we present a new class of switchable architected materials that display structural bistability and auxeticity at the same time (Rafsanjani & Safini, 2016). A rubber sheet is perforated with different cut motifs to create an experimental realization of the material concept: a network of rotating components connected by compliant hinges.

Stouhi (2021) has also shed light on the role of minarets as religious as well as socio-cultural symbolic gestures in architecture. In her famous article on minarets *The Architectural, Cultural, and Religious Significance of Minarets*, she is of the view that the addition of minarets focusing on internal spaces in shrines and mosques is one of the most remarkable aspects of Islamic architecture from a traditional point of view (Stouhi, 2021). The contrast between the inside and outside is evident, whether it is due to the deliberate planning of interior spaces to maximize natural light and ventilation or the fine detailing of embellishment through paintings and carvings (Stouhi, 2021). Nonetheless, one specific architectural element breaks the conventions of subdued façade and serves as a powerful visual declaration of the Islam's existence.

Rosyid (2022) claims that a large variety of the use of ornaments within and outside of mosques is another legacy of Islamic architecture in history. In her enlightening article *Hinduism and Islamic Ornaments in Langgar Dalem Mosque of Kudus*, Rosyid mentions that Islamic architecture is adorned with a wide variety of ornaments and hues (Rosyid, 2022,). They are typically decorated from the outside as well as the inside, with the inside of the building receiving greater ornamentation than the outside. The structural elements, including the domes, arches, and gates, are where the external decorating is primarily visible. Islamic design consists of three distinct elements.

Moreover, Rosyid states that these three elements are geometric design in an angular and linear form for repetitive patterns, calligraphy with various scripts, and organic or floral patterns that transform into vegetal abstract designs (Rosyid, 2022). Some other elements that include in the list of Islamic architecture are tombs, schools, palaces, and mosques constructed on the painted painters' designs, emirs or caliphs' geometric designs, and stones, marble, and carpets woven by weavers, plants, and artwork which was done by the Muslim artists (Zahra, 2022; Mahmood et al., 2023).

### **3. Methodology**

Art and architecture cannot be separated and exert a significant influence on Islamic architecture, the different motifs and designs portray the aesthetic features of motifs apart from the symbolical touch of paradise. This research provides a valuable contribution to enhancing the awareness of the significance and representation of blue motifs in the Islamic architecture

of Pakistan, for the research to achieve the objectives of the research, secondary and primary types of data were collected. The secondary data has been collected from published articles, journals, books, magazines and e-source, the primary data has been collected through visiting places plus the researchers themselves trying to understand the cause meaning of the blue motifs used in the Islamic architecture of Pakistan.

Figure 1: Arts and Crafts of Islamic Lands Book, 2021



As per materials, the colour blue was used a lot in the ornamentation of Islamic architecture in Pakistan where each pigment or tones of blue colours were extracted through different methods. The variety of blue colours in the material comprises the colour *Azurite blue*, which is a naturally forming colour found in deep copper mineral produced by copper deposits, secondly, the colour *Egyptian blue* was made by grounding silica, lime, copper and alkali together and then heated on extremely high temperature to get the colour. Another pigment with the name of *Lapis Lazuli* extracted from the mines is refined and turned into the colour “Ultramarine blue”, cobalt blue being a synthetic pigment was made by heating cobalt (II) oxide with alumina at high temperature. Lastly, the colour “Persian blue” which is widely used in paintings and frescos was made by oxidation of ferrous salts and these are the materials used in painting and giving colours to the blue architecture and in ornamentations in architecture of Pakistan.

## 5. Discussion

This section of the research critically considers the representation of blue motifs in Islamic architecture. Islamic art is a belief, mystical institution, and tangible physical world that in general is the representation of spiritual work. Since art is the sensible image of the spiritual world, the tangible form of art represents the form of spiritual meaning. In Islamic art, many colours hold a lot of significance and one of them is the colour blue. As the research is based upon the blue motifs of Islamic architecture and the main objective of this paper is to study keenly the blue motifs, which are found in Islamic architecture of Pakistan, we can start with the colour blue. The blue colour is widely used in different domains, as it is a soothing, calming, serene spiritual colour associated with freedom and imagination (Bloom, 2017).

It is a positive colour and has different roles in different domains, from business attires to logos blue is used a lot in the corporate world, and many national flags also have blue colour in them. It is a staple colour in the fashion, and interior industry and is even widely used in poetry making. The colour blue is also used in Egyptian jewellery making and people of Egypt also used to wrap their mummies in clothes dyed with blue pigment (David, 2008). In many cultures, blue is a highly spiritual colour and has mystical qualities and importance even in Islamic architecture the colour blue is widely used in ornamentation.

The colour *Azure blue* appears in architecture and was introduced in ornamentation from the Saljug building of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the introduction of their colour brought a revolution in the aesthetic of Islamic architecture (Bloom, 2017). Blue comes in a range of tones which are mixed with light colours to create paler blue and dark colours to make darker tones, from light to dark blue this colour fits in every category. Some of the specific tones that are used in Islamic architecture are azure blue, opal blue, turquoise blue, Persian blue ultramarine blue etc (Khazeni, 2014).

The meaning and characteristics of this colour from the Islamic point of view and about the Holy Quran are that the colour blue also known as *Al-azraq* and in Arabic is signified as the impenetrable depth of the universe and the colour turquoise blue is thought to have mystical qualities (Khazeni, 2014). The colour cobalt blue and turquoise are considered symbolic of the earth and sky. In the Islamic world, the shades of blue are used to blend aesthetics with culture, and it often combined with white and gold to blend metaphors of nature, sanctity, holiness, peace and honesty (David, 2008). Colour bluish green is sacred in Iran where it symbolizes paradise, in bible colour symbolize heaven, the colour represents peace: it is a sign of truth, trust, surrender, loyalty and eternity along with the symbol of lasting traditional value (Bloom, 2017).

According to Najm-al-Din Bemat, every colour is not for their world, it induces a calm eternity, superhuman and beyond human. Primary blue is a holy colour and is sacred in Islamic culture due to being the colour of the sky where God, pure souls and angels are, it has a divine and heavenly implication and is regarded as a symbol of holiness in the West and East. Colours like glittering blue, serene, white, gold, green, turquoise blue and red were used in the interior of the building, colour is a wonderful phenomenon it gives sense and passion to humans along with life to form. The colour blue is widely used in different geometric patterns and motifs giving them life through colour, this colour has a divine effect and a sign of purity and holiness hence it is used in the decoration and designing of the holy place.

Blue has been used in many Islamic architecture of Pakistan and it has been used in motifs, and different tints of blue especially in the shrines in Multan, the city is famous for its beautiful blue shrines and complex work in blue tiles and motifs. The making of blue enamelled tiles came to Multan from central Asia in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Craftwork named *Kashkari* done in Multan is based on two colours, deep blue and turquoise differentiate the beautiful work of Multani architecture from others. The design of beautiful motifs on the “Tomb of Rukhn-i-Alam” is one of the most unique and complex designs, the motif placement and the tilework are inspired by Persian work made with great aesthetic made on imagination which makes it even more divine. Such designs can only be seen on ancient monuments and this work of glazed poetry and the use of blue and white colours in design has been made in Multan since the time of early Muslim conquest. The shrine of Shah Yousaf Gardezi also has blue Multani tiles with



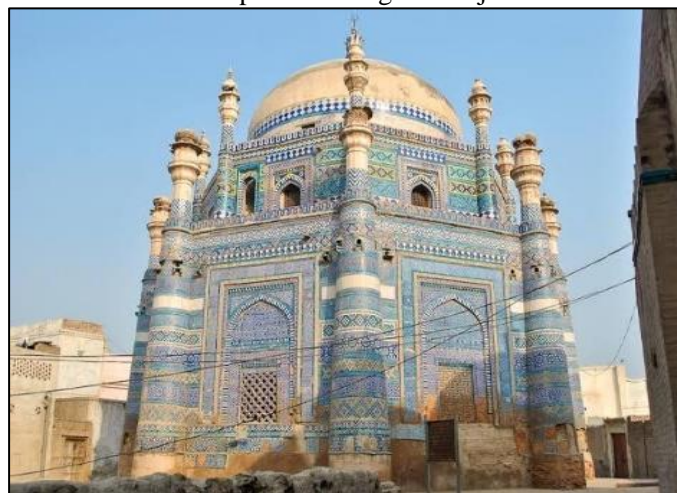
blue motifs decorated with countless geometrical and vegetal patterns which are further arranged in large rectangular and square shapes.

Figure 2: Shrine of Shah Yousaf Gardezi. Multan, Punjab, Pakistan



The blue motifs and the architectural decoration do vary according to the region of the architecture, if we compare one architecture from Punjab and one from Sindh, we can easily point out the differences. The two architectures are “Shah Jahan Mosque” Thatta, Hyderabad Sindh and the “Tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar” located in Sitpur Punjab. The Shah Jahan Mosque is considered to be one of the most elaborate displays of blue motifs and great tile work of South Asia and the Tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar is an example of Multani-style mausoleum made by taking inspiration from an Irani mausoleum. The architecture of Shah Jahan Mosque is inspired by Turkish and Persian work, but the Tomb of Tahir Khan design is inspired by Iran architecture and work. Shah Jahan has geometrical brickwork with extensive use of blue tiles and different styles of blue motifs mainly influenced by the Timurid style and on the other side Tomb of Tahir Khan is the one made with blue octagons, embedded in repetition creating a never-ending pattern.

Figure 3: Tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar. Seetpur Muzafargarh Punjab Pakistan.



Shah Jahan mosque dome has a unique sky-like Stellate pattern and the Tomb of Tahir Khan architecture has military designs such as crenelation along with intricate geometric and floral

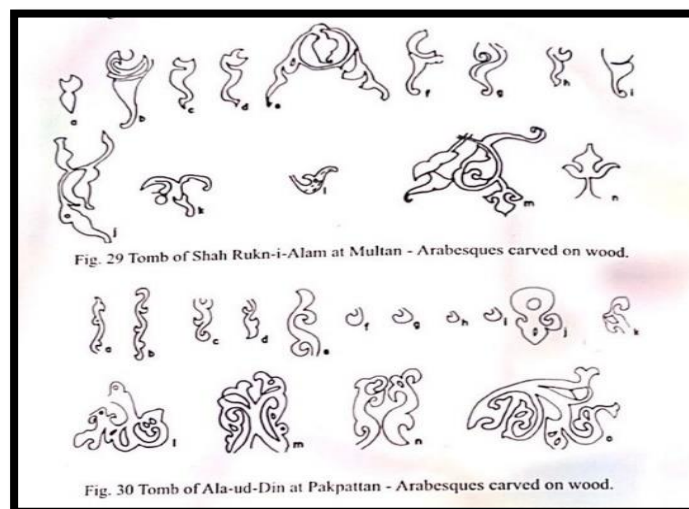
patterns. The colours used in the architecture of Shah Jahan Mosque are Blue, turquoise, cobalt blue, white and manganese violet and the colour pallet of other architecture is Azure blue, yellow, dark blue and white. Shah Jahan mosque has calligraphy done on tiles in blue and white tones arranged in such a way that they represent the heavens, and the Tomb of Tahir Khan has a special calligraphy feature wherein the combination of floral and geometric patterns there is one piece with the calligraphy of “Ya Allah” written on it. Shah Jahan mosque uses blue floral motifs with circular curves and stylish floral patterns in the architecture and the Tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar has more geometric designs with a little bit of motifs in it, the flowers in the Tomb of Tahir Khan are incorporated with geometry there are flowers made out of shapes along with some blue motifs too.

Figure 4: A view of Shah Jahan Mosque Architecture. Thatta, Sindh Pakistan



If we study closely the motifs of Shah Jahan Mosque are a lot more curved and circular, separated, and a little complex and the motifs of the Tomb of Tahir Khan are pointed and sharp, they are more in the form of a joint full motif then smaller and separate ones, the designs are simpler and diaper in shape. These are the different changes in the region, the architecture and ornamentations of mosques/shrines.

Figure 6: Study of motifs





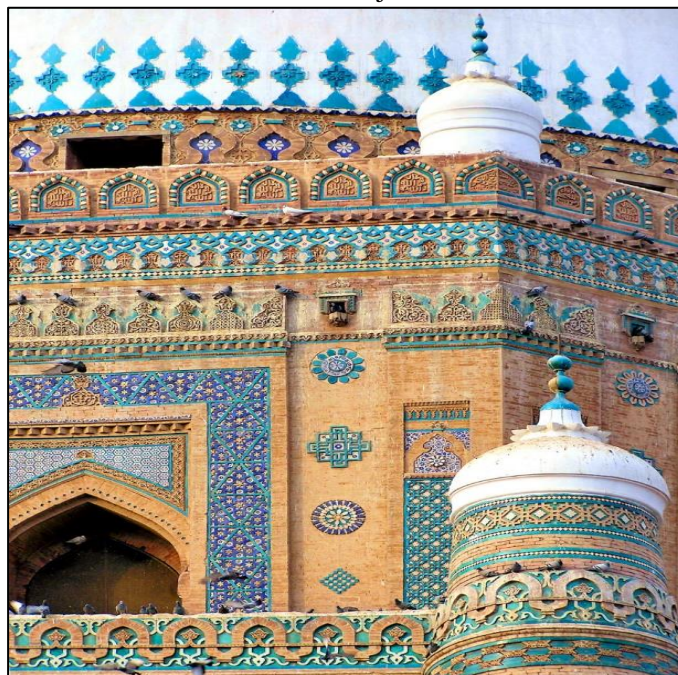
The researcher studied the architectural motifs to know the meaning and the difference between the architectural motifs of different places, the shrines that were compared are motifs of “Tomb of Rukhn-i-Alam (Multan) and “Tomb of Ala u’ d-Din” (Pakpattan). The tomb of Shah Rukhn-i-Alam is in Multan and was made in 1324 CE and the Tomb of Ala u’ d-Din is in Pakpattan, Pakistan and was made in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Both shrines hold great importance and is visited by thousands of people every year. Both these architectures are made with very intricate and beautiful detailing, they have different types of blue motifs engraved in them, and each of the motifs tells a different story according to its region and placement. The researcher researched these motifs and compared them to understand the story of these architectures.

Figure 7: The tomb of Ala ud Din Meeran Mauj Darya. Pakpattan, Punjab, Pakistan



If we study the motifs of Shah Rukhn-i-Alam, then there are a lot of elongated and pointy shapes as compared to the Tomb of Ala u’ d-Din they are shorter in length and have a lot of curves in every end of the motif.

Figure 8: A view of Shah Rukhn-i-Alam. Multan, Punjab, Pakistan



Secondly, the motif of Tomb Rukhn-i-Alam is less complex and very separated, but the motif of the other tomb is pretty jumbled up and made with a lot more complexity. As we can see in the picture both the architecture has different meanings in different designs. According to the alphabet, each alphabet represents a different motif in each of the architecture for example: the letter “L” is represented with a simple floral leaf-like motif in Rukhn-i-Alam, but in the other tomb the same alphabet is represented with a double but curved motif. Another example is the alphabet “K” is pretty big and curved in the tomb of Rukhn-i-Alam. The same alphabet in tomb of Ala u’d-Din is very small and simple, which dictates that the motifs of both architectures are very different from each other and delivers a completely different message that can also be possible due to change in region of the architecture.

## **6. Conclusion**

After a deep insight into the significance of the representation of the blue motifs in Islamic architecture, the researcher comes to the result that blue motifs and the colour blue itself are a very important part of Islamic architecture. Moreover, the ornamentation of holy places, as it completely changes the ambiance of the place, holds a lot of importance in history. The different shades of blue colour symbolize cooling, soothing and welcoming impact. Without the use of blue colour, the Islamic architecture is incomplete. The beauty that emerged through the manifestation of Blue floral and geometric motifs in arabesque and Islamic calligraphy is inspired by the meaningful verses of the Quran because it helps to create an atmosphere of spirituality so that the believer can feel connected spiritually whenever they visit the places based representing Islamic architecture.

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