

Symbolic Significance of Star Motifs in Islamic Geometric Decoration and Contemporary Trademark Design in Pakistan

Ahmed Faraz

*Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication and Design,
University of Home Economics, Lahore*

Abstract

Geometric decoration in Islamic art has a special significance having symbolic meanings. Star motif is one of the most prominent shapes employed in these geometric decorations. These motifs, as they originated with spiritual essence in Persia around ninth century, were carried on as an influential factor in South Asian art, particularly Mughal art. The surface embellishments of the Mughal monuments are flooded with geometries having various types of star motifs. Interestingly, the contemporary trademark design in Pakistan reveals great influence from these geometric star motifs. Having a symbolic significance, these designs create a profound visual impact in communication. This research puts forth the symbolic meaning behind the star used in Islamic geometric decoration, and presents its influence on contemporary visual communication design in Pakistan. The designs studied for this research are the trademarks of banks, universities, government departments, and other private companies and brands. The research, after examining the formal quality of the star motifs with reference to the respective meanings, establishes the significance of star motif in visual communication.

Key words: Star Motifs, Islamic Art, Geometric Decoration, Visual Communication, Trademark Design, Symbolism

Introduction

Islamic geometric pattern holds a sacred position among all forms of Islamic art. The spiritual aspect associated with this pattern has a great impact on the devotees and scholars. The need for the creation of these non-figurative design elements aroused as an outcome of prohibition of figurative depiction in Islam. Although, history of the Islamic art reveals some of the exceptions like miniature paintings with figures of humans and animals, yet the sacred art like illuminated sacred text and sacred architectural structures highly leaned towards geometric motifs and arabesque pattern for an aesthetic and spiritual appeal. The complex repetition of the geometric pattern has a significant character of infinity, symbolic of Divine quality. Having its historical evolution in the Sassanian Empire, Greek and Roman Civilizations, geometric pattern originated around ninth century in Persia with an Islamic ideology.¹ In Islamic art, it emerged historically from a simpler to a completely evolved intricate pattern. Each geometric pattern is built upon four basic shapes, which are circles, squares, stars, and polygons. These basic shapes, overlapping and interlacing, become a continuous chain of connected patterns forming an ultimate unity and order.

This article presents the historical review of the star motifs used in Islamic architectural decorations. The surface ornamentation of South Asian monuments has a great influence on contemporary design in Pakistan. The motifs used for embellishment purpose in these monuments have a meaningful significance. The adoption of the historic motifs in contemporary trademark designs reveals a substantial influence of the former on the latter. This research focuses on the star motifs having varying number of points, including five-pointed to twelve-pointed stars, and even more. The different meanings associated with each of the distinct star show the vastness of symbolic knowledge. With the exploration of these meanings, this research contributes towards the understanding of star motif and its ideology.

Star Motif: Its Types and Symbolic Meanings

Before proceeding towards the historic review, presented here are the type of star shapes according to the number of points. With every type, the meaning is explained to have a basic understanding of their symbolic meanings.

I. Five-pointed Star or Pentagram:

It symbolizes human. The five points in this star represent the head at the upper point, two arms on the sides, and two legs below. However, the same shape when turned upside down represents devil with two horns at the top.² Additionally, it refers to the five senses that the human has been blessed with. From Islamic point of view, the five points in pentagram symbolize five prayers of a day and five pillars of Islam.³



Figure 1. Five-pointed Star.
(Source: “Five-pointed Star,”
https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Star_polygon_5-2.svg).

2. Six-pointed Star or Hexagram

One of the most commonly appearing motifs is the six-pointed star, where the two triangles are inversely overlapped to form the hexagram. This pattern is also termed as threefold symmetry. Six-pointed star is the representation of faith in Judaism, and known as the “Star of David” or the star of Prophet Dawud (PBUH). In the medieval age, this motif began to be associated with the identity of Jews. Whereas, its use in Islamic decoration is linked with its representation of the seal of Prophet Sulayman (PBUH) in addition to that of Prophet Dawud (PBUH).⁴

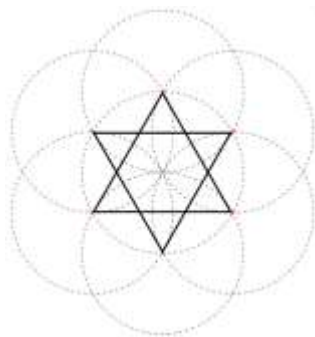


Figure 2. Formation of six-pointed star.
(Source: “Six-pointed Star,”
<https://www.outofstress.com/seed-of-life-meaning/>).

3. Seven-pointed star or Heptagram

Drawn with a single continuous line, seven-pointed star is the symbolism of eternity. Seven-pointed star's symbolism is associated with the number seven and the elements existing in seven, such as colors of the "rainbow, the seven seas, and the seven musical notes".⁵ This motif has a special significance in different religions. With Islamic perspective, it is the representation of seven heavens. It also denotes the first seven verses of the Holy Quran, and the Islamic ritual of circumambulation around the *Kaabah* seven times.⁶



Figure 3. Seven-pointed Stars.

(Source: "Seven-pointed Star," <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spirolateral>).

4. Eight-pointed star or Octagram

The other most popular star in Islamic decoration is eight-pointed star, where two squares are overlapped to form the octagram. This star pattern is also termed as fourfold symmetry. According to Islamic perspective, it symbolizes the eight angels that will be around the throne of Allah on the day of judgement. In addition, the two squares placed with 45-degree difference in their positions with a circle within, is also referred to as *Rub-el-Hizb*, which means "division in quarters" of the Holy Quran for easy recitation and memorization.⁷

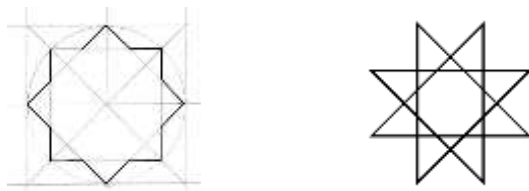


Figure 4. Formation of eight-pointed stars.

(Sources: "Eight-pointed Star," <https://mandalameadow.com/arabic-geometry-star-and-cross/>; <https://symbolsage.com/8-pointed-star/>).

5. Nine-pointed star or Enneagram

Nine is the highest number among the one-digit numbers, therefore the nine-pointed star symbolizes “completeness, perfection, totality, and wholeness”.⁸ This shape represents unity and oneness because of the characteristic of number nine to contain all the one-digit numbers. As all the higher digit numbers are made up of these one-digit numbers, therefore number nine is considered to encompass everything.⁹ Although this star represents Baha’i faith, yet it appears in Islamic decoration where it is the representation of oneness of God and Completeness of Islam as a religion.

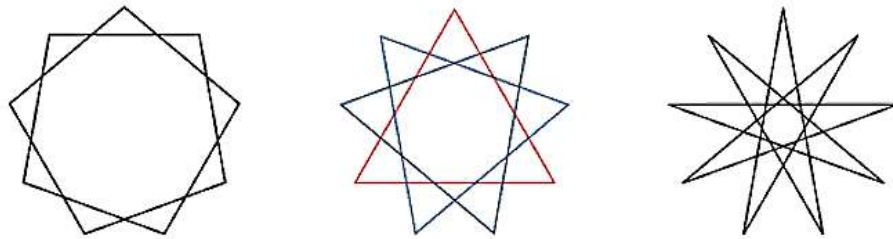


Figure 5. Nine-pointed stars.
(Source: “Nine-pointed Star,” <https://www.outofstress.com/9-pointed-star-meaning/>).

6. Ten-pointed star or Decagram

The ten-pointed star is not particularly associated with any particular symbolic significance with regards to the religion of Islam. Rather, its utilization in Islamic religious art is more general, with a focus on the beauty and marvels of the heavenly realms as manifestations of the Almighty.



Figure 6. Ten-pointed stars.
(Source: “Ten-pointed Star,” <https://design.tutsplus.com/tutorials/geometric-design-working-with-5-and-10--cms-22875>).

7. Eleven-pointed star or Hendecagram

This star shape also does not have a direct connotation of Islamic ideology. Its use in Islamic art is based on decorative purpose. Nevertheless, as a star it is depictive of the light and guidance that leads the human to the right path.

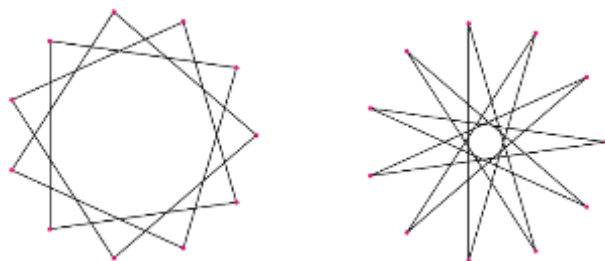


Figure 7. Eleven-pointed stars.

(Sources: "Eleven-pointed Star,"

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Regular_star_polygon_13-4.svg;

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Regular_star_polygon_11-5.svg).

8. Twelve-pointed star or Dodecagram

The twelve points in this star are the representation of twelve months.¹⁰

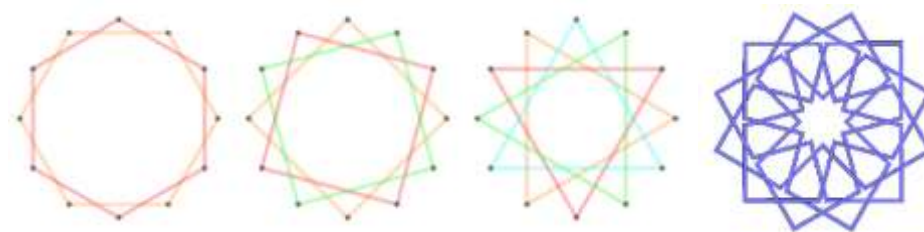


Figure 8. Twelve-pointed stars.

(Sources: "Twelve-pointed Star," <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dodecagram>;

<https://pin.it/6ewQDXX>).

9. Multiple-pointed stars

The star can be multiple-pointed, having various points, which is the representation of God's creation of celestial bodies, light, guidance and the Divine order, in addition to universal diversity. However, in Islamic art, the abundantly used geometric motifs also refer to the fine aesthetic taste of the Muslim patrons and the interest in complex designs.

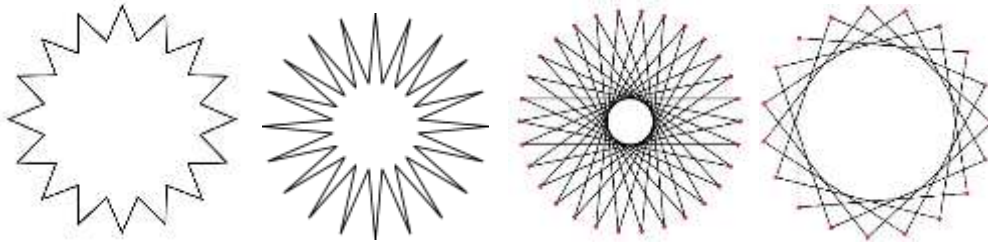


Figure 9. Multiple-pointed stars.

(Sources: "Multiple-pointed Star," <https://timvandevall.com/shape-templates/sixteen-pointed-stars/>; https://etc.usf.edu/clipart/37700/37732/20-star_37732.htm; https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Regular_star_polygon_30-13.svg; https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Regular_star_polygon_19-5.svg).

The intricate geometries form a chain of different patterns, connecting various types of stars and the polygons in between them. The loaded geometric ornamentation also reflects the splendor of the Islamic empires of Persia and the Mughals. Different polygons including (but not limited to) hexagons and octagons are formed in between the connected stars (figs. 10-12).

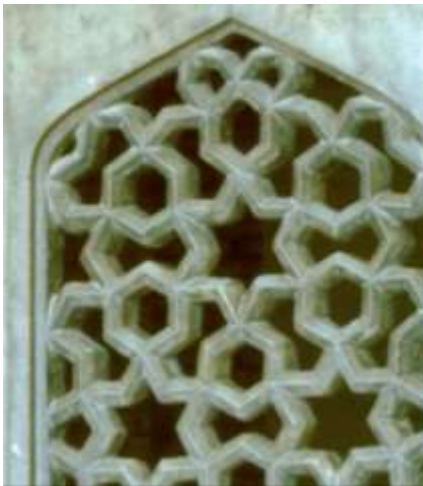


Figure 10. Ornamental *jali* with six-pointed stars and hexagons from Friday Mosque Isfahan, Iran. (Source: "A pattern from Jameh Masjid Isfahan Iran," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3baSge25ws>).



Figure 11. Tessellation with eight-pointed stars and rhombus patterns on a wall of the Alhambra, Granada, Spain. (Source: "Arabesques alhambra," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Arabesques_alhambra.jpg).



Figure 12. Tiles in the shape of eight-pointed stars and crosses, 13th century, Iran. (Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art).

Study of Star Motifs in Islamic Ornamentation

Nevertheless, there is no limitation of geometric patterns in Islamic art. Several pointed stars appear in the surface ornamentation of numerous Muslim architectural monuments, with various levels of spiritual essence reflecting the states of believer's heart. In Iran the shrine of Shah Nematollah Vali (1431) displays a variety of stars including five, seven, nine, ten, eleven, and twelve-pointed stars (fig. 13).¹¹



Figure 13. Dome of the Shrine of Shah Nematollah Vali, Mahan, Iran, 1431. (Source: "Shah Nematollah Vali Shrine," https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Shah_Nematollah_Vali_Shrine_08.jpg).

Star, with its radial symmetry has some symbolic connotations associated with Islamic ideology. All types of stars are contained within circumference of a circle which is touched by all vertexes of the star. Circle with no ending point, itself is representation of the oneness of God – the infinite power, who has always been there and always will be. The space of this circle is occupied by a star with any number of vertexes, which symbolize radiation of the light of God in all directions, as quoted by Allah in the Holy Quran "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth".¹² Unlike other religions where God is represented

through iconographic figures, Islam's prohibition of such figurative representation has given birth to the geometric aesthetics.

Besides being symbolic of the Divine light, stars have also served as navigator in the dark during the early eras. *Qiblah* direction for the Muslim's prayers is also determined by the navigational north star, hence surface decoration of the mosques employ this pattern. Furthermore, meditation which helps achieve a constant focus and leads to a spiritual state, is reflected in the continuous repetitive geometric pattern, which is perfectly harmonized by the combination of different stars and polygons. Greek mathematicians also link the perfect geometry with divine qualities. Analysis of the Greek studies have been agreed upon by the Muslim scholars to connote the geometric stars as "a spiritual gate to the divine plane".¹³ The geometric formation of stars evolved to form various complex embellishments in numerous forms of Islamic art like on ceramics, illuminated manuscripts, and particularly surface ornamentation in architecture. This Persian influence forms a basis of South Asian art during the Mughal Empire. One of the epitomes of such ornamentation is the Tomb of I'timād-ud-Daulah in Agra, India (1622-1628) with sheer aesthetics in its decorative motifs (figs. I4-I7).



Figure I4. Marble inlay ornamentation with five-pointed and ten-pointed stars at the Tomb of I'timād-ud-Daulah Agra, India.
(Source: Michell, *The Majesty of Mughal Decoration*, 80, 81).



Figure I5. *Jali* with six-pointed stars and hexagons at the Tomb of I'timād-ud-Daulah Agra, India.
(Source: Michell, *The Majesty of Mughal Decoration*, 85).



Figure 16. Geometric motifs on the exterior of I'timād-ud-Daulah's Tomb, Agra, India. (Source: "17th-century Jali," <http://www.tess-elation.co.uk/cairo-tiling/17th-century-jali>)



Figure 17. Geometric motifs in the interior of I'timād-ud-Daulah's Tomb, Agra, India. (Source: "Itimad-ud-Daulah Tomb: The First Miniature of Taj Mahal," <http://goindiayatra.com/baby-taj-or-itimad-ud-daulah-the-first-miniature-of-taj-mahal/>).

Mughal monuments in Lahore also speak the same language in terms of geometry. In addition to the floral motifs, the geometries play a pivotal role in establishing a spiritual milieu. Maryam Zamani Mosque (1611-1614), also known as Begam Shahi Mosque, in the walled city of Lahore portrays the climax of intricate geometric decoration with five-pointed, six-pointed, and ten-pointed stars (figs. 18, 19).



Figure 18. Geometric motifs with six-pointed stars in the interior of Maryam Zamani Mosque, Lahore.
(Source: Captured by the author).



Figure 19. Geometric motifs with five-pointed and ten-pointed stars in the interior of Maryam Zamani Mosque, Lahore.
(Source: Captured by the author).

Tomb of the Emperor Jahangir (1627-1637) in Shahdara Complex, Lahore, is no less an embellished wonder in the world of design. Structure of the Mughal Tomb itself is based on the symmetrical geometric plan as typical of all the Mughal tombs. This symmetry mirrors in the surface decoration as well, bringing harmony in the aesthetics, besides providing a spiritual experience (figs. 20, 21).



Figure 20. Inlaid floor in the interior of Jahangir's Tomb, Lahore.
(Source: Captured by the author).



Figure 21. Geometric Pattern on the exterior of Jahangir's Tomb, Lahore.
(Source: Captured by the author).

Conceived by the Emperor Shah Jahan, Shalimar Gardens (1641-1642) in Lahore present a visual treat to the visitors. Walking through the geometries among the gardens, pavilions, fountains and pathways, the tactile experience culminates with the visual experience of the geometric pattern (figs. 22, 23).



Figure 22. Floor of a pavilion at Shalimar Gardens, Lahore.
(Source: Captured by the author).



Figure 23. Geometric *jali* at Shalimar Gardens, Lahore.
(Source: Captured by the author).

These geometric motifs not just serve the purpose of aesthetic, but are bound with meaningful symbolism. Each shape with its number of points and angles is symbolic of Divine light and guidance for the believers of Islamic faith.

Study of Star Motifs in Contemporary Trademark Design of Pakistan

However, being a major source of inspiration for the contemporary visual communication design, these geometric patterns reappear with a modern approach, serving to visually communicate the meaningful symbolism to the general public. Although prohibition of figures is no longer strictly followed in Pakistan, yet visual communication makes use of geometric patterns to reflect the true essence of the Islamic ideology.

The contemporary visual communication designs based on Islamic geometric motifs communicate effectively because of the balance and equilibrium in the design. The symmetrical proportions of the design elements well contain the essence of the historical origin. Trademark design is a derivation from product symbols that identify a certain company, defining its reputation and market representation. A unique trademark design is protected and has a great importance in facilitating consumer recognition. Trademark design is the identity of the function of the company and its Unique Selling Point (USP).

The present-day designs of trademark reveal an impact of modernization as well as the historical culture and religious values. The research presented here analyses those trademark designs in Pakistani industry which are clearly influenced from the geometric star motifs of Islamic art. The selected designs are the trademarks of Islamic banks, universities, government departments, and other private companies and brands. The trademark design of Faysal Bank's Islamic banking is a gradient blue eight-pointed star, perfectly suggesting the Islamic Banking services accessible to all, with a dome shape within (fig. 24). The star in the trademark of the bank is the representation of the fair banking system devoid of interest, providing the Muslim customers with the facility to abide by the rules of Islam against interest. Banks use star motif as a connection that they create between the customers and the rules of the Almighty.



Figure 24. Trademark of Faysal Bank with eight-pointed star.
(Source: Faysal Bank,
<https://www.faysalbank.com/en/islamic/>).

Operating with the similar Islamic principles, Dubai Islami Bank depicts its global outreach through a globe form in green color, on which circular forms overlap to form a golden star, with its center filled with maroon color (fig. 25). The colors and the motif both are symbolic of the financial services based on Islamic values.¹⁴ The golden accents represent banks excellence and ingenuity. The bold and legible Fonts in English and Arabic, placed on the right of the globe create a balance in the design. The trademark designs of Islamic Banks speak for the Islamic ideological perspective. The visual appeal created by the Islamic motifs drives the Muslim customer's towards Islamically regulated financial system. These trademarks strongly depict bank's commitment

towards offering Islamically aligned financial services, besides signifying its leading position globally.



بنك دبي الإسلامي
Dubai Islamic Bank

Figure 25. Trademark of Dubai Islamic Bank.
(Source: Dubai Islamic Bank, <https://www.dibpak.com/>).

The trademark of Aror University of Art, Architecture, Design and Heritage, is an eight-pointed star, created by overlapping two squares (fig. 26). Executed in maroon and brown tones, the trademark design of the university recalls the Sindhi traditionally block-printed fabric known as *ajrak*, denoting the geographical location of the university in Sindhi region of Aror. The star motifs are also used in *ajrak* along with other geometric and floral patterns. However, in the field of education, eight-pointed star is the symbol of “guidance, inspiration, aspirations, balance, transformation and completeness”.¹⁵ While the circle formation within the star motif is representative of eternity, wholeness, spirituality, unity, protection, and boundaries or barrier against the negative influences. While the smaller circles within the triangular formations at the fringes of the star denote various departments of the university.¹⁶



Figure 26. Trademark of Aror University of Art, Architecture, Design and Heritage, Sukkur.
(Source: Tariq Abro. Trademark designer, WhatsApp message to author, August 30, 2023.).

The points of star in all the directions gives the idea of the power of knowledge which enlightens the minds and the world. The star motifs also appear in the trademark designs of University of Management and Technology (UMT), Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), and University of South Asia (USA). The ten-pointed star in the trademark design of UMT is contained within a ten-sided polygon (fig. 27). Inside the star is a circle having

university's abbreviation. The blue and white color combination makes the trademark design sophisticatedly appealing. Star is usually symbolic of excellence and achievement, besides illumination of thoughts. With the perspective of educational institution, star motif has a paramount significance, representing the role played by the institution for the guidance and inspiration of the learners. In addition, it is also depictive of the direction towards goals, because of star's historic function as navigator in the dark.



Figure 27. Trademark of University of Management and Technology, Lahore.
(Source: UMT, <https://www.umt.edu.pk/>).

The star motifs in the trademarks of LUMS and USA are depicted in a half (figs. 28, 29). The former is a six-pointed star divided to show only three points, while latter is eight-pointed star divided to show just the four points. Both the designs placed within a domical shape, highlighting the significance of knowledge in the religion of Islam. These universal symbols of star and dome, suggest the reach of these private universities, offering the advance facilities in education system according to the international standards.



Figure 28. Trademark of Lahore University of Management Sciences, Lahore.
(Source: LUMS, <https://lums.edu.pk/>).



Figure 29. Trademark of University of South Asia, Lahore.
(Source: USA, <https://usa.edu.pk/>).

The five-pointed star in the trademark design of Pakistan Cricket Board recalls the star in Pakistan's national flag (fig. 30). It represents the national identity as well as patriotism. With reference to cricket, the game which is highly celebrated in Pakistan, this star signifies the national pride, and excellence that Pakistan has gained on national and international levels. Moreover, it is symbolic of the high achievements that Pakistani cricket team is globally known for.



Figure 30. Trademark of Pakistan Cricket Board.
(Source: PCB, <https://www.pcb.com.pk/>).

Pakistan Railways is known for its historical importance. Originating during the British Raj, the railways has continued to serve the passengers till present day Pakistan. Its trademark is an eight-pointed star, which represents the railways' function in navigating and leading the passengers from one place to the other (fig. 31). This star motif symbolizes the quality service that has built customers' trust in the company. This motif emphasizes the railways' reputation in the transport industry.



Figure 31. Trademark of Pakistan Railways.
(Source: Pakistan Railways, <https://www.pakrail.gov.pk/>).

The star motif with varying number of points appearing in the trademark designs of numerous brands and companies mark the focus of branding strategy of the certain brand or company. The trademark of Star Asia News Channel is made up of a five-pointed star (fig. 32). The blue colored star contains within it a gold colored navigation sign, which typifies the historic characteristic of

star. The presence of stars on the trademark of a news channel can be interpreted as a sign of reliability and trustworthiness. It is an indication of the channel's commitment to providing honest, impartial, and reliable news coverage. Additionally, it is seen as a sign of responsible journalism. The star indicates the role of news channel in providing the viewers with clarity in fast-changing news events.



Figure 32. Trademark of Star Asia News Channel.
(Source: Star Asia News, <https://starasiatv.com/>).

The washing detergent Ariel has a different approach. Three elliptical shapes overlap each other to form a six-pointed star, which emits light in the center (fig. 33). Here the points are not sharp but rounded in accordance to the elliptical shapes. The ideology that Ariel adopts with reference to the star is its characteristic of shining and brightness. Here the brand highlights the capability of its detergent to make the cloths shine brighter. The trademark represents Ariel's attributes and its efficacy in brightly cleaning the fabrics. The trademark design shows the brand's capability of making the washed fabric gleam like a star.



Figure 33. Trademark of Ariel.
(Source: Ariel, <https://logos-download.com/4012-ariel-logo-download.html>)

Conclusion

The star motif holds a great significance in Islamic art and South Asian culture. Its use in the geometric ornamentation of Islamic monuments of Persia and the Mughals reflects the belief of the Muslims in the oneness of God, the Divine light, His guidance, universal diversity, and the Divine glory. This research observes that the star motifs used in Islamic ornamentation are not specifically limited to the symbolic meanings attributed to the different types of stars. As in other belief systems where one particular type of star motif symbolizes the respective faith, Islamic decoration does not make use of a certain type of star. Instead, numerous types of stars are employed in Islamic decoration from five-pointed to multiple-pointed stars, which collectively glorify the Creator and the universe.

Being the vital element of the Islamic decoration, the star motifs have continued to be used in South Asia since the Mughal Era till the present day. The influence of the star motif is widely observed in the contemporary trademark designs in Pakistan. These designs though reflect the inspiration from Islamic ideology, however different institutions, organizations, banks, universities, brands, and companies have employed the star in association with respective services. The simplified star motifs in the trademark designs present a new visual approach, yet the basic meanings behind the star i.e., light, navigation, guidance, and excellence, still associate with these designs. The contemporary trademark design shows the influence of meaning with regard to the mission and values of the company in addition to the historical context.

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¹⁶ Tariq Abro. Trademark designer, WhatsApp message to author, August 30, 2023.