



## CULTURE, THREADS AND IDENTITY IN CLOTHING AND DIASPORIC ENGLISH LITERARY WRITINGS

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### Abstract

Diasporic texts in English literature come up with curious issues. Paper under consideration talks about clothing as characters' conscious or unconscious tool that helps them navigate their dual existence. Dress here is not just a practical necessity, it marks individual identities. Clothes serve a crucial purpose in self-discovery of the characters as they journey through life. Paper goes on to discuss how characters evolve with change in their attire. This is symbolic of shifting allegiances and fluidity of cultural identity in these writings. This preoccupation with dress is symbolic of broader cultural conflicts and adaptations of characters' to all that they go through. Examples from diasporic texts have been highlighted to shed light on core aspects taken up in support of the title.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Culture, Identity, Dress, Symbol

### Introduction

Clothing oneself is acceptance of being a civilized human being. For man, these bits of cloth pieces serve as vital accessories. They protect from extremities of nature, be it temperatures, precipitation or the wind. They are powerful tools of self-expression that give identity, status, mood and culture to an individual. First impressions generally are a result of this dressing up sense. Clothes contribute to decency and societal norms, further creating mutual respect in the ordered world.

More is said and meant through words penned down by authors of famed literary works down the ages.

Paper under discussion is about clothes as means of understanding life in diasporic literature. But one cannot ignore Chaucer when it comes to talking about importance of appearances. Geoffrey Chaucer's colorful tapestry of clothing in Prologue to "The Canterbury Tales" is truly a masterpiece where these dresses serve as window to social, psychological and moral aspects of his medieval characters. His depiction of dress is both aesthetic and vital part of characterization, thematic exploration and social commentary.

### Attire as Social Signifier

Chaucer used descriptive passages on characters to bring out social status, identity and profession through their clothes. He was an observer who used his skills in extraordinary manner. He used dresses to portray medieval structure of social hierarchy and place where each of his character stood. In "The Canterbury Tales", his majestic knight wears a "fustian tunic" that is stained by his coat of mail. This get up suggests his modesty along with the dedication to profession of a soldier. Chivalric virtues of the knight are underscored by his simple attire.

In the similar manner, the Squire, fashionable and youthful son of the knight, is "embroidered like a meadow bright....flowers red and white,". He represents a courtly lover who has immense desire to impress with his youthful visage. Chaucer does more than just being descriptive about dresses. He chooses father and son relationship to highlight preferences due to generation gap. At the same time he touches upon different ideals of medieval chivalric society.

In contrast, Chaucer mocks the religious order of his times through characters like the Monk. The Monk does not dress in simple clothes. He enjoys fur-trimmed robes that come with gold pin shaped like a love knot. Chaucer hits out at the clergy that indulged in vices that were to be shunned by its members. The Monk, due to his choice of dress, is thus to be taken up as a hypocrite and symbol of religious corruption.

### Moral plus Psychological Implications

Dress, be its design or color, along with accessories, convey more than it is meant to. The wife of Bath loves fine woven clothes, stylish kerchiefs, stockings in bright red color and shoes that shine. Her rich choice of clothing tells the reader about her rich background. She exudes confidence in herself, she is of an assertive personality that commands attention of all. Red stands for passion, and Wife of Bath has a

sensuous nature. She has had many husbands and mourns for none.

Chaucer's Summoner is a visual example of man with inner corruption. The face of this person is marred by carbuncles. Garland worn by him is taken as grotesque parody; where it should have been otherwise as it is symbolic of religion. Here is moral decay in plenty during medieval period. It was belief of this age that outward appearance of a person reflected his inner vices, impurity of his soul.

Clothing is also used as a disguise in Chaucer's reputed narrative. Deception too is carried out with help of this disguise. The Pardoner in "The Canterbury Tales" sells religious relics, these are fake. His voice has animal like quality and this itself is a negative animalistic attribute. His hair are yellow and lifeless like wax, "as smooth as a hank of flax." His misleading appearance and insincere nature go hand in hand. They are reflected in his fashionable, unappealing dressing up sense that further is a comment on his manipulative and questionable morals. Chaucer is asking readers to explore the truth that says appearances can be deceptive.

### Satirizing Society

Chaucer was an observer. He used humor to comment upon social classes, mankind in general and institutions of his time. His character of Prioress is subtle critique on superficiality of few in religious order. The lady under lens wears beautifully made cloak along with coral beads for jewelry. Golden brooch with inscription of "Amor vincit omnia" (Love conquers all) worn by her has more to do with ladies at court than those affiliated to Church order. There is less of spiritual devotion in mannerisms of the Prioress.

When Chaucer talks about the Merchant, he is again touching upon theme of appearances can be deceptive. The Merchant loves "Flemish beaver hat" and he wears "daintily buckled boots." He seems prosperous

and a success in his chosen profession. In actual, this person is in debt and is using his outward dress to hide financial problems. Chaucer comments upon the dubious nature of mercantile class.

Chaucer not only criticized the religious order that is core of any society, he criticized the lower class in the social order as well. The Miller of these tales wears white coat that has blue hood. But he is not without a blemish as he is called a "stout churl." His physicality is reflected through his coarse behavior. In the form of Miller from lower class, Chaucer mocks pretensions of men with riches.

### Symbolism vs Allegory

Dress has both social and moral implications in "The Canterbury Tales." Apart from this it is also symbolic and allows the author to enrich allegorical dimensions of his text. The simple attire of Pilgrims is taken as a metaphor for spiritual mind set and holy journey that is underway. The Knight is pure and dedicated even while facing hardships. This is reflected through his stained tunic. The Parson is shown as a simply dressed up person who stands for Christian humility. This pious person is direct opposite to worldly men.

Chaucer allegorically uses dress in his dream vision, "The House of Fame." The fantastic realm of the poem is full of vividly described clothes. These clothes and appearances throughout poet-narrator's journey are symbolic of fame, transient achievements of humanity at large and fortune. The poet intricately describes both the courtiers and the humble laborers and through this he continues to explore fickle reputation and fame as distributed arbitrarily.

Chaucer's multifaceted dress tool is universal in nature. It's implications are not restricted to just one age or place. His complex description of dresses worn by his characters is a social signifier that serve the dual purpose of exposing complex nature of man along with

underlying tension that ails a society. After examining clothes on his characters, we emerge as wiser lot in arena of culture and morals of mankind.

### Metaphors for transformation & "The Buddha of Suburbia"

"The Buddha of Suburbia" (1990) by Hanif Kureishi, explores themes of caste, race and identity through its Protagonist Karim who navigates through complexities brought forth by his biracial identity amidst suburban London society and that of the city. Son of immigrant Pakistani man and an Englishwoman, Karim goes through inner conflict of not being able to identify himself with either culture.

Hanif captures the tensions faced by people in multicultural society. The novel comes with themes of cultural assimilation, rebellion, quest for self realization and search for an identity. Karim's dress helps him to negotiate through cultural tensions. While he tries to blend with suburban settings through nondescript clothing, in London he rejects the rigid traditional attire by choosing blend of eclectic styles. Both through his choice of clothing and that of profession, Karim embarks on journey of self exploration and self discovery.

Karim's father, Haroon, takes up a new identity from that of a civil servant to that of a spiritual guru. He dons elaborate robes and turbans accorded to an Indian guru to project mystique and power that goes by it. He manages to escape mundane life by becoming an important and recognized member of the society.

Karim joins London theatre and experiments with bold and bohemian fashion as desire to be recognized as an elite artist and not a commoner from the suburbs. He rebels to escape those who try to define him and caste him in a particular mould.

Clothes are metaphors for transformations taking place in the story. They are there to state the performative nature of

character's identity. Theatre allows Karim to explore his identity with each new role and new costume. World of theatre allows him to become Mowgli from "The Jungle Book" to a punk from streets of the city. Through his changing roles and costumes, Karim moves on to self realization that identity is not fixed but forever evolving.

### Tradition and Culture in Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake"

India has renowned cultural diversity that in turn is reflected through its traditional clothes. Different ethnic groups, regional topography of land and variety in religious sphere has contributed to its spectrum of colorful, unique traditional dresses. Contemporary designers cater to the aesthetic Indian. Traditional clothing fuses with modern trends to create something wonderful. And this is what appeals to the modern aesthetics.

Diasporic author, Jhumpa Lahiri, in her "The Namesake", highlights cultural identity and inner turmoil of her characters. She explores tension that underlies traditional Indian and that of a modern American. Here one comes across symbolic broader theme concerned with identity in the wide field of diasporic experience, especially through the protagonist of the novel, Gogol Ganguli.

Jhumpa Lahiri talks about Bengali Culture. Sari is a traditional dress worn by Indian women across the sub-continent. But how one drapes this long piece of cloth around one's body, is but a matter of one's tradition & culture. Traditional Kurta for men and Sari for women is what preserves Bengali culture in American setting. Gogol's parents stick to their dress code to keep alive their connection with their homeland. Ashima, Gogol's mother, wears colorful Saris in bright colors and beautiful designs. She takes pride in her dress while in foreign country. Her connectivity to her motherland is there in her choice to adhere to her native dress code. She does not feel lost and foreign even while surrounded by foreign sea of

humanity because she knows she "belongs" to someplace. This sense of belongingness is what allows a man to survive and retain semblance against all odds. Through her dress, Ashima is connected to her memories, and fond memories are what makes a person move on despite all adversities.

Gogol is named after the Russian author. This removes him from owning a traditional Bengali identity that in turn symbolizes cultural dislocation as faced by him. As he is born and brought up in foreign land, his attire is taken to be reflection of struggle faced by the character on being owner of a dual identity. He has no say as a child when parents make him wear traditional dresses during formal events. He prefers American dresses in order to be one of the lot he moves around with. This is the cause of cultural gap that causes chasm between the parents and the offspring.

### Assimilate and Rebel

Rift between Gogol and his parents widen as Gogol grows. He prefers western wardrobe to Indian clothing. He finds jeans and T-shirts more comfortable in western crowds. He does not want to stand out in the crowds; his preference is to be one of them. Indian heritage is a burden to this westernized heart. American clothing is form of rebellion against parental control. He does not crave to be known as an Indian. He has no memories connected to Indian soil, unlike his mother. He wants to assimilate into culture that he has grown up in.

Gogol's wife, Moushumi, prefers Western dresses. She uses her choice of Western attire to distance herself from her own heritage of being a Bengali.

### Dilemma of Dual Identity and Conflict

This difference in way one dresses in "The Namesake", is symbolic of inner conflict faced by Gogol. He is prey to dilemma of dual identity. He is clearly uncomfortable in public while wearing traditional clothing from his native land. He is a stranger to his own cultural

identity. Gogol's finally is seen to adopt some aspects of his cultural heritage, but in taking up westernized style, he journeys towards self-acceptance. But in the end one sees him reconciling to dual identity.

Lahiri explores world of immigrants in her novel. Dress is not only a powerful symbol for a person's identity, but it also is tug of war with dual identity. Through its various themes, Lahiri is able to touch upon question of emotions enmeshed with heritage, quest for self and sense of belongingness.

### **Culture Identity, tradition and transformation**

Monica Ali's "Brick Lane" reflects both the culture and social status of its characters. Clothes are vital in the quest of personal identity in personal journeys undertaken by these characters over time. Monica explores lives of London's Bangladeshi immigrants who strive to preserve their own heritage while adapting to their new surroundings.

Nazneen, the protagonist of this novel, identifies herself and keeps her connection to her cultural values through her attire. Sari for her is symbol of modesty, an adherence to her cultural norms and subservience to role as member of Bangladeshi woman community. These saris provide her with a protective layer in the new alien world. But one can also consider this adherence as sign of initial passivity to life given to her; first by her father and then by Chanu, her husband. Here one sees traditional cultural restraints as dictated through choice of clothes, affecting her behavior, her thoughts and her relationships.

Nazneen's identity evolves in London and her independence is reflected in her working life-style. She navigates through life by retaining her traditional dress along with her adaptation to western world through her sewing that caters to western community. Her choice of becoming a seamstress carves out her new identity that blends with her roots and experiences in the new world. Monica Ali

highlights the tension of one's cultural heritage in the western hemisphere.

Apart from duality in work and personal life, clothes in "Brick Lane" serve as marker of one's social status within the Bangladeshi Community and that of British Society at large. Power dynamics are at work in Monica's novel. Chanu want to be one of the elite member of English Society. He is concerned with how people should look upon him. He wears expensive but ill fitted English clothes that go on to highlight the gap between his aspirations and real life. He looks insecure instead of a confident person.

Nazneen's boyfriend, Karim, wears both the western and traditional dress with confidence. His political meetings are attended in traditional dress, commanding respect and giving him power among his fellow countrymen. He is a fluid character who enjoys his hybrid existence to its full potential.

Nazneen not only becomes independent but empowers other immigrant women through her choice of profession. Women working for her share their experiences, their fears and move collectively toward a better tomorrow. Feminine solidarity is another theme for reflection in this novel.

### **Conclusion**

The portrayal of dress in "The Canterbury Tales" by Chaucer and in other works falling under diasporic literature, like Hanif Kureishi's "The Buddha of Suburbia", serve purpose of being markers of identity, status, and cultural assimilation or resistance, but this they do so within very different historical and social contexts.

Chaucer deals with questions of morality and social disparity. But diasporic literature talks about struggle of different kind, it is individual's struggle to hold on to his identity in new realms. While readers are introduced to static medieval world by Chaucer, Diasporic works take readers into world of

change where identities are in continuous flux, changing and evolving according to circumstances. While Chaucer criticises morals of society that he lives in, post colonial writings have wider lands to explore where pressures of all kinds are discussed for their negative and positive attributes.

Nazneen evolves along with her attire that mirrors her journey from a passive, obedient wife to that of becoming an empowered, independent woman. Through portrayal of her clothing, Ali highlights the complex ways in which social pressures, cultural heritage and personal identity intersect in the lives of immigrants. The novel focuses on dresses as personal identifiers, but at the same time it is talking about their importance and the role they play as navigators, driving characters through challenges in life and opportunities that present themselves in the new world.

For Gogol and Ashima dress is a connection to one's roots. It is something that holds relationships together in spite of tensions that surround them.

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