



Dress Patterns and Its Implications with Special Reference to Diasporic Sensibility

Dr. Manu Bharti

Assistant Professor, Ranchi Women's College, Ranchi University
Email: manubharti09@gmail.com

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.2.56](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.2.56)



Dr. Manu Bharti

Article info

Article Received:17/03/2025
Article Accepted: 20/04/2025
Published online:29/04/2025

Abstract

Clothes are an important marker of culture. Clothing patterns differ geographically, temporally and spatially. It represents loyalty to the culture one belongs to and has a role beyond covering the body or being a style statement. This paper talks about how clothing patterns define one's identity, the gender stereotypes surrounding dress patterns, their psychological implications, and the effect of clothing on understanding diasporic sensibility. This paper analyses the aspects of clothing in intricate detail and uses examples from Indian diasporic literature to validate the points raised. The paper uses an extensive analysis of relevant books and articles on the importance of clothing in diasporic settings and identity affirmation. Focusing mainly on Indian diasporic literature, it links clothing to ethnicity, individuality and its representation as a tool for nostalgia and revolt, cultural negotiation and cultural hybridity.

Keywords: cultural negotiation, Diaspora, ethnicity, hybridity, identity.

I. Introduction

Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath...There is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking." (Woolf, Orlando 78)

Clothes and dressing pattern are an important part of culture. It plays a major role in

defining the identity of a person. It represents one's personal taste, cultural pattern, and historical background. To cite some examples to prove the validity of above mentioned statement, saree is an important dress for Indian Hindu women while hijab defines a different religious and cultural practice. Similarly kimono is a dress pattern of Japan, sarong is South Asian in origin, keffiyeh is worn in Arabic states and was initially used to protect the skin from heat of arid regions. The clothing pattern has seen a vast transition from being functional to

fashionable and vividly communicates the cultural background of a person. Ethnic identity, in simple words, is what a group of people based on some common factors like nationality, religion, historical background. identify with. Keenan says, "Clothes are a society's way of showing where we belong in the order of things, our role and position in the social pageantry." (qtd. in "Clothing and the Communication of culture: The Sociology of Fashion" 1). The African tribes have a dressing pattern based on the rank of members in the community. For example, eagle feathers were reserved for elderly or chief members showing their authority and power. Heavy brass ornaments are a part of certain tribes. The colour of clothing also differs in different cultures. White cloth in Hindu is a sign of mourning, while white gowns are worn by Christian bride on their wedding to celebrate the day. Additionally, black is worn by Christians in funeral while black hijab is an important part of Muslim culture as a part of their daily dressing. Climatic and geographical condition also affects the clothing choices. Heavy fur coats are worn by freezing countries, while light cotton clothing is representative of hot, humid climate. Hence, instead of being a mere means of covering our body, clothes today have become an important means of self definition and representation.

There is no quicker or more visible way to send a message about the person we are than in how we dress. Whether that be to show inclusion, rebellion, to stand out or to demonstrate status, clothes say a great deal about the individual and where they place themselves in their world. Alison Lurie in her book *The Language of Clothes* opines that "dress is a universal non-verbal language through which individual first communicates with each other and deliver important information or misinformation. Also... the vocabulary of dress includes not only items of clothing, but also hair styles, accessories, jewellery, makeup and body decoration." (3)

2. Psychological Aspect of Dressing

Psychoanalysts talk about the psychological implications of dress patterns. Annette Lynch and Mitchell Strauss recognize dress as "our social skin" that unmask our sexuality and inner self to others." (13) People dress up according to the occasion or the impression they wish to make on others. Clothing is also gendered. While clothes like saree, skirts, salwar kameez are deemed fit for women, men choose pants, shirts, dhotis, etc for themselves. Any deviation from the abovementioned clothing pattern is seen as unusual and depicts a lot about the gender choices of a person. Hence, clothes cease to be just a material, rather becomes a psychological representation of an individual.

Rose Findlay comments, "wearing can be an imaginative act" (84); people sometimes clothe to emulate someone they aspire to be, to mimic or even to criticize. Children trying on their mother's sari, or father's shirt, slippers, or even accessories represent their inner desire to be like one of their parents. This imagination as Findlay suggests bridges the gap between "present self and imagined future self." (84) In this regard, Calefato explains how clothing hence "becomes both the object and subject of gaze" (344)

3. Gender Stereotypes in Clothing

"Thus in this one pregnant subject of clothes, rightly understood, is included that all men have thought, dreamed, done, and been: the whole External Universe and what it holds is but clothing; and the essence of all science lies in the philosophy of clothes. (Carlyle 91)

Identity often occurs in binaries and dressing patterns is an important marker of this binary. Modern fashion industry often challenges the stereotypes of clothing patterns and subverts the gender equation. In a homophobic society, experiments with dressing is often seen as an aberration as today the individuals see their clothes as a medium of self expression irrespective of the gender they

belong to. Even the colors are gendered and children from their infancy are trained to choose colours based on their gender. While pink Kinder Joy (a chocolate brand) for girls and blue for boys might just be a marketing gimmick, it actually has a deep impression on growing children who start associating their gender with a particular colour. And this is not only about chocolates. Even the toys and pencil boxes are gendered. The supermarket shelves are full of pink dolls (which is considered as a girl's toy) while one would rarely find a pink toy car. In a world of cars, chocolates, and dolls, children subtly grow up to become gender biased before they even realize. However with evolving fashion choices, identity is viewed in a less binary way than it once was, and the fashion industry has begun to adapt to this to the point where it has begun to deconstruct gender norms by creating collections that are exclusively genderless or including gender-fluid clothing in their selections (Kulaga et al., 2022) They are gradually subverting the heteronormative gender biasness in clothing while a lot is yet to be done.

4. Clothing and Diaspora Sensibility

Diaspora literature narrates the stories of long, lost homeland, everlasting nostalgia and incessant efforts at assimilation. While the world around them changes at a drastic speed, one thing the people in diaspora stick to is their clothing patterns. For them, clothes transcend boundaries and no longer remain a means of fashion or covering their bodies. It becomes a symbol of their love towards their homeland and a connecting thread that dares to break anytime. A man's clothing doesn't exhibit much difference across continents, but a woman's dressing is heavily dependent on the culture and country she belongs to. The dressing patterns pose certain questions:

a) How does one's country of origin/homeland affect their cloth choices?

- b) Why do certain individuals show stronger affinity to their ethnic apparels than the others?
- c) Is this difference uniform in first generation Diasporas?
- d) Can something as basic as dress choices prove as tool of retaliation?
- e) Is the adornment of ethnic dresses always a matter of pride or is it done out of fear of losing oneself in the host culture completely?
- f) What is the relationship between ethnic fashion and ethnic identity?

To answer the above mentioned questions we need to realize the importance of clothing patterns and their role in a diasporic setting. This can be discussed as follows:

a) Emphasizing cultural heritage

The first generation diaspora often miss their homeland while trying to adjust to the ways of hostland. Hence keeping up with their traditional clothing pattern is not just a conscious choice, rather it becomes a means of preserving their cultural heritage. Jhumpa Lahiri in her novel *The Namesake* makes sure to emphasize on this conscious choice of first generation immigrants through her character Ashima Ganguly. Even in the extreme weather conditions of U.S, Ashima flaunts her six yard sari, never giving up on her traditional way of clothing. It becomes a visual representation and a visual link to her much missed past. Lahiri's other first generation diasporic characters share the same love for sari, refusing to give up their cultural identity.

b) Cultural Negotiation

While Jhumpa Lahiri's first generation characters refuse to give up their traditional clothing patterns, Manju Kapur's Nina (*The Immigrant*), living in a loveless marriage wants to escape and the first step she takes up in this regard is giving up wearing sari. Nina, the protagonist, has a great difficulty in adjusting to

the cloth culture of Canada as initially she doesn't feel comfortable in Western clothes, but to win over husband who finds her fluorescent colored saris shameful and goes to the extent of calling her a Christmas tree (106), Nina decides at cultural negotiation. What starts as a means to convince her husband, her changed dress pattern, instills into her a confidence she never knew she had- it made her fit in, and allowed her to expand her horizon. The anonymity jeans and t-shirts brought comforted her as she attracted fewer gazes and felt as a part of the crowd. Gradually she gets used to it and feels melting into the adopted country and as she says "Assimilation brings approval" (Kapur 153)

c) Challenging Stereotypes

"Dressing also brings to light the anxieties and dilemmas about the reflexive production of our embodied selves. The relationship to dress is a personal and embodied one." (Derrington 11)

Apart from representing love for homeland and cultural negotiation, clothing pattern is also an important tool of challenging stereotypes. It highlights cultural hybridity and a waning interest towards the roots. It can also represent a protest to uphold a set of cultural values one does not relate to. It emphasizes power and choice, preference and fluid diasporic identity. In *The Namesake* when Moushumi, a second-generation Indian immigrant in U.S. makes an entry, the author makes sure to contrast her with Ashima based on her physical looks and social skills. Moushumi is depicted as wearing a short skirt, fitting top, and blazer with loud makeup on her face. Also, she meets Gogol (Ashima's son) with a kiss on his cheeks, thus challenging the Indian tradition and behavioral patterns she had grown up hating. Hence her choice of clothing is not a mere accident, rather a conscious choice of eliminating everything Indian about her. It subverts the norms and is a subtle way of representing her identity crisis. It is also an

attempt to belong to the host culture without getting questioned about her much hated roots. This retaliation is not only evident in Jhumpa Lahiri's writings. Bharati Mukherjee, a prominent first generation diasporic writer often endows her female characters an urge to escape the root culture and re-root themselves in the hostland soil that smells of freedom and possibilities. Apart from using other methods to challenge the stereotypes, she uses clothing habits as a major one. As Howell comments, "As people move (and are moved) across the globe, they transform local identities into new and hybrid forms. Sometimes, people in motion are reborn" (Howell 2000:59) This rebirth in diaspora sees dress patterns, coloured hair, tattoos and piercings as major indicative factors.

5. Conclusion

Clothing has functions way beyond just covering up bodies. It has social, ethnic and psychological implications as discussed in the article. Our dress patterns not only define who we are, but also represents our mental status, our cultural concerns and our ethnic choices. In diasporic narratives, it becomes a tool of retaliation, of emphasizing cultural shock while sometimes it evokes nostalgia. Dress has now crossed gender boundaries and modern dresses question the heteronormative construction of society by becoming gender fluid. It is a vibrant to establish and express the varied aspects of one's personality. It is defining, deciding, differentiating and demonstrating.

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