Subjectivities Determining Dressed Bodies

Key words: fashion / subjectivities / multiculturalism / postmodernism

Abstract

Fashion is expressive of individual personality, socially constructed, and subjected to various influences, manipulations and changes, which have been institutionalised by the élite designers and through dominant mentality. It is torn between and a victim of various ambivalences of cultures, age, gender and race. It has travelled from the domain of a hierarchical society to individual boundaries, from modernity to postmodernity. These subjections have moulded the identity of fashion giving its ephemeral nature and at the same time power to alter external realities. At a personal level, meaning of the word "fashion" has mutated. I have been subjected to the dominant processes defining multiculturalism and postmodernism, where experiences don't necessarily reflect linear progress and what emerges seems in order but springs from chaos. Living in Western cultures over a number of years, my Indian cultural identity has encountered an acculturation process. Subjections to multidimensional cultures, and the ever-changing Zeitgeist of societies we live in today, leave us exposed to an uncertain zone of identifying dressed bodies in fashion. Christopher Breward (2003, p. 217) in his book Fashion states that 'fashion can communicate individual passions and authentic cultural meanings as effectively as it contrives to disguise or mould them'. This paper explores fashion and its ever-changing identity in relation to various subjectivities that determine dressed bodies. The research is based on reflective studio practice engaging in fashion creation based around the plurality surrounding relationships between dress and wearer, wearer and society, the signifier and signified. These creations are analysed in light of the personal wardrobe of the researcher accumulated during the past two decades through documented photographs. Today fashion springs from pluralities characterizing the postmodernist society. The individual clothed body is submerged in the vast pool of fashion which is difficult to define as it takes fluid form with changeable boundaries.

Introduction

This project[1] is about how over a period of time, various influences have shaped my thinking about self and my fashion design practice. Clothing, dress and fashion, over the past two decades have slowly transformed my personal life. In this paper clothing and dress are

included in the broader framework of fashion. Living with and knowing cultural difference is important for my work as my cultural identity is defined by a plethora of cultures: where I have lived and am now living. This paper explores fashion and its ever-changing identity in relation to various subjectivities that determine dressed bodies. The research is based on reflective studio practice engaging in fashion creation based around the plurality surrounding relationships between dress and wearer, wearer and society, the signifier and signified. These creations are analysed in light of my wardrobe through the past two decade using documented photographs.

Today's model of fashion is bridging the gap between the European 'high' fashion and the local everyday fashion that is customised culturally in specific situations.

The equation of fashion with variables such as success, importance, aesthetics plus identities is developing with the shifting local and global situation. According to Jennifer Craik (1993) the loci of power associated with fashion are shifting and cannot be confined to a particular economic or cultural set of arrangements. She aptly states that fashion today leads in the ethnographic way, where the fashion designers and the consumers want to draw from many different cultures. Thus, with the reflexive response to cross-cultural blend of aesthetics, techniques and material, it is not easy to claim possession of one acculturated fashion. At this point it goes beyond possession and identity and becomes global and yet also very individual and specific. It is this paradox which intrigues me in relation to my work.

My thinking supports the idea that design / fashion cannot be isolated from my culture, exposure to personal experiences and environment. In fact these are continuously represented in a designer's work. Each culture brings along with it the manifestation of its own history in designing, fashion, thinking, philosophy and materials. Being an Indian by birth, my roots are strongly established in my culture and my own work speaks of it. In the past I have been exploring garment designs and surface embellishments used by Indians, for example the garment shown in figure 1 below was designed by me in 1997. It is an adapted version of an Indian garment named *Churidar Kurta*[2]. The neck follows the style lines of a shift dress worn in the northern region of India. The appliqué work reflects Indian upholstery designs. When I examine my clothing and dress they depict an eclectic make-up produced through the process of continual change in differing contexts through the lived experiences of my life.

Figure 1. Autumn Dress
Three piece wool blend outfit, a woollen felted vest, a long dress
jacket, fitted trousers with gathered hems (The author).

Contemporary Indian Fashion Designers

The upcoming contemporary Indian fashion designers, in their active, creative capacities are constructing shared, meaningful, global fashion practices. Their creations have multiple connotations, expressed in unfolding of historical meaning and in western adaptations of dress. These non-western designers are using fashion as a means to wear shifting and multiple identities. To establish the similarities and differences from western and personal fashion, I will elucidate the work of some Indian fashion designers such as Shahzad Kalim, Falguni & Shane Peacock, Ashish and Soni.

Media review released for 2007 Lakme India Fashion Show states:

> "It was a collection that wove the spirit of 1947[3] in a glamorous and patriotic manner…….. Known to be a very avant garde designer Shahzad, showed Indian wear in the most contemporary silhouettes, layering and embellishing them to give the garments a very futuristic look yet drawing from traditional Indian silhouettes, like the rural Rajasthan peasant tops, the flowing *kurtas*, the *bundi*,[4] *churidars* and knee length pants."

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Marcel Mauss (1973 cited in Jennifer Craik 1993, p. 9) elaborates on how societies fabricate body techniques that are individualised through borrowed signifiers like gestures, movements, actions and demeanours. Clothing fits very well into such fabrications. According to Jennifer Craik (1993, p. 9) rather than restricting fashion to the province of consumerist culture, fashion is a general technique of acculturation. Outfit in figure 1 fits well into this description of fashion. While the body gesture/stance of the model in this outfit is western and the colours are inspired by New Zealand autumn, the cut of the outfit is partially western and mostly non-western. In year 1997 the western influences in my design process started to find its initial conception.

Personal Fashion experiences and developing Identity:
A fashioned body is constructed though the act of self identification in relation to the significant other, of the world inhabited. Identity is developed through the process of belonging to yourself, someone, somewhere and something. Birth signifies, within an immediate framework, relationship to a creator and within a wider framework, relationship to place / nation / world.

Living outside my place of origin has magnified the importance of memories related to my family culture and the ongoing impact of my national culture. As part of growing up, I was exposed to my mother creating art and clothing both for achieving personal artistic value and functional value. Childhood brings back memories of being dressed in pretty embroidered frocks, sometimes smocked, made by my mother, to give her creative self a true and tangible expression. At this time I was not fully conscious of how these creative pieces would impact on my later personal life or how they might develop my sense of visual conception.

With the passage of time these personal experiences were woven unintentionally into the manifestations of my past and its interactions with the changing present and future. Now living in New Zealand, I am naturally transformed as part of the process of displacement of values and identities, by coming in contact and experiencing another culture. Giorgia Volpe and Mariette Bouillet (2001, p. 36) have very appropriately explained how the memories of our origins are strongly felt with the process of separation:

> 'It is a memory that I carry in my body. And I also question myself about the displacement of cultures, values, objects, and religions from one country to another…It is the essential question of identity, that of crossbreeding or of

ghettoisation, of transformation or of fossilisation, of living memory or of dead memory, of taking roots or of being perpetually uprooted'.

Cultural experiences define and give a structure to early experience of identity. Artist/designer constructs identity in response to multiple experiences. Creation of identity and its expression in art becomes a point of contact for unravelling identity and interacting with it from individual positions.

When I follow the trajectory of fashion in my personal life, much was initially formed by the cultural parameter of national boundaries. This is evidenced in the two images below showing my designs from 1989. Image 2 shows one of the variations of a garment called *Salwar Kameez*. The Salwar design is an adaptation of men's Dhoti, which is made from unstitched fabric draped around the legs like a bifurcated garment. The design was dictated by the cyclic return of dhoti salwar making them more desirable, and inspired by nationalism. The garment in image 3 is a gathered skirt worn with a tie-dyed mirror embellished top. Inspired by lehnga and choli – an outfit worn by women in western India, the design reflects personal design choices at that time in my life. Worn as street wear, the design was personalized and unfamiliar to the existing popular fashion. Nationalism is again expressed in the styling of the outfit which has been accessorised with a red dot on the forehead and anklets on the feet. Besides being ruled by fashion looks at the time, various personal and social elements dictated the designing of these garments. As the national boundaries became fluid through travelling abroad my exposure to western fashion increased and personal fashion choices changed.

Figure 2. Salwar Kameez
Personal Photograph (1989)-the outfit is called *kameez* and *dhoti shalwar*[5] which drapes differently than the standard *salwar* (The author).

Figure 3. Rajasthani outfit
A personal photograph (1989) –The outfit is an adaptation of *lehnga*[6], *choli*[7]. The *lehnga* (skirt) is gathered with subtle volume and the *choli* has tie-dyed print (The author).

At a personal level, the meaning of the word "fashion" has mutated as I have been subjected to the dominant processes defining multiculturalism[8] and postmodernism, where experiences do not necessarily reflect linear progress and what emerges seems in order but springs from chaos. Subjections to multidimensional cultures, and their ever-changing Zeitgeist, leave me exposed to an uncertain zone.

In essentialist version, my collective 'true self' identity was represented through garments suitably termed as national dress. Sari, worn traditionally, was differentiated exclusively by regions.

Worn in the contemporary style, sari is five to five and a half meters long, pleated over the petticoat at centre front and draped to sit over the shoulder. Before moving to New Zealand I wore sari extensively – mostly in the contemporary style, without covering the head, both at work and for social occasions. The Maratha style (from central India) is nine yards long. The extra length is used to drape between the legs, giving a bifurcated appearance at the back.

The traditional interpretation of sari, since I left India in 1996, has been cut across by the circulation of international media bringing with it western influences. This is vividly evident in work of designers like Falguni and Shane, who have played with the sari length, one of the most traditional features of the attire, by shortening it to knee length. This length has been seen in characterization of village women in Indian cinema, but is now appealing to the elite consumers of contemporary Indian fashion. Like Falguni & Shane, today I prefer to wear and style sari in ways that challenge the norm. For example last time I styled a sari, it was differentiated by using longer bodice, draped over fitted rushed pants rather than a petticoat. The drape was modified to expose the fitted pants worn under the sari.

Perceived differences between western and non-western fashion
The subtleties of non-western fashion are marked by changes which are not exclusively representing group identities. These changes are characterized by 'selective borrowing' between cultures. This shows the non-static and self-expressive character of dress and the bodies wearing it. This is how designing clothes has changed for me. I have moved away from nationalism and now embracing multiculturalism. Jennifer Craik (1993, p.19) believes that '…dress can be treated as specialised techniques of display and comportment rather than as mere reflections of general and impersonal social forces…'

Even though to the western eye, the sari may appear a constant, but within national and international influences, many modifications in construction, drape, and design have been evidenced. Naseem Khan (1992, p. 61-74) attributes this change to the arrival of commercial fashion in India. However this new look of sari will take time to be accepted as everyday fashion, or to be worn on the streets of Indian metropolitan cities.

The effects of disappearing national boundaries through modern technology are reflected in a lack of pure forms of local or global fashions. They cannot be separated from each other, and are now shaping into hybrid and eclectic looks. When I look at my designs in figure 4 it shows the heterogeneous character embedded in them. Associations and connections with objects, images and materials are defined by a national culture. But as the boundaries between nations become blurred, these objects, images and materials become less specific, universal and more mutable. Their meanings become nuanced by the changing viewers of changing contexts.
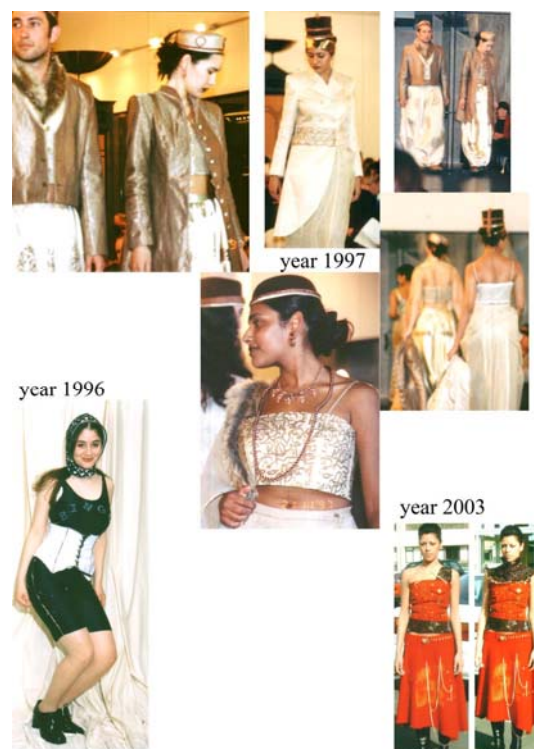

Figure 4. personal design work form 1996 – 2003. 1996 outfit-swim
wear/active wear is inspired by Las Vegas casino culture
1997 outfits are inspired by Arabic culture giving them royal twist
2003 outfit designed for street wear is inspired by deconstructed look
with various textile embellishment techniques (The author).

Malcolm Barnard (2002) considers the generative aspects of fashion, the ways in which what people wear constructs and maintain their identities. He also writes about the

revolutionary, or challenging, aspects of fashion, the ways in which what people wear can contest those identities. Within national parameters, different classes and genders occupy different positions in a society founded on power and status. Fashion enjoys the political position of challenging and maintaining these inequalities. The dominant culture, in opposition to the subordinate culture is always in a position to maintain prevailing identities and positions: while a subordinate culture is more likely to contest and challenge entrenched positions.

Dress creates plurality of identities, whether it is within one culture, or across different cultures. The western discourse encompasses the difference between western and non-western fashion.

Jennifer Craik has made observations on differences between western and non-western fashion. She explains that western dress represents fashion as it is ever changing, and projects individual identity of the wearer. However non-western dress falls outside the definition of fashion as it is stable, dictated by religion, customs, hierarchal systems, and represents group identity. These are categorized as national costumes in western discourse (1993, p.18).

While placing myself at the cusp of western and non-western fashion, my designs now have multicultural and global influences as can be seen in Figure 4. The disjunctive global cultural flow is characterized by cultural hybridity expressed in the outfit below in figure 5. It reflects a western silhouette designed for street wear. The skirt length can be varied by manipulating the closure of braces. The image printed on the front of the sweatshirt is from personal collection of photographs.

Figure 5. Embroidered street wear
Casual street wear outfit designed in 2004 with sweatshirt printed and
embroidered, tartan semi circular skirt with embroidered suspenders
(The author).

On close inspection of the outfit, it shows how the repertoire of embroidery stitches, used by Indian villagers from Gujarat, has been interpreted in a western outfit. It is the specificity of local and national signifiers that have been culturally and globally transported into western fashion. The signifiers used to create the fashioned subject are continuously evolving and representing, similarities and differences to the significant others. This outfit from a distance is globally placed but is rooted in particular features that are specific to me. Ronald Robertson (1992, p. 175) elucidates the concept of glocalization[9], to express 'the global production of the local and the localization of the global'. 'An emphasis on particularity and diversity can be regarded as an increasingly global discourse today' (cited in Chris Barker, 2000, p. 174).

Glocalization of Fashion

Is non-western fashion, in my case Indian fashion, peripheral and outside the mainstream? While the mainstream, everyday fashion in India is very different from the fashion system for the Indian elite, is this true for rest of the world? In New Zealand I could say that the gap between the two fashion systems is narrow. At the same time different fashion systems are competing and interacting in creation of complex array of dress codes embedded in global and local influences. Thus the aesthetic expressions of ideas, desires and beliefs circulating

in societies locally are interpreted within the wider international fashion framework. This supports what Chris Barker (2000) explains, that globalization is not constituted by a monolithic one-way flow from the west-to the rest. The current phase of accelerated globalization, which is not one-directional, is creating new forms of world inter-dependence in which there are no 'others' (Anthony Giddens, 1990, p.175 cited in Chris Barker 2000, p. 173). The very idea of 'centre' and 'margin' is challenged in creative practices born out of hybridization.

Garments like bomber jackets, pegged skirts and the like are clothing specific to Western culture and unfamiliar to my traditional culture; but no longer today to Indian urban youth. Over a number of years living in or along Western cultures, process of acculturation has resulted in partially displacing and relocating the identities of many Indians in their adopted multicultural societies. In the case of local Indian designers the acculturation process is driven by the commercialization of world media and by trotting the global village. Today they have acquired new visible identities by challenging the traditional and contemporary clothing systems and plugging them into the commercial systems.

Jennifer Craik (1993, p. 26) explains how many 'non-western cultures have shown flexibility and creativity at retaining other dress codes, modifying indigenous codes, and developing their own versions of 'western' fashion'. Work of some designers like Ashish and Soni have individualized what fashion means to some. Some of their outfits in 2006 collection shown at Lakme Fashion Week – India are completely deprived of traditional Indian aesthetics. Stuart Hall (1992bb, p. 275) explains how an individual subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not cohesive, but contradictory, pulling in different directions such that the identification is continually being shifted about (cited in Chris Barker, 2000, p. 224). The fashion system feeds on these instabilities / ambivalences / ambiguities, surrounding the socially and internally constructed subject / identity.

From modernity to post modernity
Hence fashion in its creation is totally submerged in collective and individual subjectivities. Ambiguity that surrounds fashion, the threats posed to its status, the dualities related to its formation, all spell out the problematic and subjectivities that determine the world of fashion.

Fred Davis (1992, p. 4) in his book titled 'Fashion, Culture, and Identity' explores the meaning of the word "fashion". He explains that 'through clothing people communicate some things about their persons, and at the collective level this results typically in locating them symbolically in some structured universe of status claims and life-style attachments'.

On following the trajectory of fashion, we decipher the plurality surrounding the relationships between wearer and society, between the signifier and signified. The outfit in figure 3, worn as street wear, was unfamiliar to the popular fashion of the time in India and yet accepted by the society. The signifiers used in its designing and styling appealed to the society. It would have drawn a very different response had it been worn in western context. The socially acceptable appearances of fashion clothing are defined by the social codes, identities created, and their acceptance in the dominant society, consumer culture and capitalist processes. In contrast to the dominant society, individuals will accept clothing based on their reality: what they want to portray, and their interaction with their psychology. In today's post modern society the individual, like me, internalizes various experiences to create many temporary fashion identities through dress as evidenced from figure 6.

Figure 6. Personal photographs from 1989 – 2005
Personal photographs reflecting different hairstyles and changes in
clothing choices.

'This is where fashion as a process comes into play as a useful mechanism for interrogating the subjective experience of modern life. Fashion is a process in two senses: it is a market-driven cycle of consumer desire and demand, and it is a modern mechanism for the fabrication of the self. It is in this respect that fashion operates as a fulcrum for negotiating the meeting of internal and external worlds'. (Christopher Breward & Caroline Evans, 2005, p. 2-3).

Alfred Kroeber, a well-known American ethnologist, carried out a study on the evening dress of western women over three centuries. The length and size of skirt, size and depth of neckline, and height of waistline were the elements studied. The results showed that the variations such as in skirt length, oscillated periodically every fifty years alternating between long and short (Roland Barthes, 2004, p. 92).

Roland Barthes (2004, p. 93-95) explains types of fashion based on the timescales of history. For example the basic pattern such as a kimono is an archetypal form of clothing developed over a longer timescale. Compared to this is the snippet of fashion called micro-fashion which alters annually. Barthes suggests that these timescales are part of larger historical rhythms such as expressed in Kroeber's study. Barthes analyses his study and the problematic attached to the change in Kroeber's rhythmic cycles. He concludes that if this happens it would be due to the growth and globalization of culture, by equalization of cultural objects. While what he predicted is almost true, fashion is only fractionally cyclic, and now is marked by temporariness. If we accept George Simmel's theory about fashion being a process of imitation and innovation, then this process would be following a very short time cycle sometimes seasonal, where distinctiveness in innovation would appear blurred for the benefit of mass produced ready to wear fashion.

While the designers in ready to wear garment industry are struggling to understand the modern montage of fashion looks leading to urban anonymity, they are also faced with the radically customized consumer embedded in social differences of the post modern society. As a customer I fall into the customized category where it is hard for me to be satisfied by one fashioned look fed through the commercial forces. Instead I want to mix and match with different fashion articles and create a personalized style. Ted Polhemus holds the view that "our delight in individuality, our respect for difference, our distrust of uniformity…is simply too great" (1996: 135). I hold that this is a big challenge for a contemporary designer today to satisfy so many characteristics into a unified, cohesive fashion. Modern conception has us believe that the world is knowable and that true knowledge of it is possible. Can we hold this for today's fashion? With innumerable social instabilities, can the fashioned subject be knowable? Is it really possible? As a designer fashion has changed for me dramatically and is still changing. In 1989 I was designing Indian ethnic styles (figure 2, 3). After moving to New Zealand in 1996, I was adapting Indian styles into western silhouettes (figure 1). In 1997 I was still finding huge ethnic elements in my designs. Gradually my designs are now reflecting more western bent with ethnic accents (figure 5). Slowly the proportion of these

cultural influences is changing along side the changing self with different lived experiences. At this point in time my designs are celebrating the difference of which I am a product.

My work speaks of alternative identities, with multiple voices, neither in the centre nor on the periphery, placed in several contexts, unravelling different meanings of objects as a fashion garment or a dressed body. Here I am a designer creating ideas that translate into the purchases and pleasures of the consumer and in a different context I am the fashioned body with various ambiguities. Can these two positions be placed independent of each other without touching? I am in a post-modern world, as its product and also implicated by it.

Conclusion

Fashion springs from these pluralities characterizing the postmodernist society. The individual clothed body is submerged in the vast pool of fashion which is difficult to define as it takes fluid form with changeable boundaries. Fashion today is subverted to the social instabilities which Fred Davis talks about, and I experience, and now these instabilities are becoming more specific than collective.

Figure 7. Embroidered garment
Embroidered garment (Choli) from North India – personal collection

Figure 8. Black and white interpretation
Personal interpretation of the garment in Figure 10
showing embroidery with black and white stranded cotton and grey
yarn which shimmer.

My current work involves embroidered samples collected from India shown in image 7 and its interpretation and modification in image 8. The flower has been worked in image 8 using herringbone stitch on and below the surface, depicting play of shadows. This work takes me back to my roots again, exploring the embroidered garments with meanings embossed in memories, seeking visibility. As an artist and creator of fashion I start with one influence, give it different interpretations, mix it with other signifiers and give birth to new fashioned body. Its visibility is paramount as it impacts on fashion systems and zeitgeist of our worlds.

Today the meaning of fashion is constructed through differences and supplemented with continuous changes, layering one over the other. This palimpsest of meaning is embedded in differences and diffusions. My personal perspective on dressed bodies is that they are being fabricated by individual, social and institutional subjectivities, to tip the balance of the fashion equation. Each one wants it to tilt to the direction that benefits them by giving visibility. These tensions between various fashion variables is getting stronger, as personal, social, national and global perspectives change. None can claim the possession of one acculturated fashion. Its fluid form will be continuously cut across by the circulation of global, local and specific discourses.

Endnotes

[1] This project forms part of my masters in fine Arts study.

[2] Churidar Kurta: It is a tight-fitted pyjama, rouched from the knee to the ankles worn by men and women with knee-length shirt, most commonly described as a tunic and also called Kameez.

[3] 1947 is the year when India got independence from British rule.

[4] Bundi is a short jacket or waistcoat with Nehru collar or without collar.

[5] Dhoti is an unstitched garment used to drape the lower body and Shalwar is a baggy style of pyjama tapered at the ankle worn mainly in the north Indian state – Punjab, Afghanistan and neighbouring areas. Dhoti Shalwar is an adaptation of combining the features of the two bifurcated garments.

[6] Lehnga is a gathered skirt, usually very flared.

[7] Choli is a short tight -fitting bodice worn by women either with lehnga or with sari.

[8] Kocur Z. Leung S. 2005. "The Syncretic Turn: Cross-Cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism" *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, Blackwell Publications, Malden, Mass, Pp 233-241.

[9] Glocalization is a marketing term used to imply how the global influences are already in the local and the production of the local is generated by a global discourse.

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