

Clothing and the Rhetoric of Patriarchy in Medieval and Early Modern Literature

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Abstract

Obsession on clothing has been an issue in society and academia for quite some time. Particularly in the Middle-East and in South Asia *hijab* has been a focal point of discussion. However, that is also the case in other parts of the world. News on banning, prohibiting clothes, dress and costumes can be found on social media every now and then. This control over clothing sometimes comes at the cost of some people losing access to education at times; sometimes it costs someone's job. Control over clothing also affects spatial movement, particularly for women. Therefore, this article purports to look into the agency behind the overarching obsession with clothing with regard to medieval and early modern literature. The discussion spans across cultures, be it Western or Indian. The body is monitored by clothing every moment, even as we discuss this. Interestingly, most of the time people are not aware of the implications of wearing a particular cloth.

Key Words: *Hijab*, patriarchy, spatial movement, access and prohibition.

At a time when there has been a ban on dresses both in India and abroad, it becomes important to look at the cultural history of clothing and whether a particular kind of clothing bears larger connotations in a socio-political and economic context. Although it is true that most of the impositions of dress codes are targeted at women, men are not entirely immune to patriarchal aggression. In 2021, *Khap Panchayat* at *Muzaffarnagar* in Uttar Pradesh banned jeans for women and shorts for men. When six students in *Udupi, Karnataka*, wearing *hijab* were not allowed to enter an educational institution, there were nationwide protests. Therefore, one must ask who decides what one wears. All these restrictions on clothing are meant to make men and women conform to their gender roles. Textiles and their cultural representation in literature are gendered. This article purports to look into the representation of clothing in literature and culture.

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One of the earliest literary examples of clothier is in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Alice, famously known as the Wife of Bath, was in the cloth-making business and probably lived in the West of England. Mary Carruthers opines that by the late fourteenth century, the cloth business in England was as much a trade business as the wool trade. Alison's business was big. It seems Chaucer too appreciated her professional worth (Evans 22). Therefore, the wife is not just a clothier, but an entrepreneur. It is possible that she had taken over the business after the death of her husband(s). She belonged to a distinctive group of entrepreneurs who emerged during the later Middle Ages to control the cloth business. They were also known as cloth-maker or "cloth-man". The name of the business is gendered male. By entering into the business, Alison is laying claim to masculinity. Carruthers claims that acquisition of money is equivalent to the attainment of honour, respect and independence. Sheila Delany's opinion on the wife's economic position in society is somewhat different. According to her, Chaucer has portrayed the wife with "sexual economics" (71) in mind. The psyche of the wife has been developed to use her sexuality to make economic gains. Unlike Carruthers, Delany thinks that the wife as a petty bourgeoisie and a small time entrepreneur in the textile trade. Besides being a successful entrepreneur, Wife of Bath has quite an opinion about her dressing sense. She has learnt a technique to manipulate her husband(s) into buying pretty clothes for her to wear, as she needs decent clothes to go out. Wife of Bath here seems to be stressing the importance of clothes which enable one to move out of the domestic sphere and connect with people. But this is easier said than done, even for the wife of Bath who is economically independent and is quite familiar with the way of the world. She then quotes from the Bible:

"And when a woman tries a mild display
In dress or costly ornament, you say
It is a danger to her chastity,
And then, bad luck to you, start making free
With Bible tags in the Apostle's name;
'And in like manner, chastely and with shame,
You women should adorn yourselves,' said he,
'And not with braided hair or Jewelry,
With pearl or golden ornament.'... (Chaucer 15)

She quotes from 1 Timothy chapter 2, verse 9-10, where it is advised that women should wear modest clothing; it should not be elaborate and expensive. It should be decent. What kind of clothing is modest and decent is only explained by a patriarchal society. Therefore, one's clothing is not a matter of one's choice. When a woman like the Wife of Bath wears a particular dress, which is not considered "modest" or "decent", it is thought that she invites danger to her chastity. Moreover, her hair should not be braided with any jewellery. Therefore, if a woman does not abide by the dictum of the patriarchal society, she alone is to be blamed if anything untoward should happen to her. In a way, a woman is not in control of her body. Sarah A. Bendall argues that humans are socially created by their clothes. Clothes make the body, and the body thereby makes the identity of a person. Therefore, the identity gets articulated by clothing one wears. The perception of identity gets further filtered through, in turn, by clothes. As one puts on clothes, one puts on gendered identity. The naked body, I propose, does not influence gender as such; it is the clothes which usher the body into

the realm of gender signification. The patriarchal society has successfully policed and controlled the body by clothing. The very idea that clothes should reflect gender is a social construct, and clothes visually incarcerate one's identity by putting it under a gendered gaze. Film theorist Laura Mulvey first coined the phrase male gaze in an essay in 1975. While critiquing Hollywood movies, she explains,

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Women displayed as sexual objects are the leit-motiff of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. (808-9)

According to Mulvey, the appearance of a woman is expected to have an erotic impact. Women are exhibited and displayed. They have been objectified. Primarily through this exhibition and display, the male gaze is operational.

In another context, in India, women try to protect themselves from the male gaze by putting on *hizab* or head scarf. Complication arises when six students are not allowed to enter school for wearing the particular clothing. In a two-judge Supreme Court bench on the Karnataka *hijab* ban Justice Dhulia asserts that students of Junior colleges are at the right age to learn to rejoice in our diversity and realize that in it lies our strength. Justice Dhulia further observes that, as for *hijab*, the very reason to wear it is to protect women from the male gaze. School uniforms have enabled female students to discard *hijab*, which is a symbol of a particular religion. More often than not, *hijab* is considered mandatory by patriarchal families. Sometimes women are forced to wear this clothing in order to go outside. Perhaps the primary goal with regard to Indian culture is to take the muslim girls out of the home first, as outside lies their chance at education. Justice Dhulia adds that for many Muslim students, *hijab* is perhaps the only ticket to education. If the fact that clothing like *hijab* enables muslim girls to have education is established, then banning it will be misconstrued. She further adds that these girls must not be pushed to madrasah schools, as it takes them away from a friendly environment. *Hijab*, though a patriarchal clothing, in this context, helps them to break stereotypes on education and mistrust of people.

In the cultural history of India, *Hijab* has been a part of the clothing attire of Indian muslim women for quite some time. There is a particular reference to *hijab* in a short story "Sultana's Dream" by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, published in 1905 at the turn of the twentieth century. In the short story, the speaker talks to a lady, whom she has mistaken for sister Sara, about feeling awkward about walking unveiled. Being accustomed to wearing *hijab*, she is somehow apologetic about walking without it. However, there is no description given about the kind of clothing the speaker's friend wears. Readers are not sure if her friend is also a *hijab* wearing woman. The *pardah* is not followed in the place where the speaker is now, probably in her dream, as her companion informs her that women are allowed to have access to education; a few schools for girls have been founded with the help of the government, education is spread far and wide among women, and child marriage has been stopped. Before this time, *pardah* was prevalent; seclusion of women had been practised, and education was denied to them.

Purdah is a system which is very much prevalent in the Middle East and South Asia. While talking to Sultana, her companion informs her that although the men in her country remain in *zenana*, they are not trusted with the embroidery. There is a close relation between *purdah* and embroidery, as women in *purdah* have kept themselves busy with this work and believe that *purdah* is the cause of their being economically backward. *Purdah* controls women's interaction, irrespective of Hindu or Muslim, specifically with men. *Purdah* or *Hijab* is a part of clothing which has a cultural anxiety over it. It somehow expects the wearer to abide by such principles, which make them more docile and obedient. As a result, women are not forced into modest behaviour; they themselves have internalized the principles. Even if they forget, the *hijab* is there to remind them to be modest. In the short story, the speaker identifies herself as a "purdahnashin woman" (Hossain 155). What it means to be *purdahnashin* can be found in

The recurrent description of *chikan* embroiderers as "pardanashin" primarily refers to the fact that they do not work outside the house, and rarely go to collect embroidery work themselves. Instead, they rely upon relatives, neighbors, or agents to bring the work to them. The necessary networks to bring work to women at home are so well developed that seclusion and *chikan* are indelibly related in thought and practice. (Wilkinson-Weber 75)

Being an active participant, the speaker is also a practitioner of the *purdah*. That is why she feels so uncomfortable walking without *hijab*. Wearing *hijab* in public is part of *purdah*. Casting veil has also limited her movement outside the home. Although wearing *hijab* is the effacement of self identity as the face of the person is not visible, a new religious identity is dawned upon every time she wears it. Self identity is somehow submerged under a religious identity.

Another example of a clothier can be found in *The Clerk's Tale*. Janicula, unlike Alice, is a poor clothier. His daughter Griselda helps him by tending sheep and spinning the wheel. Walter, the marquis, wishes to marry Griselda, but he has one condition: that she should leave her old rags (Chaucer 349) behind in her house. Griselda's father, being a poor clothier, is left with little choice but to accept the advantageous wedding. Walter's women strip her naked and clad her in new clothes. She is transformed in her gorgeous dress into a spectacle which Walter wants to display. The person Griselda is lost in the richest clothes offered by Walter. With her new clothes, she has left her will and freedom behind, and has given in to Walter's wishes or, to the wishes of his people, as his people want him to marry in the first place.

Mary Wollstonecraft thinks masculinity is a proposition, a cultural construct based on group needs, which counteracts a hesitant and resisting character. The ideals of masculinity are the needs of a group where the resisting nature of an individual, like cross dressing, is not tolerated. Manhood is conferred when someone contributes to the security and prosperity of the group. So, masculinity manifests in the body. It is something to be gained. It may be gained by honor, riches, power and the like. Thus, if I could twist a very famous statement of Simone de Beauvoir, I would say, one is not born a man, but becomes one. Therefore, masculinity is an artificially induced status. Griselda therefore cannot protest when she is put on trial of faithfulness by her children, having taken away from her. She even has to trade her maidenhood for a smock, which she requests when she is asked to return home naked. When she marries

Walter she has only her naked body and her maidenhood as dowry. Now she has to relinquish the only claim to her body for an undergarment. When she returns home, her father receives her with an old cloak, but it does not fit, as by that time her body has grown to fit into comfortable clothes. Not only has she lost her identity, but also her claim to her body. Her body, being clothed by Walter, has turned into a site where he projects his masculinity.

Costume can be equally troublesome for people with a patriarchal bent of mind, be it school costume or a swim suit. In the case of the latter, a teacher at St. Xavier's University, Kolkata, is asked to resign and pay a fine of almost 100 crores because she posts her picture wearing a bikini on Instagram, which, however, she does after working hours. One of the complaints from the guardian is that the photo posted on social media is the objectification of the female body. Now, this objectification and male gaze have been a practice for years, and it goes on unchecked. We have been accustomed to looking at the female body, and that is exactly what the male gaze is. Instead of putting blame on the teacher, one should teach the students about the complexity and rhetoric of patriarchy at play. The problem is always with the one who wears a "controversial" dress, not with the ones who look at it.

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