

“Woven Narratives: Exploring National Identity And Class Through Fashion In Literature”

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Abstract

Fashion in South Asian literature operates as a powerful cultural and narrative tool, particularly in the portrayal of Indian women. Beyond serving as a personal or aesthetic expression, fashion becomes a medium through which women assert national identity, navigate diasporic spaces, and negotiate class mobility. This paper examines the nuanced role of fashion in two contemporary South Asian novels: The Sari Shop Widow by Shobhan Bantwal (2009) and The Henna Artist by Alka Joshi (2020). Using the critical frameworks of Diaspora and Transnational Studies alongside semiotics of fashion (fashion theory), the analysis explores how clothing choices become emblematic of deeper socio-cultural dynamics. In The Sari Shop Widow, the protagonist Anjali Kapadia's sari boutique in New Jersey symbolizes her commitment to preserving Indian cultural identity across national borders. In The Henna Artist, Lakshmi's strategic use of fashion not only bridges tradition and modernity but also enables her upward social mobility by appealing to elite clientele. Through these narratives, the paper offers a fresh perspective on how seemingly simple fashion choices in literature reflect complex intersections of gender, culture, class, and national belonging.

Keywords: Fashion, diaspora, class mobility, National identity, Culture.

INTRODUCTION:

In India, the origins of fashion can be traced back to a time even before the Indus Valley Civilization. The clothing and accessory of mythological figures often reflect the styles and cultural aesthetics of their respective eras. In the modern era, while the reasons behind fashion may have evolved, the medium of expression remains consistent. Indian fashion has become increasingly universal, embraced by a wide spectrum of people for diverse social, cultural, economic, and political reasons. Individuals across the country use fashion as a way to present themselves uniquely, influenced by both tradition and contemporary trends. Fashion is inherently cyclical styles often resurface with variations, and trends continue to shift rapidly, making permanence rare. Personal preferences and comfort largely shape one's choice of attire. Even an ordinary individual can be perceived differently when dressed in branded or fashionable clothing. Ultimately, fashion serves as a powerful form of communication, allowing individuals to express their identity, status, and personality in distinct ways (Shetty, Kasturi.J).

Fashion choices are differed because of several reasons; therefore fashion is called the reliable mirrors of society (Kim). Fashion is not merely a reflection of women's external appearance; it is a dynamic and powerful medium that embodies their identity, agency, cultural values, and social positioning(Vanyan). Beyond aesthetics, fashion functions as a language through which women negotiate societal expectations, assert autonomy, and challenge patriarchal norms. It reflects personal and collective histories, becoming a site of resistance and self-expression in both public and private spheres.

This paper seeks to explore the multifaceted role of fashion in shaping the social status of Indian women, particularly in the context of tradition, modernity, and diaspora. By analyzing how clothing choices influence perceptions of class, respectability, and empowerment, the study aims to demonstrate how Indian women have used fashion not only as a tool for navigating social structures but also as a means of self-definition and cultural continuity. Furthermore, this research will delve into how fashion becomes a vehicle for preserving and showcasing India's rich textile and sartorial heritage, especially in foreign or diasporic spaces where national identity can feel fragmented or under threat.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Numerous studies reveal that fashion and dress play vital roles in shaping individual and collective identities, acting as embodied practices that contribute significantly to the presentation of self and group affiliations (Polletta and Jasper 285; Taylor and Whittier 104). Studies on the South Asian diaspora in various settings highlight the role of clothing in articulating social belonging and displaying specific taste regimes (Dwyer 5; Reddy 149; Shankar).

Fashion is far more than a mere expression of personal style or clothing preference—it encapsulates the history of sartorial practices, the evolution of design techniques, the influence and adaptation of Western aesthetics, and the complex negotiation of identity, particularly within diasporic contexts. The choice of fabric, the cut of a garment, and the blending of cultural motifs all speak to deeper narratives of tradition, cultural heritage, and the politics of representation. These themes have been extensively explored in fashion studies, shedding light on the historical significance of textile choices and the shifting sartorial trends across time and regions.

In literary works, fashion functions as a rich symbolic device representing emotional states, aspirations, and internal conflicts. It often serves as a mirror to a character's development, an indicator of social status, or a tool for resistance and self-fashioning. Through clothing and appearance, authors articulate broader cultural tensions, desires for transformation, and the subtle dynamics of power, identity, and belonging. This intersection of fashion and literature opens up critical spaces for interpreting how garments carry meaning beyond aesthetics—into realms of narrative, identity formation, and socio-political commentary.

While previous studies have emphasized the importance of fashion in expressing individuality and navigating personal struggles, particularly through the role of clothing in shaping one's identity, this paper shifts focus toward understanding fashion as a crucial medium for asserting national identity in a foreign context. By applying theories of diaspora and semiotics of fashion to selected literary works, this study aims to offer a fresh perspective exploring how fashion not only reflects personal identity but also becomes a powerful symbol of one's cultural heritage and national belonging. Furthermore, this analysis will illustrate how fashion serves as a means for women in the diaspora to elevate their social status, assert autonomy, and reclaim visibility in environments where they may otherwise feel displaced. In essence, fashion becomes both a tool of empowerment and a symbolic extension of selfhood for women living away from their homeland.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- ▮ To undertake a comprehensive analysis of the cultural and symbolic significance of fashion as depicted in the selected literary texts.
- ▮ To offer a nuanced interpretation of fashion as a potent emblem of women's empowerment, self-assertion, and inner resilience.
- ▮ To engage in an extensive critical examination of *The Sari Shop Widow* by Shobhan Bantwal (2009) and *The Henna Artist* by Alka Joshi (2020), employing the theoretical lenses of Diaspora and Transnational Studies in conjunction with the semiotics of fashion, thereby unveiling the intricate interplay between clothing, identity, and socio-cultural agency.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FASHION IN SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURE:

Fashion in South Asian literature holds profound cultural, historical, and political resonance. It transcends mere descriptions of clothing to become a critical narrative tool—one that reflects identity, class, migration, gender, and the evolving tension between tradition and modernity. For South Asian authors, fashion serves as a symbolic language through which they narrate the complexities of diasporic experiences, colonial legacies, and the nuances of self-representation.

Historically, fashion in South Asian texts reflects deeply rooted sartorial traditions that are intricately linked to caste, religion, and region. Through detailed depictions of dress, authors explore how clothing functions as both a marker of cultural belonging and a site of resistance. It becomes a medium through which gender norms are negotiated and often challenged, allowing women in particular to assert agency and redefine their social roles.

Moreover, many literary works depict how Western influence—initially introduced through colonialism—continues to shape modern South Asian identities. This influence, often portrayed as both aspirational and alienating, exposes a growing obsession with Western aesthetics in younger generations. Literature captures the

cultural ambivalence this creates: the desire to modernize or assimilate versus the urge to preserve one's indigenous heritage.

Notable works such as Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man* (1972), Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), Meera Syal's *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (1999), and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) powerfully illustrate these tensions (Pereira-Ares). Through their nuanced portrayals of dress and appearance, these authors interrogate how fashion shapes and reflects the lived experiences of their characters—whether navigating diasporic dislocation, negotiating generational divides, or confronting racial and gender politics.

These narratives reveal that fashion operates on multiple levels: as a visual marker of socio-economic and cultural identity, a vessel for memory and tradition, and a tool of transformation or rebellion. Analyzing these texts through the lens of dress not only enhances our understanding of character development and thematic depth but also contributes to broader discourses on the politicized and performative nature of clothing in South Asian societies.

Ultimately, South Asian literature positions fashion as a crucial cultural signifier—one that not only reflects the intricate fabric of identity politics but also adds to ongoing scholarly discussions about the significance of the dressed body in both literary and real-world contexts.

FASHION AS A MEDIUM FOR ASSERTING NATIONAL IDENTITY IN SHOBHAN BANTWAL'S THE SARI SHOP WIDOW:

In Shobhan Bantwal's novel *The Saree Shop Widow*, the protagonist Anjali Kapadia, a middle-aged Indian woman, resides in New Jersey, USA. As a widow, Anjali experiences a deep sense of lost identity, reflective of the many challenges widowhood presents within Indian traditions and belief systems. Indian culture often marginalizes widows, expecting them to lead lives of solitude and austerity. However, this novel challenges such stereotypical narratives through Anjali's transformation, particularly when she rediscovers love with Dev Rajah, a business investor from London.

Anjali's journey offers a refreshing perspective on widowhood, showing how a woman can reclaim agency, passion, and identity in the aftermath of personal loss. Much of this transformation is fueled by her role as co-owner of a high-end saree boutique in New Jersey. Her deep commitment to the business not only reflects her love and respect for Indian culture, but also acts as a catalyst for her emotional and psychological empowerment. The boutique becomes a symbol of tradition preserved in a diasporic setting, allowing Anjali to both honor her heritage and explore her true potential as a modern, independent woman.

Anjali's boutique serves not only as a source of livelihood but also as a space where she channels her creativity and cultural pride. It is described as "her boutique—her baby—her artistic and inventive skills put to optimum use in creating a fairytale store worthy of movie stars, models, and beauty queens" (Bantwal 5). The store's elegance and uniqueness reflect her personal journey and her desire to

stand out in the diasporic community. As the narrator notes, "It stood apart like a maharani, a queen amongst the ordinary, plain vanilla sari and clothing shops of New Jersey's 'Little India'" (Bantwal 5). These images reinforce how Anjali uses fashion as a vehicle to reclaim her identity and establish herself as an empowered woman within her community.

DIASPORA AND TRANSNATIONALISM: THE SAREE SHOP AS A SYMBOL OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND EVOLVING TRADITION:

The term "diaspora" has ancient origins, appearing in texts by historians like Thucydides and in the Hebrew Bible, where it was used to describe the scattering of populations. In contemporary scholarship, however, Diaspora Studies has evolved into a field that examines the complex dynamics of identity, belonging, and transnational relationships. Closely tied to this is the concept of transnationalism, which refers to the ways individuals maintain social, economic, and cultural ties across national borders. Scholars like Nina Glick Schiller have explored how migrants actively sustain such connections between their homelands and host countries (eGyanKosh).

Through the lens of diaspora and transnational studies, Anjali's life serves as an illuminating example of an immigrant woman who retains her cultural roots while navigating a modern life abroad. Despite initially living in the shadow of loss and deprivation, Anjali uses fashion — specifically the saree — as a medium to reclaim her

confidence, identity, and cultural pride. Her saree business becomes a metaphorical space where tradition and modernity co-exist. The decision to introduce contemporary business strategies — such as modernizing the store and collaborating with Dev — mirrors her personal evolution, as she chooses to embrace love and new beginnings, challenging the notion that widows must live in isolation.

Moreover, these business decisions reflect how traditional Indian culture can adapt and evolve through fashion to remain relevant and empowering in diaspora. The boutique not only becomes a site of economic revitalization but also a symbolic space where national identity is reaffirmed for the Indian diaspora in the West.

CLOTHING AS CODE: TRACING FEMALE EMPOWERMENT AND CLASS MOBILITY IN THE HENNA ARTIST VIA SEMIOTICS OF FASHION:

In *The Henna Artist*, Lakshmi Shastri, a henna artist who has escaped an abusive marriage, carefully constructs her identity through sartorial semiotics—using clothing and appearance as **signifiers** to convey elevated social status and credibility among Jaipur's elite. She deliberately presents herself with refined attire and accessories, understanding that these visual cues serve as non-verbal language that aligns her with upper-class norms and expectations.

Lakshmi's mastery over such visual signs helps her sustain her reputation and conceal her traumatic past. She recognizes that fashion operates as a tool of symbolic capital, affirming her belonging within high society. As she reflects on this dynamic, she astutely observes: "*Before independence, these objects had signified my ladies' admiration for the British. Now, they signified their scorn. My ladies had changed nothing but the reasons for their pretense. If I had learned anything from them, it was this: only a fool lives in water and remains an enemy of the crocodile*" (Joshi). This metaphor illustrates how outward appearance and clothing can be recontextualized to preserve authority and social mobility.

Furthermore, Lakshmi remarks on the ephemeral nature of external success: "*Success was ephemeral—and fluid—as I'd found out the hard way. It came. It went. It changed you from the outside, but not from the inside*" (Joshi). This reflection emphasizes that while fashion and appearance can grant her social footing, they do not fundamentally transform her inner sense of self—but they do provide a vital façade for survival and influence.

This semiotic framing is particularly evident in early scenes, such as when Lakshmi is painting the hands of high-caste clients like Parvati. Despite her Brahmin heritage, she is perceived as "fallen" simply by virtue of touching unclean feet—an irreversible social mark in Jaipur's caste-conscious society (Joshi). Through her careful sartorial choices—her dresses, jewelry, and composed demeanor—Lakshmi counteracts such stigma, using fashion as symbolic camouflage and aspirational code, signaling her belongingness and masking her vulnerability.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Like the characters of Lakshmi in *The Henna Artist* and Anjali in *The Sari Shop Widow*, women from South Asian communities often navigate their identities, social status, and empowerment through the language of clothing. While clothing may appear to be a superficial or aesthetic choice, it carries profound socio-cultural implications, particularly for women in patriarchal and diasporic contexts. Even today, women across the globe continue to fight for the autonomy to choose how they present themselves, making fashion a deeply political and personal act.

In literary narratives, fashion can serve not only as a tool of self-expression but also as a site of resistance and transformation. Lakshmi's meticulously curated appearance allows her to ascend socially and conceal her vulnerable past, while Anjali's saree boutique becomes a symbol of cultural pride and economic independence in the diaspora. These characters exemplify how attire functions as a semiotic system—where garments and aesthetics carry coded meanings about class, identity, respectability, and liberation.

Historically, in many South Asian societies, fashion has also been a site of emotional, economic, and mental struggle for women. The imposition of clothing norms—whether through caste, religion, colonial hangovers, or gendered expectations—has often limited women's agency. However, contemporary and literary portrayals increasingly subvert this narrative, showing how women reclaim fashion as a form of autonomy and cultural empowerment.

By applying semiotics of fashion as a theoretical lens, future scholars can unpack the deeper meanings embedded in clothing within female-centric literature. This approach opens up an important interdisciplinary avenue—bridging fashion theory, gender studies, postcolonialism, and diaspora studies. Future research could explore:

- How fashion serves as a metaphor for transformation and empowerment in women's literature.
- The evolution of fashion norms in postcolonial South Asian societies and their literary representations.
- Clothing as a marker of resistance, especially in contexts of migration, widowhood, and caste-based restrictions.
- Comparative studies between diasporic and homeland narratives in the way fashion communicate identity.
- How traditional attire (e.g., sarees, henna, bindis) is re-signified in global contexts as a statement of pride and nationalism.

Ultimately, this field holds vast potential to re-evaluate how something as everyday as clothing can be a powerful narrative device—one that reflects not just beauty or tradition, but also survival, ambition, and liberation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. How does fashion in South Asian literature reflect and affirm cultural values and national identity, as portrayed in selected novels?
2. To what extent does fashion function as a tool for Indian women to negotiate and attain social mobility within literary narratives?

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