



RHETORIC OF DRESS: INTERGENERATIONAL DISCREPANCIES IN QAISRA SHAHRAZ'S SHORT STORY A PAIR OF JEANS

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Abstract

This paper addresses the ongoing tug - of - war between the first and second generation immigrants with respect to dress, and highlights the role played by costume in everyday lives. The predicament of the younger generation squashed between two extremely different cultures - one vouching for a conservative lifestyle and the other edging towards extremity mirrors the ever - changing cultural landscapes all over the world. No matter how much time has flown by, there are certain mindsets that are deeply rooted. Migrants are often compelled to make rapid changes in their overall personalities in order to be fully accepted by the host community. Here dress becomes the most resonant sign language, the spectrum through which cultures assess its members. This short story dramatizes precisely the desperate position of women who are forced to put on a mask to please the rest of the lot so as to secure their space in the social order.

Keywords: Dress, Culture, Tradition, Intergenerational Differences.



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Qaisra Shahraz is not only an acclaimed Pakistani – British novelist, but also a scriptwriter, college inspector, teacher trainer, freelance journalist and education consultant who has organized several workshops and training sessions on quality education in Pakistan and India through the British Council. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and a former director of Gatehouse Books, her works primarily explore issues relating to religion, race, cultural divides, patriarchal control, female sexuality, etc (“Qaisra Shahraz”). Being a migrant herself, she is acutely aware of the problems faced by the younger generations in a foreign country and therefore questions of participation, negotiation and adaptation attain vast critical significance in her narratives. Her first literary excursion began with the hugely popular short story *A Pair of Jeans* which still remains one of the best pieces in her literary oeuvre. It largely focuses on questions of identity, generation gap, and the enduring problems faced by young Muslim women in Britain and how they encounter and survive the pressures forced upon them by both traditional and Western cultures. Widely published locally and internationally, it is also studied as a literary text in German schools. Her fictional works

include: *The Holy Woman* (2002), *Typhoon* (2007), *Revolt* (2013), *The Concubine & the Slave-Catcher* (2017), etc. Notable short stories are *Holding Out* (1986), *Black and Priceless* (1987), *Pakistani Writing In English* (1997), etc.

Religio – cultural beliefs practiced by people across the world instantaneously foreground the prevailing societal ideologies and the corresponding thought processes. Culture comprises the customs, values, norms, beliefs, artifacts, technologies, and institutions common to the members of a particular group or society. It constructs a system of living exactly showing how and why things pan out in a particular way. The absolute codes of religion become the mainstay of our identity, unconsciously letting us submit to the untold laws sanctioned by society. Though religion and culture spring from disparate social, political and economic contexts, they are indubitably linked and are often translated by those in power who privilege masculinity over femininity. Additionally, diverse cultures and religions favour specific forms of masculinities and femininities in order to perpetuate their consciously constructed views of different genders. Cultural notions of female sexuality shape the mental makeup of women by showing them how to think, behave and act in selected milieus. Here statutes are forcibly imposed on a select group to protect the sanctity of the populace which sadly only help to accentuate the barriers between the sexes in the long run. Clothes play a prominent role in society - they not only act as identity markers but also underline the uniqueness of the individual over others. Age, gender, occupation, religion, community, and ethnicity determine the type of clothing that one may wear during one's lifetime. Women often dress selectively in order to hide the contours of their bodies from the panoptic male gaze. Over the years, clothing industries have undergone eye boggling transformations and nowadays people either stick to preordained codes of sartorial modifications or else veer away towards more perverse, shocking, outrageous, bizarre or iconoclastic dresses. Succinctly explained, what we wear on our bodies indicate who we are as individuals as well as the societies we belong to. When people exploit clothes and accessories for self-display, diversity arises and this eventually plays a crucial role in developing, or else disrupting cross- cultural and intercultural relationships.

Jeans have long been, and even still continue to enthrall generations of people across the globe. As a clothing range, the sole secret of its survival lies in its ability to impress people across borders and races. The countless mediatized images of Western women wearing extremely tight, low waist jeans with short tops and high heels have redefined the concept of

feminine modesty and morality. The Western world is therefore judiciously seen as inferior to the traditionally rich cultures of the East. Second generation immigrant women living in Western countries customarily adhere to the speech and behavioural patterns of the native residents since they find it more suitable for everyday dealings but when it comes to dress, the challenge to strike a balance is immense and downright frustrating. Clothing regulations put enormous pressure on women, literally coercing them to conform to the rules and regulations laid down by society. In fact, it is a lame excuse used by generations to control women and reduce the responsibility of men for their actions. Patriarchal belief systems followed by denizens around the world typically provide numerous justifications for the policing of women's bodies. Clothes that we wear send potent messages to the outside world and reveal much about the wearer. Choosing the most appropriate outfit for an occasion requires taste, and an understanding of the theme of the selected event. There are diverse reasons for people choosing a particular style - a desire to fit in with a select group, fashion trends, cultural upbringing, or individual and collective belief systems. The love - hate relationship between body image and dress style is a highly complex affair – the former decides how the physical body should be displayed before others through the medium of dress. Yet, it is ultimately culture which outlines the context in which body image is formed, and hence it becomes a crucial element in understanding why body image changes so sporadically.

Miriam, the central character is compelled to dangle between two cultures. Having grown up in a Muslim family, she is extremely conscious of her appearance and takes pains to dress accordingly when in the midst of family, relatives and neighbours. The insipid fear of being singled out and chastised for transgressing the sartorial codes haunts her every now and then. The cultural and religious upbringing she has had during her formative years is primarily responsible for this and makes it doubly difficult for her to steer away from well trodden paths. At the same time, she is forced to wear clothes which go against her cultural beliefs in order to be a part of the student community. According to Baumeister and Mark Leary (1995), the primary reason for this is that:

...human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong that is by a strong desire to form and maintain enduring interpersonal attachment. People seek frequent, affectively positive interactions within the context of long-term, caring relationships. (522)

Without a sense of belongingness, people find it difficult to communicate with and relate to their surroundings. In fact, it promotes an increased sense of unity and collectivism amongst people. Similarly, youngsters routinely change their appearance to fit in with their companions and to feel securely confident. They are in an unpleasant space theoretically for they genuinely want to be part of a group and at the same time are striving hard to establish their individual identities. For immigrant kids too, the situation is no different. Kwak (2003) observes that adolescents who grow up in a new culture find it easier to forge new relationships faster than that of their parents (p.124). While the first generation immigrants battle it out to quell language barriers and cultural differences, the second strive to adapt in order to meet the demands of mainstream culture. In fact, the children of first generation are forced to incorporate two vastly different cultures:

...All day she kept pulling it down to cover her midriff. Strange but she felt odd in her clothing. Yet they were just the type of clothes she needed to wear today: for hill walking in the Peak District, in the North West of England. Somehow here in the vicinity of her home, however she felt different...and hoped that she would not meet anyone she knew. (166)

Miriam, a second generation immigrant arrives home from a hiking tour with her university friends exactly at the same moment as her prospective in-laws. They sneer at her sexy outfit comprising of skin-tight jeans and a short tank top which bares her midriff. Her father-in-law "bent on avoiding eye contact with her" (167) looks over her head. Though an educated woman with a mind of her own, she is forced to adhere to the rigid rules assigned by society. In order to wipe away the stain of sartorial outlandishness, she has to quickly change into a shalwar kameeze suit which "covers the curvy contours of her female body" (167). All her efforts to redeem the worsening situation fall short of the target and she is shattered beyond words when they take off immediately without discussing the details of the wedding with her mother. On arriving home, the father-in-law rejects her as a suitable wife for his son because he does not want to ruin the family's honour at any cost but Begum is ready to give her a second chance. Though Miriam's blatant sexuality via clothes infuriates Begum, there is still an iota of love lingering in her heart. Her words exactly depict her dilemma, "Why did that stupid girl have to wear those jeans and that vest today of all days? ... And why did Ayub have to see her like that?" (175). Ayub taunts her for still having a soft corner for the girl. After much cajoling, the mother-in-law too joins hands with the old man and both finally

come to the conclusion that the girl is profligate and unbridled to the core. They can only see her as a young college woman “very much under the sway of Western fashion and by extension its moral values” (169), a threat to their family’s peace of mind and way of life. In short, girls like her are perceived as “rebellious hoydens...who do not respect either their husbands or their in - laws” (170), “twined their husbands around their little fingers, and expected them to dance to their tunes...” (174).

Begum is forced to hide her real feelings and support her husband for the sake of her family, she “did not have the heart nor the courage to play the role demanded of her; nor the one she inevitably had to play in this drama” (177). In fact, the mother - in - law’s position is quite similar to that of the girl she is forced to reject. Both are denied the right to speak their minds. In the case of Begum, the final decisions are taken by her husband, Ayub, and she is obliged to follow him most of the time. Their strained relationship illustrates the dissatisfaction lurking beneath the facade of marital bliss. She is the silent sufferer who is entrusted with the enormous duty of upholding the traditional values passed on by her ancestors. She is powerless before his authoritative gaze and his words most often send a chill through her spine. They reject the girl callously on account of her dress and give a lame excuse for cancelling the marriage. Miriam who has been earnestly waiting for her dream wedding is crushed and disconsolate after the unexpected turn of events. She too is compelled to believe that her tight and sexy outfit betrayed her and ruined her chance of living with the man she loved most. Miriam in a fit of fury pulls the jeans from her wardrobe and kicks it mercilessly to unleash her suppressed anger. It’s a sad reality that even now women who dress daringly in public spaces are shunned regardless of their talent and educational background. Miriam is punished for neglecting her public persona and dressing in a shameless and indecent manner. Ayub’s biased demeanour can be clearly seen in the amount of freedom he gives his sons. He is not at all bothered by the fact that his eldest son hasn’t got home even after midnight nor is he angry at the youngest one for playing loud music while studying. He has issues only against Miriam and her repugnant lifestyle. Rules are far more stringent for girls than for boys in an honour – based society. Here, a girl’s primary responsibility towards herself and society at large is to preserve her virginity, remain faithful in marriage, produce sons to continue the lineage, and obey the elders and their orders throughout life.

The concept of modesty is central to Islamic way of life. Sexual modesty is encouraged in both men and women but exhibitionism is ousted outright. As per the widely followed

religious code, it is considered totally inappropriate to expose certain body parts before strangers. Exposure of the midriff is therefore socially discouraged and transgressors are punished severely as it goes against the ethical and moral standards of appropriate behaviour. Guidelines are most often set by the local community based on cultural etiquette, traditional norms, religious beliefs or moral notions. On the whole, children are trained from childhood onwards to act as per the rules codified by society. Hence most are ineffectual to envision a life distinct from what they lead all these years. Miriam's in-laws schooled in traditional modes denounce the self-styled fashionable girls who compromise on their honour by dressing as sluts. They are labelled harlots and shunned in the marriage market mostly because parents largely prefer daughter-in-laws who are not "strongly influenced by Western form of dress, culture and probably feminist ideas" (175). Frequent visits by the in-laws even before the marriage to study the bride's family heightens the anxiety of the latter like none other. Miriam's unorthodox outlook makes her an undeserving candidate for the wifely role. Since marriage demands sartorial modesty, virginity and lifelong commitment to wifedom and parenthood, Farook's parents are pretty confident that they will be able to find girls "who have a more discreet taste in clothing and a good understanding of female modesty" (178). The cultural practices and religious convictions followed by Ayub and his family highlight the discriminatory ideologies and customs still persisting in many places without an end in sight.

The indisputable power of one gender to control the other has been used as a cohesive strategy since time immemorial to belittle and degrade the less powerful in a patriarchal social structure. Men and women are systematically trained by those in power (religious and political forces) to adhere to a lopsided social system that is based on an unequal power relationship. In the story, religious tradition is represented as an oppressive, egotistical force bent on suppressing the individual rights of women. Female body becomes the virtual hotbed for an eponymous battle fought between religious and secular forces keen on outstripping the ideological innuendos of the other. Miriam rebels against the traditional gender belief systems, and decides to explain her side of the story to her fiancée without the intermediation of her parents. She assumes full responsibility for everything that has happened and instead of waiting around to see what will happen, follows her intuition and decides to sort things out i.e. she refuses to meekly accept the fate thrust upon her by the elders. Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* rightfully asserts that "for woman, as for man, the need for self-
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fulfillment, autonomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, self-actualization is as important as the sexual need” (314). Through the enigmatic representation of a pair of jeans, Shahraz unveils her own personal philosophy, she prefers cross - culturalism (ethnic inclusiveness) to religious conservatism and authoritarianism. Therefore, in the second ending, Qaisra sends Miriam out in the very same clothes which annoy Ayub and Begum, to inform Farook about his parents' decision. Miriam is certain that he will understand the situation and make decisions accordingly. This is, however, in sharp contrast to the first ending, published in 1988, where patriarchy reigns supreme and retains its power. *A Pair of Jeans* gives voice to women's frustrations, disappointment, alienation, and their resistance in a patriarchal world. It is an open confrontation against the elitist established mindsets which disregard and elude women's centrality. Wearing select clothes or fearlessly choosing which clothes to wear is an important part of self- expression. When a woman is asked to cover up, society rebuts her right to think, act and present herself without any external pressure. Most male-dominated societies deny women the freedom to transcend the limitations on choice, even today complete breakthrough has not been attained in this regard. As a matter of fact, the existing codes of decorum and propriety have to be altered and the cultural corpus revised accordingly for appropriate changes to seep into the social consciousness.

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