

THIRD EYE EDITION

Garment of the soul



Two events, wildly disparate, have inspired me to home in on today's theme. The first was *Saraswati Puja*. It was still biting cold, the sunshine as wan as a ghost, but there, in exhilarating abundance, flitted a thousand butterflies of all hues – a visual symphony that brought with it the promise of love, youth and Spring. Male readers from twelve to sixty are sure to get the drift. I am, of course, alluding to the dizzyingly beautiful eves who suddenly appeared on our streets like some sylphs of an Arabian fantasy. Suddenly is the operative word here. These young women have always been here – attending classes, hanging out at pizza joints, rifling through clothes racks. But their chosen attire is always a pair of no-nonsense jeans and a T-shirt. They entirely miss the point that in being trendy, they lose out on individuality and aesthetic appeal. They are just clones of each other, in functional, regulation wear, too inhibited by peer pressure to be game for any sartorial adventure. Then comes *Saraswati Puja*...

Cut to Oprah Winfrey's Mumbai visit. The Queen of daytime television was chauffeured around by no less than the Big Daddy of Bollywood. Oprah was graciousness personified (can't say the same for her bodyguards, though) and the shutterbugs caught her in her Indian avatar, her generous form draped in a brilliant orange-pink silk sari gifted to her by Aishwarya herself. Some catty scribe had a single word comment about it – *ugh!* For a brief while, a lot of us seemed fawningly grateful that Oprah had worn this Indian garment. But I wonder why nobody in the West even bats an eyelid when an Indian celebrity wears a gown at say, the Oscars, Oprah had a blast trying out an exotic garment. Let's leave it at that, shall we?

Which leads us to the theme of this piece – clothes. There is no getting away from clothes. The moment you pop into this world, screaming your little lungs out, they wrap you tight in your swaddling clothes. And they wrap you so tight you can't even move your arms about. They say it's good for you. At every stage of your life, your clothes call the shots. You pass your childhood angry that your clothes don't keep up with you. At school your teachers want your skirts to be long and decorous. As a young woman, you are terrified and exhilarated as you try on your first sari, pleating the folds, clumsily trying to pin the free end

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to your shoulder. Every girl dreams of her wedding finery, in many cases more than about the man who will sit by her side. Soon, all to soon, she will be knitting jumpers for the little fellow on the way. Perhaps the most poignant transition is when a Hindu woman slips into widowhood and colour is forever denied to her.

There is still a marked divide when it comes to male and female attitudes regarding clothes. For a man, his attire is a symbol of his masculinity and status in society. A shirt, a pair of trousers, a jacket still serves just a functional purpose. But in a woman's case, it is not so simple. There is a whole world of meaning and symbolism, a blurred dimension, of thoughts seldom articulated, but instinctively understood. More than status and utility, clothes for a woman are a powerful, primary tool of self-expression. They define who she is, how confident she is of her place in the world, and how much she values the opinions of those who judge her. Along with that, her clothing is both a medium and a piece of art, both the easel and the canvas, the pen and the poem. She combines the elements of her physicality, the colour, cut and drape of her clothes, the allure of a trinket to create a pure work of art – herself. And like a true artist, she remains unsatisfied with her masterpieces. She is endlessly reinventing herself, exploring new colours, patterns, shapes to reach that perfection that always seems to slip out of reach. Some would censure this vanity, some would laugh at this frivolity and self absorption, but to me it embodies her essential creativity. In nurturing herself, she also nurtures those born of her.

One of my early memories of clothes concern a group of women devoted to a lifetime of self-abnegation. At our school in Shillong, our lives were ruled by a band of nuns who could freeze us with a look as effortlessly as they broke out into song. In summer they wore flowing snow-white habits with the crucifix nestling over their hearts. The all-enveloping habit and cowl was much envied by us, troubled as we were by puberty and the havoc it wrought on our body shapes. And then, suddenly, on a day we least expected it, the nuns would discard their white habits and wear the black ones. It was a signal that winter was upon us, with its freezing cold and stinging breezes, the morning fog and pale sunlight. It was almost as if the good nuns had instructed the seasons to change and they did.

Clothes had a distinct presence in the nursery rhymes of our childhood. Sleepy John not only slept with his breeches on, but one sock was off and one was on. When the dogs set up a cacophony of barks, you know that the beggars are coming to town, some in rags and others – incongruously, in velvet gowns. The rhyme on the mulberry bush reveals a clear obsession with the washing, ironing and mending clothes – a reminder to little girls, perhaps, of the life of tedium that awaits them. Even the three little kittens have one consuming worry – how to find their lost mittens and wash them clean. Wee Willy Winkie, busy reminding children to go to bed, is dressed, appropriately enough, in a nightgown. Being Red Riding Hood is every little girl's worst nightmare. Was it her red hood that attracted all that wolfish attention? Even if it did, red was certainly not the big bad wolf's lucky colour and his sins finally caught up with him.

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We identify some iconic women from their clothes. If a plain white sari with a blue border means Mother Teresa, a white frock billowing in a gust of wind is Marilyn Monroe in all her seductive glory. When Lady Diana was a naive, painfully shy wife and mother, she was seen in old fashioned pastel dresses with puffed sleeves and floral prints. As she grew more confident and increasingly alienated from her husband, her dresses became bold, form fitting, with plunging necklines and striking colours. If Jacqueline Kennedy had an unerring French intuition for clothes, Indira Gandhi's immaculate saris brought out the artistry of our traditional craftsmen. Not only was the burning of foreign clothes an important aspect of our freedom struggle, but Gandhi's *charkha* continues to radiate its message of self-sufficiency and national identity. Bapu himself, clad in just a humble *dhoti*, brought an empire to its knees, provoking Churchill to mock him as a half-naked *faqir*.

Strangely, the only two stories with clothes as a theme that come to mind have tragic endings. The first, obviously, is Nikolai Gogol's *The Overcoat*. The young Akaky is an impoverished clerk whose shabby overcoat is the butt of jokes at office. After a great yearning for a new overcoat, a salary bonus helps him achieve his dream. But on the very first day, two ruffians seize his coat and leave him sprawled on the snow. His desperate attempts to get back his coat with the help of the law come to naught and finally, he dies from a fever. But his tortured soul comes back as a ghost, seizing overcoats from pedestrians in St. Petersburg. Gogol's pitiless gaze is not only directed at a callous society, but also mirrors the helplessness of an individual. This seminal work of fiction has had so much influence on Russian literature that Melchies de Vogue once remarked "We all come out from Gogol's overcoat."

Equally haunting is Japanese author Yukio Mishima's classic story *Swaddling clothes*. A young woman Toshiko travels on a cab, depressed by an incident. A woman, hired as a nanny to her son, gives birth to an illegitimate baby on their kitchen floor. The hapless infant lies wrapped in newspapers. Toshiko's actor husband discusses the incident with his friends in an amused and disinterested way. Toshiko feels sad and lonely as she wonders what the future holds for the unfortunate child. Towards the end of the story, Toshiko's thoughts take on an eerie resonance as she comes across a homeless youth sleeping on a park bench. He has blanketed himself with newspapers for warmth. She imagines this is what the baby will grow up to be – homeless, poor, a criminal vagrant. As she steps closer to look at him with pity and horror, he seizes her wrist. We do not know what happens in that dark garden by the Imperial Palace. But we are left fearing the worst.

In a mystic sense, our body is the cloak that contains the soul. The soul may well pass through many bodies, in the way we wear and discard or outgrow our garments. Our lives are but fleeting moments in eternity, but while we are here, dressing up remains an innocent, everyday pleasure.