DEFINING FASHION: EXAMINING EVOLVING TRENDS FROM A SOCIO-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

Fashion is defined as a mode of dressing, behavior, writing or performance that is favored at any one time or place [1]. It can be regarded as an individual's statement of personal expression and is a popular style or practice in clothing, footwear, accessories or makeup which defines a personality [2]. Style is often described as a fashionable way of doing things which implies that fashion and style go hand in hand. Though fashion can be masculine, feminine or androgynous, it is primarily referred to in the context of women. Fashion is not a universal statement as it varies from one society to another and depends upon age, social class, profession and geographical situation.

Fashion has undergone metamorphosis over the century. The women at the turn of the 19th century wore restrictive corsets with heavy frilled skirts and puffy lacy blouses and this dress gave them the much desired S-shaped figure [3]. The social acceptance of working women saw a shift in the concept of fashion with more emphasis on convenience and freedom for the modern women leading to tailored suits, blouses and skirts. Women have influenced fashion since the start of the century thereby making clothes more comfortable and practical while at the same time initiating a style statement [4].

KEYWORDS: Women, Fashion, Fashion designers, Style Icons, Fashion victims, Sexism

Evolution of fashion

Like the spoken dialect, the language of fashion has undergone continuous changes over the years. Though the beginning of fashion dates back to the sixteenth century, the modern concept of fashion refers to the developments occurring in the eighteenth century onwards amongst the rich and elite of Europe [5].

The Edwardian era demonstrated a taste for flamboyant and provocative evening gowns with low cut bodices [6]. These gowns were worn with restrictive and suffocating whale-boned
corsets which tightened the waistline to twenty inches or even less. In the early 1900s, these corsets gave way to 'Health corsets' designed by Mme Gaches-Sarraute which created the characteristic S-shaped pouter-pigeon figure [7]. Eminent physician and anatomist Von Sonnerring has hypothesized that the compression generated on the internal organs and ribs by these corsets may have led to tuberculosis, cancer and scoliosis (curvature of spine). Despite the well known health hazards of the constrictive corsets, women from the upper classes continued to wear them to gain tiny waistlines [8].

The 1920s experienced dramatic changes leading to coordinated and accessorized outfits. It was the era of flappers and these dresses were brighter, lighter and shorter than the earlier fashion statements [9]. In the 1930s the bias cut, long, simple and clinging evening gowns were introduced [10]. The slinky feminine looks, with low back dresses accentuating the shoulders became fashionable. The World War II affected fashion with clothes being made with padded shoulders and knee length skirts with fewer pleats [11]. In the 1950s Christian Dior revolutionized the fashion statement of the preceding 1940s with his 'new look' which consisted of tops aiming to give women a feminine silhouette and longer and fuller skirts with cinched waistlines [12 & 13]. The end of World War ushered in the “Hippie Culture” which stressed on flower power and vibrant colors. Miniskirts designed by Mary Quant and Biba became a rage for the young people.

The 1950s had no clue that jeans will become a routine necessity and dominate the wardrobe of all irrespective of gender or class [14]. The jeans- overalls without the bib, was originally designed by Levi Strauss for the miners and cowboys and it became fashionable amongst the teenagers and young adults [15]. The jeans became a symbol of youth rebellion during the 1950s and was banned in certain theaters, restaurants and schools. During the 1960s the wearing of jeans became more acceptable and by the 1970s it had become general fashion [16 & 17].

A paradigm shift was observed in the world of fashion during the 1990s. Pop culture was a major influence on fashion trends and casual looks was replaced by an emphasis on femininity with floral dresses, lace/silk shirts and baby-doll dresses being widely popular. Elite brands started making their presence felt and designer labels such as Chanel, Lacoste, YSL, DKNY became an indication of wealth and status. The early years of 2000s brought in the low waist jeans, tank tops, mini skirts and dresses in pastels or light shades.
Emergence of Women Designers

The term fashion and its meaning and context for women was different in the 1900s from what we see today and it undergone significant transformation to reach a stage where a woman was allowed to choose what she wants to wear and how. The 1900s saw the female body being treated like a piece of decoration- erotically stylized, made disproportionate, deformed and secluded from its biological function by the corset or crinoline. It was believed that fashion made women and inconvenience was a part of being fashionable. It took many decades to cast off the corsets and many more to accept women's bodies as they were. Who else would understand the need of a woman better than a woman herself? By the end of the nineteenth century one saw the emergence of woman fashion designers and many of them became fashion icons and continued to rule after a whole century went by because of their timeless and eternal styles. A new fashion world was inaugurated with designs that made women feel empowered, comfortable to be in and strong and beautiful.

In 1891 Jeanne Paquin and her husband started the house of Paquin which became very famous and one of the prominent couture house of the belle époque. Women were thrilled with Paquin’s take on fashion and many adventurous, forward women indulged in this fresh breath of air in the Victorian era. “Paquinisque” became the word for sophisticate modern youth. She became one of the first women to design garments specifically for sports. Her major work was on the combination of tailored with draping thus showing a new way of garment construction. Her styles were best of both worlds as she made aristocratic gowns but unlike the restrictive fashion of the bygone era she stressed on comfort and freedom that denotes the modern way of dressing and was therefore crowned as the “mother of modern dress”. Even the ensembles she wore, which she always made herself, were classic examples of comfort and functionality mingling with versatility. She was the first couturièr to be called a fashion icon [18].

Madeliene Vionnet was one of the first mainstream designers to discard corset entirely. She believed in the beauty of the body as it existed and not one created artificially which enhanced or concealed any feature. She was the queen of bias cut dresses; the world learnt making full garments on bias grain from her as she would make layers and flairs using different geometrical shapes of fabrics. Vionnet was influenced by the futurist and cubist aesthetics of her time. Madeliene Vionnet was a couturier whose reputation continues to grow with time; she is the high priestess of modern dress [19].
Art and fashion are interconnected and Elsa Schiaparelli was the first to nurture this bond. Her clothes emanated outrageous style, anarchy and provocation that would demand attention. Elsa believed that women possess charm and elegance and the missing ingredient was “shock”. She worked with many famous artists of her time including Salvador Dali, Jean Cocteau and Man Ray. Schiaparelli found inspiration in their works and used them as her themes, motifs and accessories. She was a surrealist designer, the head turner [20].

"The woman who hasn't at least one Chanel is hopelessly out of fashion”- one cannot talk about fashion without mentioning Coco Chanel [21]. Chanel's philosophy was to emphasize understated elegance through her clothing. Her aesthetic redefined the fashionable woman for the post WWI era. The Chanel trademark was a look of youthful ease, a liberated physicality and unencumbered sportive confidence. Her famous Chanel suit created a revolution in women’s fashion world. A woman was never adorned in a suit by a designer and that too which could be worn for doing any kind of work. After World War I the image of working women started gaining slow social acceptance and the suit emerged as a perfect answer to women’s work wear. It consisted of a cardigan jacket and pleated skirt paired with a low-belted pullover top. This ensemble, worn with low-heeled shoes, became the casual look in expensive women's wear. The fluid jersey suits and dresses created by her were practical and allowed free movement. The concept of the 'little black dress' is often cited as a Chanel contribution to the fashion lexicon and is a creation which survives to this day. Its first incarnation was executed in thin silk, crèpe de chine and had long sleeves.  Chanel created a new high in making women’s fashion more work friendly and efficient.

These are the women who represent change and radicalism in the history of fashion for women and we should thank them for paving way for modern fashion and making life of a woman more comfortable. The world of fashion is ever changing but these designers have imprinted their aesthetics on it forever.

**Fashion Icons and trend-setting**

Fashion is influenced by globally famous females who became the trend setters of style [22]. Jacqueline Kennedy, wife of President Kennedy, set a new standard for glamour and style and her name is a fashion code in itself. Marilyn Monroe, an American actress and model was also a style icon who loved off-shoulder dresses and silhouettes. Women to this day admire and imitate her style. Actress Audrey Hepburn is one of the most admired fashion icons and is known for her classic, chic style. Women have modeled full wardrobes after her
for decades. Lady Diana, princess of Wales, was a legendary icon of fashion and was considered to be one of the most beautiful women in the world with fans across the world admiring her style and personality.

Actress Jessica Alba who is famous for her simple and sophisticated style has been patronizing several designers like Michael Kors and Versace. Singer and actress Jennifer Lopez is an owner of a clothing line and is known for making style statements. Aussie star Nicole Kidman, famous for her sense of style, also patronized Versace gown to the Oscars. The Duchess of Cambridge, Kate Middleton, known to be one of the best dressed women, is generally copied by women all over the world.

**Pitfalls of high fashion and sexism**

It is important to realize that all fashion trends do not suit everybody. Thus, one should avoid being a fashion victim who follows current fashion, be it clothes, hairstyles or accessories regardless of how well it suits him/her. Fashion should be a mode of self expression rather than blind following of a trend set by style icons. Today, fashion is often defined as a reflection of the social and economic status of a person. This spoils the spirit of art and beauty that embodies fashion making it an exhibition of one's wealth and prosperity.

Fashion is often colored with sexist shades as well. Women are often viewed as being ornamental with more value laid to good looks than accomplishments. The irony lies in fact that while more emphasis is laid on good looks by the society, it is also considered shallow, trivial and vain. This may stem from the fact that women are trivialized and therefore while women consider fashion as a form of personal expression and art, it is scorned at and mocked by the males. Female fashion also bears the sexist assumption that women embrace fashion primarily to get male attention and elicit male approval. The fact that women use fashion as a language of communication is completely ignored. Fashion is a language which identifies like-mindedness and camaraderie, as after all the way one dresses is a statement of one's identity and beliefs and may have absolutely nothing to do with men.

**Conclusion**

Fashion is a synonym for style and glamour. It has manifested itself in all spheres of human activities. Fashion keeps changing in a constant manner and new trends soon get old and outdated. Younger generation are keen to experiment with new and interesting things and are avid followers of fashion. They even go a step ahead and refer to fashion magazines, websites and fashion blogs for capturing the latest trends. Celebrities have always been influential in
dictating fashion. Fashion trends are often popularized by characters on television shows and movies.

Fashion is an art which means different things to different people. It is a peek into their personality. The clothes people wear communicate something about who they are. Fashion and style is not defined only by clothing choices but also depends upon our personality and the way we carry ourselves.

"The most important thing to remember is that you can wear all the greatest clothes and all the greatest shoes, but you’ve got to have a good spirit on the inside. That’s what’s really going to make you look like you’re ready to rock the world." — Alicia Keys

References

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