

DISQUIET



The Apparel of Anxiety

Three Artefacts of Fear and Fashion

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Artefact 1: In the March of 1933, a curious report appeared in *The Hindustan Times*. It read:

A Sartorial Ordinance¹

For the purpose of preventing movements of, and communication with, absconders and terrorists, the Governor in Council has inserted a rule in the Bengal Suppression of Terrorist Outrages Act, whereby no person will be allowed to wear the garb of any community or sex other than his own, unless he habitually does so in the normal course of his profession or occupation. Any person contravening the rule is punishable by imprisonment extending to 6 months, or fine, or both.

Another report the following day provides some ancillary context to the decision.

Dynamite in Girl's House²

Seventy sticks of dynamite were discovered in a young Bengali girl's house this morning by the Calcutta Police. After her arrest the girl, it is alleged, confessed to a conspiracy among the revolutionaries to damage local Government buildings and European houses.

The report continues:

The girl, though Bengali by birth, came from up-country and, it is alleged, had been disguising herself as a Punjabi woman with a view to avoiding police detection.

The decision did not go uncommented upon. An editorial appeared two days later which challenged the validity of the order, reasonably arguing that given the diversity of dress and attire in a country such as India, it was ridiculous to prosecute individuals solely on their fashion sense. It noted that,

India is a land of infinite variety of costumes and not merely no two communities but no two individuals always dress alike. That any one should be condemned to six months imprisonment for sporting a fez, a coat of a particular cut or a pagree tied at a particular angle is a serious invasion of the personal rights and liberties of an individual.

Artefact 2: In *The Battle of Algiers*, Gilles Pontecorvo's film on the Algerian struggle for independence, there occurs a startling sequence of self-transformation. Three Algerian women, FLN³ activists, stand before mirrors in a small room, somewhere in the *qasba*. In a rapidly edited sequence, where the camera draws attention to the harshness of the actions, they cut their hair, dye it blonde, divest themselves of their *abayas*, wear make-up and tailored suits, don pretty clothes. They pass through the barricades, are politely received by the guards on duty, who exchange a casual greeting even as they jostle *abaya*-clad women, mirrors of the selves the women have temporarily left behind only moments ago. Clutching handbags, they merge into the dense urban crowd. Some minutes later, bomb explosions tear through the city.

Artefact 3: In July 2004, 12 middle-aged women demonstrated naked outside the headquarters of the 17 Assam Rifles regiment at Kangla Fort in Imphal, capital of the Northeast Indian state of Manipur. Paramilitaries from the regiment had picked up, brutally raped and murdered a young woman, Thangiam Manorama. As the protestors exhorted Manorama's killers to appear in person, police personnel were despatched to deal with the situation. But what were they to do? So unused were they to the force of a body stripped voluntarily of clothing in full public view, shaming them rather than cringing in shame, that they were forced to withdraw.

Separated as these accounts are by vast swathes of time and distance, they share a vision of the self, one that relies on the outer casing as being somehow reflective of the inner 'core' of a person, such that to transform the outer is to simultaneously morph the inner. The outer must thus be strictly policed. The fears on display, from the very real threat of bombs faced in the first instance by a repressive colonial regime, to the sequence in *The Battle of Algiers*, wherein the cutting of hair and the discarding of veils signify the surrender of a self in the service of another, this fearful fashioning of the self that accompanies the assumption and divestment of clothing is, in a sense, an expression of an intuitive understanding regarding the expressive possibilities of clothing, or its lack.

Theoretically speaking, we could say there is no such thing as a fully clothed body, or a completely naked one. If by 'naked' we mean 'devoid of embellishment, concealment, disguise or addition', then, paradoxically, it is clothing that seems to perform this function. By wearing garb that one "habitually does... in the normal course of one's profession or occupation", one is proclaiming who one is unambiguously, transparently. If becoming 'French', 'Bengali', 'Punjabi', 'Homosexual' were simply a matter of divesting oneself of one garb for another, how then would it be possible to state anything with any clarity?

And yet selves, like clothes, can be shed. The news report above, betrays another sense altogether of the relationship between appearance, performance, fear and the body.

For it is not that an individual reflects what or who she is by her clothes declaring what or who she is socially defined as, but rather that by wearing a *salwar-kameez* instead of a sari, or a "fez instead of a *pagree*", she renders herself temporarily invisible, camouflaged. Unlike small animals that play at being specimens of their more dangerous sibling species in order to deflect prospective predators, she seems to do the opposite – she feigns an innocence, and hides her sting.

The generalisation of dread makes suspects of everyone, certainly. But it also accomplishes something else – it radically alters the terms on which power can engage with the mere appearance of being. Power fears the twin axis of radical ambiguity and radical clarity. Power is most comfortable when the terms of dissimulation and transparency are defined by itself. The asking of the question, 'Who is the stranger next to you?' is also to simultaneously acknowledge the answer, 'It could be, it might be, it possibly is – me.' The distance between that which is deemed the 'source' of fear/terror/anxiety – the 'terrorist', the 'stranger', the 'absconder' – and the target is finally only a few centimetres of cloth. For if part of Brihannala's fear is that she will be exposed as Arjun, then certainly Arjun too is afraid of what being Brihannala might reveal in himself.⁴

But what of the body? Often the nakedness of the body seems to reveal a truth unbearable in its iteration. The naked body can only ever be itself. But what is this self? It is not possible to say very much about it. This is possibly why forensics is such an inexact science. Being naked is to walk with an impenetrable cloak. Today, even to be naked is to obey an inner sartorial ordinance, the dictates of the fashion of fear.

Notes

1. *The Hindustan Times*, 17 March 1933.

2. *The Hindustan Times*, 16 March 1933.

3. FLN: *Front de Libération Nationale*. Formed in 1954, the guerrilla group launched the Algerian War of Independence against the French and became the struggle's central political force. Algeria won its independence on 5 July 1962.

4. Arjun, the Pandava prince, one of the main protagonists of the Mahabharata epic, is said to have spent the penultimate year of his exile (along with his brothers and their common wife) in disguise as a dancing girl in the court of King Virata. Each of the five Pandava brothers chose a guise that is supposed to have reflected their innermost desires. Yudhishtira, the eldest prince and moral authority, chose to be a gambler; Bhima, the strongman, chose to be a cook; and Arjuna, the fierce warrior, chose to be a woman, and a dancer.