



Postfashion and Diasporic Designs: A Study of Selected Texts

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Abstract

Postfashion, according to Barbara Vinken, is characterized by self-distancing, self-irony (43), and a predominant theme centered on "the economy of meanings invested in fashion" (50). She also notes its inclination to "épater le bourgeois" (43), suggesting a deliberate intent to shock or provoke conventional sensibilities by experimenting with existing fashion norms, presenting designs that appear strange and absurd. In the technological age, fashion is rapidly advancing in various dimensions, exemplified by innovations such as Bella Hadid's spray dress in the Coperni Spring/Summer 2023 collection. By delving into diasporic fashion and scrutinizing the parameters defining postfashion, this paper seeks to explore whether diasporic fashion qualifies as a phenomenon within the realm of postfashion. The study focuses on selected designers and artists, where the core impetus is the diasporic sentiment. Additionally, the paper will briefly investigate the proximity of postfashion to postmodernism and deconstruction, exploring the nuanced intersections between these conceptual frameworks.

Keywords: fashion, postfashion, diaspora, diasporic fashion, culture, postmodern, deconstruction

Introduction

Precursory corpus of fashion criticism broadly encompasses three key categories: examination of gender roles intertwined with fashion, analysis of class dynamics within the realm of fashion, and consumerism and capitalism in fashion. Established fashion theories, including classical perspectives from sociologists such as Herbert

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Spencer, Ferdinand Tonnies, Thorstein Veblen, and George Simmel, delve into one or all of these thematic categories. A notable exploration of class in fashion can be found in Spencer's 1854 essay, "On Manners and Fashion." The essay also explores the imitative nature of fashion, categorizing it into reverential imitation (stemming from admiration for the upper class) and competitive imitation (an effort to mirror the upper class). Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* adds to this discourse by labeling fashion as "conspicuous consumption" (33)—a display of wealth—and introducing the concept of "pecuniary emulation," (12) wherein the middle and lower classes strive to emulate the lifestyle of the upper class. George Simmel, on the other hand, links fashion with identity in his essay "Fashion." He analyzes the sociological aspects of fashion, asserting that it embodies two opposing tendencies: generalization and specialization, arising from the human need for both conformity and differentiation, hence "union and segregation are the two fundamental functions which are here inseparably united" (544). Ferdinand Tonnies, in "Community and Society," aligns with the perspectives mentioned above, and underscores the role of distinction in the fashion system. His essay "Custom" defines both custom and fashion as forms of "social will", and claims the notion that something, in order to be noticed and pleasing, must be new and strange or different is the essence of fashion.

Roland Barthes' *The Fashion System* scrutinizes fashion magazines through a semiological lens, revealing his skepticism towards the phenomenon, and "his theory of fashion is based entirely on the idea of irrationality" (Wilson 24). Barthes contends that fashion not only embodies irrationality but also significantly contributes to the promotion of consumerism. While critiques of fashion within the realms of consumerism and capitalism already form substantial portions of fashion theory, there is a new imperative to delve into intricacies of the interplay between fashion and culture. Within emerging academic discussions on fashion, postfashion stands out as the most recent conceptual framework. Since fashion criticism currently delves into an exploration of its defining characteristics and relevant examples, the paper aims to comprehend diasporic fashion as a facet of postfashion. However, before delving

into this exploration, it is crucial to establish a clear understanding of postfashion and diasporic fashion.

Explicating Postfashion

In contemporary times, technology has become an indispensable force across various domains, and the fashion industry is no exception. Illustrating the transformative role of technology in fashion, designers Sébastien Meyer and Arnaud Vaillant, the creative minds behind the label Coperni Femme, introduced a groundbreaking concept during the Paris fashion week. In their Spring/Summer 2023 collection show, model Bella Hadid adorned a dress created from a white substance (which was sprayed on the model) known as Fabrican. Another notable instance is Gary James McQueen's digital fashion show, "Guiding Light," released in April 2021. Presented as a 10-minute animated film, the show offers a 360-degree view of the designs, a feat not achievable in traditional physical fashion spaces. McQueen envisions that digital displays will pave the way for new and diverse avenues in designing and presenting fashion, marking a paradigm shift in the industry's traditional norms.

Nevertheless, the first critic to introduce the term "postfashion," Barbara Vinken, does not refer to the incorporation of science and technology on the runway or in the production of clothing as a distinctive feature of postfashion. For her, postfashion comes after the great "hundred-year" period of *haute couture*. (35). "Hundred-year" fashion here refers to the dominant fashion of 20th century, it hints at the dominance of fashion standards set by Chanel and *haute couture* of other hefty labels of the last century. "Postfashion is after and against Chanel" (83) which, under Karl Lagerfeld was majorly about the *Griffe* (fashion brand, or a signature), and not about peculiarity of designs. As Vinken says, "Postfashion is more than merely an anti-fashion: the rebellion against fashion is just the starting point of something different. The century of fashion is over: the very idea of Paris fashion is at an end" (63), postfashion is not the destructive discourse against fashion or a movement to castigate fashion practices, instead it subverts the authority of mainstream fashion world by dismantling it and creating new forms of fashion that are not in alliance with the already established fashion standards,

such as the monopoly or dominating influence of Paris fashion throughout the world. Barbara Vinken considers the work of Martin Margiela as a great example of postfashion who “applies his deconstructive talent to the subversion of the strategies of the present-day fashion scene” (140). Margiela is a complete paradox of Chanel under Lagerfeld since he doesn’t sign his creations, hence not concerned with the *griffe*. Moreover, he frequently stages his 'shows' in unconventional locations like Barbès, one of the deprived areas in Paris primarily inhabited by Africans and Arabs. These venues include vacant Metro shafts, abandoned parking lots, and disused railway stations. His creations are frequently presented by individuals who are not professional models.

One distinguishing feature of postfashion is that it is antithetical to the traditional “trickle down” theory of fashion, according to which a trend is initially introduced and embraced by the elite or upper class before gradually being adopted by the lower class. In the realm of postfashion, there is a notable “reversal of the relationship between fashion-creator and imitator” (Vinken 63), it no longer emanates from the aristocracy; instead, it ascends “upwards,” originating from the streets and permeating the esteemed salons of haute couture, where they undergo adaptation and imitation. Amid recent discussions within the fashion landscape, the element of “comfort” is hailed as essential, revolutionary, and superior to other considerations. However, it’s crucial to note that postfashion doesn’t necessarily align with the emphasis on “comfort” or the concept of “comfortable sportiness.” “Postfashion opposes itself to quiet elegance, but also to comfortable sportiness...” (65). As the acceptance of unattractive, the grotesque, and the absurd increases, postfashion goes beyond its avant-garde origins. It adopts a self-aware and self-ironic stance, occasionally resorting to shocking the conventional sensibilities in its less robust moments. This departure from traditional avant-garde fashion is marked by references to unconventional or ‘perverse’ forms of sexuality. However, postfashion may still resort to a tendency to *épater le bourgeois*, meaning it may deliberately shock or provoke conventional, middle-class sensibilities.

Elucidating Diasporic Fashion

Arjun Appadurai suggests that “there is an urgent need to focus on the cultural dynamics of what is now called deterritorialization”, fashion system at present cannot be studied in alienation from globalisation (“Disjuncture” 192). In the same essay, he introduces the idea of global cultural flows and one of its dimensions “ethnoscapes”, which he defines as “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers and other moving groups and persons” (297). It is evident that “ethnoscapes” are becoming a basis for novel creations that may be considered as texts of diaspora. Diasporic expression has garnered significant acclaim in literature, giving rise to a distinct genre known as Diasporic Literature. However, this sentiment extends beyond the realms of literature and cinema; it finds profound expression in the work of emerging fashion designers and artists worldwide. Their creations serve as a canvas for diasporic experiences, encapsulating a sense of nostalgia and longing for what is lost or distant. In *Global Diasporas*, William Safran proposes the characteristics of diasporas and one of them is that “they continue in various ways to relate to (that) homeland and their ethnocommunal consciousness” (6). The designers (whom I call “diasporic designers”) constantly refer to their homeland through their designs by incorporating elements such as motifs, fabrics, specific embellishments, accompanying accessories, colors, structures, patterns, or designs traditionally associated with their homeland into the clothing prevalent in their hostland. While discourse on diaspora is well-established in literature and cultural studies, its exploration within the realm of fashion dynamics remains relatively understudied.

Influenced by Arjun Appadurai’s idea of “scapes”, Birgit Haehnel introduces the term “fashionscapes”, which refer to “multi-sited fashion flows within the overall global economy” (“Fashionscapes” 171). The paper refers to the concept I coin as ‘diasporic fashionscapes,’ which will be used to denote a space of multi-sited diasporic fashion flows which gives rise to a fashion (sartorial, make-up/accessories and mise-en-scène) that exhibits the diasporic encounters of the designers. Diasporic fashion refers to everything that exhibits its sentiments, be it the ensemble, the verbal

description of the ensemble by the designer or even the mise-en-scene. Diasporic fashionscapes refer to the space which gives rise to such creations. It is a way to look at fashion flows centred majorly around diasporic experiences and their expression in clothing. It also includes the traditional clothing practices of common people living abroad, since traditional clothing in an abroad setting involves the sentiment of expressing a national and cultural identity and belongingness. Hence, the term is a classification of “fashionscapes” and denotes the occurrence of fashion practices influenced by diasporic sentiments and experiences. Fashion encompasses more than just the runway; it serves as a means of expressing ideas and identity through clothing. This paper delves into the designs of emerging designers who may not be widely recognized in the mainstream fashion scene. Diasporic fashion, in particular, introduces a unique form of hybrid fashion, where diasporic sentiment is fundamental. The diasporic space becomes crucial in the creation of fashion/designs. The “environments mitigate, control, inform and enhance how fashion is experienced, performed, consumed, seen, exhibited, purchased, appreciated, desired, and, of course, displayed” (Potvin 2), the physical diasporic space and diasporic fashion are not independent of each other and their symbiosis is essential for the experience of diasporic sentiments, and eventually the creation and consumption of diasporic fashion. It is crucial to note that there is no such extant category as “diasporic designs” in fashion studies and the paper uses the term diaspora since it refers to everything that is based on the idea of homeland and the core element of the history of the term is “the loss of home and the ongoing link to some notion of it” (Sigona et al. xix). The chosen texts for elucidating diasporic fashion comprise images featuring the creations of selected designers and the accompanying narratives they provide to articulate the essence of their designs. The presence of diasporic sentiment in the designs is substantiated by the accompanying narratives. Given the pivotal role of textual captions in shaping our interpretation of images, there is a deliberate effort to explore the intricate dynamics between text and image, unraveling the mechanisms through which they jointly construct and disseminate meanings. Gillian Rose astutely questions the rationale behind segregating the examination, “Why split things apart when they are almost always found in such persistent spatial proximity?” (70).

Therefore the paper explores the symbiotic relationship between visual and verbal components, emphasizing the culturally specific meanings inherent in the amalgamation of pictures and words.

The term ‘diasporic designers ’will be employed in this context to describe individuals who, as a shared characteristic, incorporate references to their homeland in their designs. Their creative endeavors are often inspired by and allude to their respective homelands. First example of “diasporic fashion” is a design by Natasha Sumant, founder of the label "gundistudios", an Art Director and Inter-disciplinary Designer based in Brooklyn.



Example 1 - (Picture source- Instagram, @gundistudios)

Her work presents an intersection of fashion and visual design in which she never misses to add a glimpse of her cultural roots. She calls this dress “The Azaadi Dress” describing it as “made from khadi as an homage to the Swadeshi movement of 1947 [sic], which promoted the spinning of khadi as a means of development in rural India.” It can be interpreted as a means of preserving national consciousness within oneself, and reflecting the diasporic emotion of not abandoning either culture. The choice of a dress, as opposed to a saree or another Indian garment, subtly suggests an equal connection to both cultures among those in the diaspora. The fabric of the dress relates to the deep-seated sentiments tied to one's cultural and

national roots, capturing the social and historical realities of a specific period in a nation's history. The inclusion of traditional Indian nose pin, specifically the Peshwa Nath from Maharashtra, serves to emphasize the Indianness of the ensemble. Choosing this particular type of nose pin (Nath) may aim to underscore the wearer's regional background, symbolizing a stronger connection to regional consciousness rather than a broader national identity. Furthermore, the label name on the dress, presented in both Hindi and English, subtly suggests an inclination towards embracing both cultures.





Example 2 (Picture source- Instagram, @gundistudios)

Second example serves as an articulation of the designer's personal memories and a nostalgic reflection on her childhood spent with her grandmother. The skilled women involved in crafting this dress, as noted by the designer, acquired their expertise through observational learning from their mothers. In addition to showcasing the Champi tradition prevalent in South Asian culture, emphasized in the picture to underscore the deep bond between mothers and daughters, the braids also symbolize the intricate interplay between hair and weaving. This alludes to the interconnectedness of both the woven hair and the knitted dress. The knitted midi dress, coupled with a draped element evoking the essence of a saree, further underscores the fusion of the designer's homeland and hostland cultures. The choice of earrings, resembling a belcher chain or link chain, creates an impression reminiscent of various forms of weaving. In this creative endeavour, the two distinct geographical spaces play a significant role in shaping the fashion narrative.

Example in picture 3 is by Neha Kapil, a Los Angeles - based Indian -American designer, founder of label *Agni*, and also a visual artist who experiments with make-up by creating facial art with colours and cosmetics. Given that "postfashion is very much dependent on populist myths and their motives" (Vinken 66), Neha

Kapil's creation, named the "Devi Lehenga Skirt" in example 3, encapsulates the portrayal of a formidable goddess wielding a weapon (depicted in the print) and is accentuated by a dagger-shaped pendant. This print depicting a fierce goddess and the accompanying pendant evoke the rich myths surrounding goddesses or devi prevalent in Indian cultural beliefs. The prevalent use of the colour red in both the ensemble and the mise-en-scène suggests a pertinence to Hindu temples in Southeast Asia. Ultimately, what defines it as a diasporic design is the fusion of two elements- the dress's structure (tube top and skirt, paired with ankle boots) and the intricate interplay of the print, jewellery, and makeup (which involves the reference to the designers Indian cultural roots).



Example 3 (Picture source- Instagram, @agnistyle)

Diasporic fashion as a facet of Postfashion

“Along with the reversal of high and low, the carnevalization of relations, and the populist dissolution of the borders that mark out stylistic regions, postfashion is characterized by a decisive change in the relation of fashion to time” (Vinken 67). Having elucidated the nuances of both the concepts (postfashion and diasporic fashion), it becomes apparent that diasporic fashion exhibits alignment with certain characteristics of postfashion. This inference is drawn from the evident "dissolution of the borders," as diasporic fashion

epitomizes the blending of clothing forms from diverse cultures. In this context, geographical and cultural boundaries lose their significance, highlighting the inclusive and boundary-defying nature inherent in both diasporic fashion and the broader concept of postfashion. The showcased designs exemplify that diasporic fashion subtly alludes to "populist myths and their motives," underscoring its integral connection to the essential aspects of postfashion. Examining the aforementioned examples and designs from an alternative standpoint, the deliberate experimentation with traditional Indian garments such as sarees and lehengas may aim to shock or provoke the sensibilities of conventional middle-class individuals ("épater le bourgeois"). While diasporic fashion doesn't strictly conform to all the characteristics of postfashion as outlined by Vinken, it aligns with certain elements, establishing itself as a component of the postfashion.

Proximity of Postfashion to Postmodernism & Deconstruction

The following statement by Vinken alludes to the idea of postfashion being analogous to concepts of postmodernism and deconstruction—

The creative impulses now come from *prêt-à-porter*, and not from *haute couture*. Postfashion breaks the dominance of Paris fashion, which with its couturiers had been the last remainder of French power of the eighteenth century. Above all, it breaks the dictatorial privilege of the great couturiers. The fashion designer loses his absolute power. His inspirations no longer come to him from an obscure genius. Fashion becomes a co-production between the *créateur* and those who wear the clothes. Whether fashion is interesting is no longer dependent on the designer alone, but in equal part, on people in the street: on what they 'make' out of what is on offer, as Yohji Yamamoto says. (Vinken 35)

The *prêt-à-porter*, denoting ready-to-wear garments available in standardized sizes and finished condition, facilitates the democratization of fashion, thereby challenging the notion of Paris fashion's exclusivity and superiority. Similar to the paradigm in postmodern literature where the author relinquishes the authority to

create and convey meanings, postfashion isn't solely centered on the designer; rather, it encompasses the recipients and their interpretations. The manner in which individuals receive and perceive these designs holds equal significance.

Jean Francois Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, defines postmodernism as "Incredulity towards meta-narratives" (xxiv). Postmodernism is commonly characterized as anti-authoritarian, rejecting the recognition of any single authority, and marked by subjectivism and skepticism whereas deconstruction is a way of understanding the uncertainty, undecidability and indeterminacy of meaning in a text, also advocating the possibility of absence of the meaning in a text. John David Caputo, an American philosopher, articulates deconstruction as a method aiming to demonstrate that various entities like texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices lack concrete meanings and fixed purposes. According to Caputo, these elements always transcend the limitations imposed by any predefined mission, consistently exceeding the boundaries within which they currently exist. Analogously, postfashion rejects the authority of any singular fashion form or definition, surpassing the limits imposed by dominant fashion standards and practices. These three concepts share the fundamental idea of questioning established standards and subverting their authority. The nuanced examination of fashion alongside deconstruction and other postmodernist ideas is opening new avenues for research in fashion studies. Alison Gill, in her essay "Deconstruction Fashion," traces the emergence of deconstruction in fashion, exemplified by the works of Martin Margiela and Rei Kawakubo, whose garments are often described as "unfinished," "coming apart," "recycled," "transparent," or "grunge." Barbara Vinken views Martin Margiela as a representative of postfashion, while Alison Gill identifies him as an exemplar of deconstruction in the realm of fashion. This convergence illustrates the shared similarities between deconstruction and postfashion.

In conclusion, diasporic fashion illustrates the "dissolution of the borders", positioning itself as a key element within the realm of postfashion. This trend reflects a proclivity for integrating diverse clothing patterns from various cultures, resulting in the creation of

novel and avant-garde styles. From a broader perspective, this phenomenon aligns with the artistic principles of "bricolage" and "pastiche" prevalent in the postmodern era, wherein disparate elements are skilfully assembled to generate innovative creations. Within the realms of postmodern art and postfashion, there exists a profound ethos of inclusivity and a genuine celebration of diversity. It involves the artful combination of different fashion elements, imbuing them with new meanings or, at times, eschewing conventional meanings altogether. In conclusion it may be noted, that Diasporic fashion, as an integral part of postfashion, embraces the notion of challenging established practices in the fashion industry, transcending cultural and national boundaries.

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