



Interpreting the Dress Code of Zarri Bano: From Fashionism to Spiritualism

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Abstract:

Clothing is an essential component of human existence and one of the fundamental necessities. Since clothing is a way for people to mimic their social bodies, there are many different explicit and implicit connotations associated with it. Clothes can serve as a means of communication regarding one's personality, habits, and unique style. The organization of social life, class, and community can all be characterized by one single item of clothing. Numerous factors, such as the media, the fashion industry, culture and also an individual's character, have an impact on how one dresses and expresses their interests. The representation of clothing in a narrative is not static. It helps readers investigate symbolic meaning and provides authors with a familiar vehicle for conveying nuanced character features. Through an in-depth exploration of Zarri Bano, the leading lady in *The Holy Woman*, this paper demonstrates how clothes and accessorizing express religious, cultural, and social recognitions. Also, taking into consideration the spiritual versus corporeal dynamic, the paper attempts to showcase how clothes in the recent work act subliminally to define Zarri's identity and self and her understanding of the dualistic view of reality.

Keywords: Clothing, Fashion, Identity, Self, Spiritualism.

The need of dress is eminently a "higher" or spiritual need. This spiritual need of dress is not wholly, nor even chiefly, a naive propensity for display of expenditure. (Veblen, 1899, p. 168)

Introduction

Qaisra Shahraz's "The Holy Woman" revolves around an independent and happy-go-lucky Zarri Bano, who falls prey to the practice of "Holy Woman". The heroine Zarri Bano is a young, attractive, joyous, and city-bred Muslim virgin who is ruthlessly entrapped to adhere to the custom of *Haq Bakshish*. At the beginning of the novel, Zarri joins APWA (All Pakistani Women's Association) actively and is portrayed as a burn-the-bra kind of feminist. However, the abrupt death of her only brother, Jafar, acts as a catalyst in transforming her ideologically, physically, and emotionally. Zarri's father, Habib Khan, an affluent landlord of Chiragpur, uses intimidation tactics to manipulate her, mostly to his benefit. Zarri is scapegoated to become a holy woman and eventually falls heir to the property as her brother has left no male successor to inherit the acres of land.

The practice of “Holy Woman” or *Haq Bakshish* means giving up the right to wed and to cease having marital bliss. Seemingly, this odd practice, which involves marrying a girl to the Holy Quran, is a stark reality of rural Sindh, Pakistan, where such traditions are practiced to victimize women under the pretext of Islam. The brutal tradition was innovated by feudalists and is approved by the rigid adherence to the feudal tradition. The custom of marrying a woman to the Quran rather than a man is enforced to prevent wealth and acres of land from passing to unrelated third parties. This custom solely represents the power struggle of the feudal rulers and their self-interests and is in no way mentioned in any authentic Islamic source. Shahraz pinpoints the ubiquity of these non-Islamic cultural practices that present a bad picture of Islam and frequently draw the attention of Western media, which demonizes Islam worldwide as a hotbed of sexism and cruelty. In Western culture, the veil has always intrigued and bewildered both men and women. For them, the phenomenon is as disturbing now as it was in the past. They see it as a symbol of male oppression, which is a widely held stereotype, and think that men force their womenfolk to wear it. Westerners have always misunderstood the entire procedure since the true reason why ladies wear it cannot be rationally articulated. As Tajuddin posits:

Of course, it is not immediately the clothes in question as a source of complexity, there are media roles “advertisements”, industries “creators”, communities “users and creators”, as well as social institutions “government and its tools” that shape the turn of clothing into products that regulate its users. (Tajuddin, 2018, p. 23)

Zarri Bano’s fascination with the fetishized apparel is a reflection of the power that her modern identity carries. Her penchant for all things modern and dated not only fails to pronounce her as independent, but also, to a great extent, reduces her further to victimization by the feudal lords who want her to save her family’s honor by transforming herself into a holy virgin. Zarri’s sartorial style revolves around her self-reliant physique, which may resemble the demeanor and performance of an independent lady. However, the modish clothing retains its potency and symbolic significance only when donned by a free-willing woman. Zarri is suddenly expected to transform herself into a saintly woman in both appearance and inner essence as per the age-old tradition of “Haq Bakshish.” Her unwillingness to wear a *burqa* and adopt a different identity emphasizes her struggle to bid adieu to her contemporary way of life.

Zarri’s transformation from a worldly woman to a holy woman is a tedious process. Shahraz has keenly portrayed the metamorphosis of Zarri Bano from a carefree, self-loving, and stylish girl to a mature and renowned scholar of Islam. The novel, at several places, pinpoints the stylish vanity and apparel of Zarri Bano that define her temperament and taste. However, her repositioning as a holy woman and her shift from dressing in bright-coloured clothes to a dull dark veil give a tight jolt to her beauty queen image. As Tajuddin identifies, in moral and ethical matters, religious clothing ideology “is a rule or law regarding how to dress according to the conditions of space, place, and time, which need to be understood and implemented.” (Tajuddin, 2018, p. 25). Zarri’s moaning at the thought of wearing a veil shatters her modern identity. It emphasizes the inner struggle of a woman who is oscillating between her traditional father and her modern self. As Shahraz puts it: “Her brain was suddenly attacked by the image of herself enveloped in a long black cloak. ‘How can I wear a burqa?’ She moaned to herself. ‘I will never get used to it, not me. I, who have a natural instinct for glamour and fashion. I will be smothered alive behind it.’” (Shahraz, 2001, p. 17).

The ascension of her father to power at Zarri’s refusal, as Qaisra Shahraz says, alludes to decades of patriarchal and social superiority. The system of *Haq Bakshish* in the clan used family honour and tradition as paraphernalia for extending authority over the physical, psychic, and social life of women. Literary scholar Ania Loomba determines “women’s oppression had hitherto been seen as simply a matter of culture and as taking place within the family.” (Loomba, 2005, p. 26). It is this patriarchal superiority bolstered by such pointless customs that mock Zarri’s ideology, sexuality, and her perfect body, which wore modern clothing.

I want to be a normal woman, Father, and live a normal life! I want to get married.

I am not a very religious person, as you know. I am a twentieth-century, modern,

educated woman. I am not living in the Mughal period- a pawn in a game of male chess. Don't you see, Father, I have hardly ever prayed in my life, not opened the Holy Quran on a regular basis. How can I thus become a Holy Woman? I am not suited to that role. (Shahraz, 2001, pp. 54-55)

When Zarri Bano is left without any choice, she further emphasizes

-No choice? I don't believe you. There is no way I will become a Holy Woman, Father' she warned him. 'I know what it entails and I am not cut out for that role. As you know I have hardly ever covered my head properly. I know very little about religion. I am very much a worldly woman. I cannot become a nun!' (Shahraz, 2001, p. 51).

Zarri's father, however, is unmoved by her persistent opposition and refusal to become a holy woman, and her clan's patriarchal advances remain unabated. Zarri, a feminist in and of herself, is torn between her own contemporary self, her aspirations for the future, and her responsibility to her clan following the passing of her brother. Her hostility towards the life of abstinence and the black cloth grows more intense as soon as she witnesses the tough nature of her father and grandfather. Zarri's response to Sakina's compliments during the *Haq Bakshish* ceremony, when she dons a burqa for the first time, is particularly noteworthy.

Can any woman look lovely in this garment? I loathe this cloth. Sister Sakina. It burns my body! I have never ever worn a shawl, a *chador*, let alone a *burqa* in my entire life. This thing— I cannot bear it! It is smothering the life out of me. Do you know that black was my favourite colour, two months ago? But this! Her Body began to shudder uncontrollably behind the cold soft fabric (Shahraz, 2001, p. 96).

The novelist aptly describes the situation when Zarri is shocked to see herself in a black veil.

Like a large black tent, it hid her red ceremonial suit totally. Only her slippered feet were visible. The sleeves of the *burqa* reached below her wrist line. The countless number of gold bangles she wore jangled awkwardly inside. The seam of the face triangle chaffed her delicate cheeks and she felt hot (Shahraz, 2001, p. 96).

Zarri's reaction to Sakina's words about her standing as a holy guide illustrates not only her psychological and physical state but is also reflective of the orthodox feudal psyche. Her melancholic response at being adorned as a bride for the ceremony demonstrates the injustice done to her.

Tell me, Sister Sakina, 'Why are my hands bedecked in this ridiculous fashion? Normally I never wear more than two rings at a time. Here, look, I have eight rings on my fingers! They couldn't find one for the thumb! Who am I going to impress? Which in-laws? Which husband is going to admire their design and count them? You don't wear anything in your hands. Did you go through this macabre drama, of being dressed up as a bride before you became a Holy Woman? (Shahraz, 2001, p. 94).

It should be mentioned that although Habib Khan decides his daughter's fate, he too understands how terrible it would be to waste the intelligent and attractive Zarri. His mind strangely couldn't connect the two visions of his daughter when he initially saw Zarri Bano wearing a *burqa*. However, he upholds the long-standing custom at the expense of his daughter's happiness and as Shahraz confirms per the bargain "The burqa was an important part of that equation. He couldn't surely have his daughter as a figure of fashion as Shahzadi Ibadat. Religious piety and glamour had never gone hand-in-hand." (Shahraz, 2001, p. 110).

In the beginning, Zarri Bano used to dread the notion of having to wear a veil for the rest of her life. She never used to cover her head with a *dupatta*. Her reply to Jafar for always being

her chaperone was, “So what if my *dupatta* fell down for a few seconds? Have you never seen hair before”? However, later on, her rejection of femininity and assimilation of patriarchy in favour of an Islamic lifestyle is a powerful metaphor for her acceptance of her destiny. Her entire makeover can be greatly attributed to both her physical and mental transformation. She reluctantly lays behind her stylish persona as she is no longer deserving of frills like dressing up and emulating a sophisticated woman. She has no right to enjoy such indulgences as self-adornment and prettification as her right to a normal life has been stolen by the feudal past.

She swiped the dressing table top clear of bottles, creams, lotions, sachets, and perfumes. Dropping everything into a large carrier bag, she knotted it tight. Now only a comb, a tub of hand cream, and a tub of moisturizing cream stood on the stark, clean surface. From the drawers, she took out the velvet boxes of jewellery. Opening each one she gazed at its contents. Silver, gold, rubies, opals, and emeralds sparkled in front of her face. Closing the boxes, one by one, she placed them in a pile on one corner of the dressing table. She would hand them over to her sister and Cousin Gulshan. ‘My only ornament in life now is going to be the veil, the *burqa*. (Shahraz, 2001, p. 110).

Zarri, to protect the legacy and save the priceless lands of her ancestors is dragged out of her modern clothing and fitted into this holy garment. However, she replaces her previous, much more charming self with her new identity as a holy woman. She progressively changes her perception of the rebellious woman of the twentieth century to that of a mature and tenacious woman. She transforms herself from beauty to beauty with brain and becomes a symbol of endurance and strength. “Going to her wardrobe, she looked for the simplest and most dowdy of outfits. Glancing at all the elegant clothes hanging there, chiffons, crêpes, cotton, lawns and velvets, her hand lingered on the black chiffon outfit...” (Shahraz, 2001, p. 109). By donning the veil, she gives the feminist movement a fresh perspective by demonstrating her strong opposition to both the die-hard feminist and the orthodox politics of the patriarchal hegemony. Her mind is nourished by the wealth of Islamic knowledge, and the black veil isolates her body from society. The veil aids her in discovering her actual self on a personal level as well as in developing and broadening her horizons on a social level. “In the personal dimension, clothing becomes a medium to explore expressions and ideas that sometimes appear in abstract forms. Through the socio-cultural dimension, clothing is used as a medium of communication, promotion, and even the formation of ideology.” (Tajuddin, 2018, p. 22). Her transformation from an “elegant frame dressed in Karachi’s *haute couture*” (Shahraz, 2001, p. 30) to reinstating that “The veil has given me a sense of my self-worth, respect, and dignity. Above all, it has freed me from vanity. I never thought it would be easy but I have been able to shed myself of the trappings of female vanity.” (Shahraz, 2001, p. 197) aptly describes her spiritual journey. As Turunen points out, “Feminists saw both fashion and cosmetics as trivialities that functioned ideologically to foster a false femininity of controlling women, and to keep them trapped in subservience to men.” (Turunen, 2018, pp. 122-23). The *burqa* becomes a significant part of her life, and removing it means renouncing her identity and giving up on her goals. The modest attire helps her to deviate from the trend and recognize the erratic nature of sophisticated existence. At one point in the novel, when Gulshan argues about Zarri Bano being in *purdah* all the time, her counterargument to Gulshan is noteworthy.

Gulshan, please remember that I am not in *purdah*, to be hidden behind four walls. I can do whatever and go wherever I like, within the parameters of my role and the different demands that it makes on me as a person and as a Holy Woman. I must now live up to that name and learn to adapt to a life of simplicity and humility and, wherever possible, avoid any contact with men (Shahraz, 2001, p. 111).

As time progresses, she gives her life a new perspective and purpose through the black garment. Her shift from bright and latest designs of clothing to wearing a dull black colour all her life shows her reverence towards her newfound identity. “In terms of hijab, it certainly has meaning

and definitely affects meaning that is contained in it, because hijab is understood not only physical changes but also changes in attitude as to be more religious.” (Tajuddin, 2018, p. 24). To bolster the argument, at another point in the novel, her reaction to Gulshan, who expected Zarri to be decked up for her sister’s marriage, quite evidently showcases the promotion in her character and conduct.

What did you expect -my bright orange *lengha* that you and my mother ordered from the best tailors in Lahore? I am not a bride to be decked up; after all, I am supposed now to be a devout woman- a woman of simple taste’, retorted Zarri Bano. ‘It matters to me very little now what I look like, Gulshan. For you see, vanity is one thing that I have managed to exorcise from the old Zarri Bano. Do you know, I thought that would be the hardest thing to do, but I have managed it quite easily. (Shahraz, 2001, p. 111).

She scathes at meaningless and illogical compliments delivered by her cousin to flatter her beauty and vanity when she is demanded to wear jazzy clothes. “I feel terrible! What will people think of me? Do you think that they will ever respect me again? I am dressed in such a vulgar fashion— almost like a lady of the night!” (Shahraz, 2001, p. 170). In the initial stage her constant state of flux from being a fashionista and making pensive statements like “They (clothes) have no purpose in my life now.” (Shahraz, 2001, p. 109), “I have no use for ornaments any longer.” (Shahraz, 2001, p. 111), “the mirror had lost its functional use” (Shahraz, 2001, p. 110) to feeling annoyance when made to wear a flowing *shararah* outfit, makeup, and jewellery at her sister’s wedding is quite observable. Zarri Bano’s inner feelings are delicately conveyed by Shahraz.

Zarri was feeling as if another woman had taken over her body. These clothes felt so strange and cumbersome. The ornaments clawed at her skin. The urge to go back and wipe her face clean was very strong. The make-up made her feel as if she was wearing a heavy mask. The weird sensation of having her hair swing openly and wantonly around her face made her long to sweep it all back and hide every single strand under her burqa hood. Instead, she carried her burqa over her arm (Shahraz, 2001, p. 168).

Arja Turunen, in the article “Feminists in High Heels”, posits that by the middle of the 1970s, feminist leaders began to promote the idea of “choice feminism,” which included the choice to re-embrace conventional feminine attire. Rather than dictating a certain way of life and look, it was claimed that the movement’s primary objective was “choice”. Zarri, too, in the novel, embraces the change in her conduct, appearance, and attitude after becoming a holy woman. The veil now becomes a matter of choice as she settles in well with her newfound identity. “In this view, ‘liberation’ thus did not come from specific clothes that a woman was supposed to wear, but from the knowledge that the choice was hers to make.” (Turunen, 2018, p. 128).

Zarri “loved social life and fashion” (Shahraz, 2001, p. 120), but it is her identity as the Holy Woman that grants her a life of freedom and independence rather than one of servitude. In status and position, she stands next to a male heir who traditionally inherits land and riches and achieves equality in a male-chauvinistic feudal society. Her daring personality does not change but develops. All the experiences that she endures build up to form the identity that she carries later on in life. Tajuddin, drawing on Herry’s idea while explaining the theory of personality posits that “personality contains an arrangement of dimensions that distinguishes the ways of oneself arranged and presented” (Tajuddin, 2018, p. 21) Herry postulates that personality has three dimensions which are “appearance, realization and intermediary” (Tajuddin, 2018, p. 21). The veil gives Zarri Bano the freedom to participate in Islamic conferences, organize workshops, and meet with people from different countries and cultures. Her clothes, however, are not modern and fashionable, but her outlook towards life is modern. And this is how, within the folds of her parameters, she has easily been able to break from the

stereotype of a voiceless, submissive, and meek lady. The veil not only gives her a new appearance but also choices to take up roles and decide what should be private and what public. "Appearance refers to whether an aspect of oneself is displayed in general or is still regarded as something personal." (Tajuddin, 2018, p. 21). She, like before, is fully empowered to exercise her bodily as well as social autonomy. Secondly, the veil takes on a new significance as a domain marker and a useful tool for the protagonist to transcend national boundaries and lead an international life. This is further demonstrated by the fact that Zarri Bano's sister, Ruby, was denied permission to travel to Cairo for her university education. However, in Zarri Bano's case, the veil proves to be an invaluable instrument in shattering the barriers of tradition that have kept the women of her clan imprisoned for centuries. Her hatred for the black garment that "Two years ago I wanted to tear it aside" and then the realization that "now I cannot live without it." (Shahraz, 2001, p. 197) is a journey of debunking the myth of a modern woman and the discovery of her true self. She begins to realize that the veil is a resource that a Muslim woman can draw on to function at the social level. "Realization of resources is the level at which self-characteristics are believed to originate in the individual or from the group where the self becomes a part." (Tajuddin, 2018, p. 21). It is to be mentioned that despite Zarri Bano's continued refusal to become a holy woman, she is very much a child of her clan. Despite her fashionable and brash demeanor, she is fundamentally a mixture of her feudal roots and modernistic ideas. Her conversation with Sikander amply validates.

Don't be fooled by the modern image that confronts you. I may look the part, but on the inside, I am very much a product of my clan. Never, ever forget that. I think and behave in a manner consistent with my clan's traditions. I respect and follow our centuries-old traditions. The essence of my life lies with the well-being of my family (Shahraz, 2001, p. 30).

In the *Haq Bakshish* ceremony, Professor Nighat calls her a coward and a selfish person who only thinks about her family's honor and bogus traditions. She also charges Zarri Bano with abandoning the feminist movement by showing little care for the APWA movement, succumbing to patriarchalism. Zarri Bano's independent and modern image makes it difficult for her mentor to understand how she has been duped into becoming a holy woman. She is pained to see the beautiful girl behind the folds of the veil. As it has been rightly mentioned, "the process of becoming a feminist is often represented as a transformative experience that changes a woman's identity, which is stereotypically made visible through dress and appearances." (Turunen, 2018, p. 130). Zarri Bano's professor is oblivious to the extent of her dedication to the feminist cause. In a world where women are still considered inferior to men, she is committed to using patriarchal tactics to attain the equality and respect that only men can truly deserve. Zarri makes an effort to persuade her mentor that her new position as a female Islamic interpreter and her rekindled interest in Sharia law are compatible with her strong beliefs. Furthermore, she realizes that her new existence is not a life of isolation but rather one that will guide her toward enlightenment and the great field of Islamic knowledge. As she says, "I shall be a bird with wings that let her fly into a new world. In truth, I am flying next week to Cairo for a year, to study Islam at Cairo University." (Shahraz, 2001, p. 118). She realizes her potential as soon as she is exposed to the world outside the four walls of her house. She functions as an intermediary, effortlessly adapting to her new environment. "Intermediaries are levels of active power that are inherent in themselves..." (Tajuddin, 2018, p. 21).

At the climax of the novel, even after being set free from the vows of 'Holy Woman' by her father Habib Khan and marriage with Sikander, Zarri Bano is unwilling to abandon her holy self. She cannot give up her identity as a holy woman and struggles to fulfil the stereotypical duties of a wife.

This marriage, apart from how it relates to Haris, means very little to me. What matters is my identity. For the second time in my life, I am being robbed of it. I have become a helpless victim once again. From an ordinary girl who loved friends

and fashionable clothes, I became a simple, devout woman, sacrificing all aspects of my former life. Now that devout woman is being pressurized to fulfil her wifely duties. The essence of my life and my whole being is at stake here. If I cannot be true to myself and my feelings, or respect myself, then I am a lost woman (Shahraz, 2001, p. 309).

After marriage, Zarri is supposed to live the usual life of a married woman, which throws her whole existence into disarray once more. She is unsure whether to look put together or dress up for herself or her husband. Her hesitation to pull herself out of the *burqa* and dress up in bright shades and makeup is quite evident from her tense tone throughout the paragraph.

At the moment, I am struggling to make sense of minor details and changes in my lifestyle. For instance, I found myself debating whether I should wear a dull-colored suit, as I have done for the past five years, or to switch over to these pastel shades and bright deep colours. Yet my mind shies away from them. Until now, I have gone everywhere in my *burqa*; now I am requested to discard it at home. I am so used to the *burqa*, feel so totally happy and safe behind it, Mother, that without it I feel naked and disorientated, very conscious of my body and its shape. I have not touched the makeup kit for so long, and yet now I have to make up my face as befitting a new bride and to please my husband. I find all this abhorrent. I have no desire for it any more. Yet I am doing it all. I have compromised, but there is a limit to how much pressure and change I can take, unless you want me to end up in a psychiatric unit. (Shahraz, 2001, p. 309).

Conclusion

Qaisra Shahraz through the portrayal of Zarri Bano presents an ideal and new generation of trailblazer women who struggle to mark their identity without abandoning their faith in this day and age. The veil is complete with subliminal signals and the novelist has keenly given way to modernity through the way of acute traditionalism. Apart from sharing intimate relationships with the body and personal space, the veil comes to be significant, delivering different messages about gender roles and the flow of power and ideas in society. Zarri realizes on her path to spiritual revival that man doesn't need much to survive. The yearning for status and the impulse to flaunt it to others are what fuel the passion for expensive attire and glitzy life. Even though she considered the *burqa* to be a cheap and loathsome garment, she recognizes its worth and carries it with dignity.

It is not only that one must be guided by the code of proprieties in dress in order to avoid the mortification that comes of unfavorable notice and comment, though that motive in itself counts for a great deal; but besides that, the requirement of expensiveness is so ingrained into our habits of thought in matters of dress that any other than expensive apparel is instinctively odious to us (Veblen, 1899, pp. 168-69).

Through the contentious issue of the veil, Shahraz showcases that the essence of a true woman lies not only in her clothing but in what is inside her heart and head. Shahraz wishes to highlight that rather than her modern attire or veil, an intrinsic capability and courage make Zarri overcome external barriers and eventually make her a veritable woman with a will of her own.

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Bio-note

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