In October 2018, to celebrate the decriminalisation of Section 377 in India, the Lotus Make-up India Fashion Week put up a show asking forty designers paying homage to queer fashion, with outfits that reinterpreted the rainbow-striped pride flag (Dey, 2018). From transgender models to genderless clothing to men wearing frills, laces, and sarees, the ramp saw mainstream Indian fashion making bold statements about perceptions of gender and sexuality through fashion. Around the same time, genderqueer clothing labels like Two Point Two, Potplant, and Bobo Calcutta came into their own, cashing in on the growth of queer identity politics (Ladha, 2019).

This growing presence of queer fashion in India is emblematic of a worldwide shift in fashion and its relationship with gender. In the last decade, fashion has become increasingly critical about its association with the LGBTQ+ culture, right from Lagerfeld’s 2013 display of two brides (celebrating same-sex marriages in France) to dapperQ’s show at the Brooklyn Museum (marking ten years of dapperQ, a queer magazine devoted to visual activism through fashion) to Burberry’s 2018 design that added rainbow-coloured tartan to its signature collection (to show the company’s support for LGBTQ+ charities). Fashion that bends gender, challenging traditional conceptions of clothing has become one of the strongest weapons of queer resistance culture (Weaver, 2017; Couto, 2018; Khatib, 2019). Based on queer theory’s conceptions of gender and sexuality, this movement’s power lies in its appropriation of heteronormative clothing, creating a style that lies deeply embedded within existing limits of fashion while simultaneously offering resistance to these very limits. How fashion negotiates this space makes for an intriguing story.

Roland Barthes (2013) was one of the first people to write of fashion as a language with its own grammar and syntax. He talked of clothing as an institutional, external, and a social reality: the reserve from which individuals draw their personal choices of the dress. Looking at fashion as a language as Barthes envisioned it has three key implications.

One, like language, fashion becomes a quintessential cultural symbol. Following the symbolic interactionist paradigm, people derive meanings from said cultural symbols. The overt symbols that clothes and clothing styles are, fashion becomes a visual language, with its symbols being used by people to negotiate their own identities, along with those of others around them (Reddy-Best & Pedersen, 2014).

Secondly, to see fashion as a language is to recognise its duality in society, which is key to its function. It has the ability to unite those of different social classes and groups, while at the same time offering these groups ways in which they can set themselves apart from others (Simmel, 1957). For instance, in the 1950s, butch and femme styles emerged as subtle expressions of the self, setting themselves apart from larger heterosexual feminine fashion, while at the same time allowing lesbian women to identify others of similar sexual orientation (Reddy-Best & Pederson, 2014). Fashion can erect social and cultural boundaries, while simultaneously offering

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1 ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ are adjectives used to describe masculine and feminine attributes in women respectively. A butch clothing style refers to a woman donning masculine clothing (trousers, ties, tailcoat), while a femme style has to do with conventionally feminine clothing.
the means to transcend these boundaries. Fashion therefore, can be used to impose or deny identities, but it can also be used to liberate identities. While Victorian gowns and corsets-imposed femininity, women appropriating menswear like trousers is a strategy of resisting this hegemony. Fashion choices can thus be strategies for resistance, as is the case with drag and/or cross-dressing (de Lauretis, 1991).

Thirdly, and most importantly, by speaking a language, people acquire the right to alter it (Crystal, 2003). If we are to see fashion as a language, everyone who speaks it has the right to alter it, to tailor it to their needs and desires. The aforementioned duality of fashion plays a key role here. This malleability of fashion is what forms the bedrock of its centrality to the queer identity’s socio-political discourse.

Clothing has always been prominent in the process of building identities, particularly gender-based identities. Judith Butler (1988) wrote of gender being performed through social acts. Central to this performance is the dress. If we are to believe Butler, and if we are to go by Goffman’s symbolic interactionism, people make meanings out of outward physical appearances and symbols (Greaf, 2015). Clothes are the most obvious symbols of a culture and, since the 19th century, they have become increasingly malleable and fundamental to identity politics. Furthermore, given the history of oppression and othering of sexual minorities, and the resulting lack of other forms of power, clothing has time and again been the agency offering powerful yet subtle means of self-expression (Crane, 1999). Given this disenfranchisement, clothing has very often been the only agency available.

Important to note here is a fundamental difference between queer movements and gay or lesbian social movements, which translates into fashion as well. Gay and lesbian social movements have carved their identities based on a history of shared oppression and segregation, thus looking to normalise these identities. Queerness, on the other hand, builds on the instability of all identities. Unlike its gay/lesbian counterparts, queerness does not look to normalise itself but in fact revels in the difference (Gamson, 1995). Thus, while gay and lesbian fashion might look to normalise itself within the heteronormative structure, queer fashion stands for a complete revision of the relationship between gender and fashion. What unites either is their resistance to the static idea of identity as lies in the gender-binary and its propagation by heteronormative structures.
and institutions. Queer fashion therefore is more of an umbrella term, including within its definition any and all kinds of clothing that looks to resist heteronormativity. With the Industrial Revolution, fashion effectively came into its own in the modern sense of the term. For one, industrialisation allowed mass production on a scale humansociety had not known. Secondly, with the Industrial Revolution, new classes emerged in society – classes that had money and were willing to spend it. Together, both these factors – the sheer amount of choice available in clothing, and the willingness of people to exercise their choice – led to fashion beginning to democratise (Crane, 2000). For the first time, people could select their clothes in keeping with individual preferences; they could experiment to an extent hitherto unheard of. With this democratisation of the dress, the style became more important than the ‘end product’, as Barthes calls it. With the standardisation that accompanied democratisation, individual preferences and eccentricities now worked around this by personalising clothes – experimenting with combinations of outfits, putting together different sets of clothing, adding accessories and ‘personal effects’ (Barthes, 2013). It was at this point that clothing was appropriated by women and the homosexual community as an agent of expression.

One of ways this came to be was through the rise of dandyism – exemplified most prominently by Oscar Wilde. With its extravagant velveteen cloaks, rich materials and flamboyant colours, the dandy style became a tool of expressing the self that worked within the confines of heteronormative clothing, while simultaneously resisting them by appropriating styles from mainstream fashion. The real power of the dandy lay in the details – how the clothes were worn rather than the clothes themselves (Barthes, 2013).

During the same time, women appropriated menswear, making the latter’s emphasis on ease of movement a significant chunk of the dress reform movement, and, more importantly, of the suffragette rhetoric in Victorian England. Furthermore, this appropriation of hats, ties, and trousers was as significant for lesbian women as it was for heterosexual women (Crane, 1999; Ladha, 2019). While for the latter menswear was a way to defy the patriarchy, for the former, adopting facets from feminine as well as masculine clothing was symbolic resistance to the gender-binary, which during these Victorian times was only growing more pronounced.

Queer fashion as an umbrella term today is an attempt to rework the gender binary, to portray gender as a fluid spectrum through visual reworking of how clothing and gender are tied in social structures. It is a narrative built in resistance. To borrow from another Foucauldian idea, power lies dispersed in society and hence it almost always flows both ways (Gutting & Oksala, 2018). Thus, it only makes sense for a hegemonic heteronormative discourse in clothing to be met with resistance, particularly from those very identities that heteronormative clothing oppresses.

In this context, nothing is more powerful than drag culture. Through their performances, drag artists exemplify Butler’s arguments regarding gender performativity (Greaf, 2015). The ballroom becomes a safe space where fashion is used to shape different manifestations of identity. Fashion flourishes here in the instability of identity in ballrooms (Susman, 2000). What makes drag so powerful is that it forces people to clothing defy long-enforced gender norms by portraying men in feminine clothing and vice-versa. Secondly, the power of drag also lies in its appropriation of, a) high fashion (haute couture) and b) clothing from the opposite gender (Vinken, 1999; Susman, 2000).

Appropriation, customization, and personalisation is integral to queer fashion. Like drag, gay style revels in adopting existing styles and tweaking them slightly: skinny jeans, t-shirts slightly tighter than usual, or, most notably through the embellishment of otherwise plain fashion, making it ‘effeminate’ (Flynn, 2017). Similarly, lesbian style lies in adopting menswear along with traditionally feminine clothing.

On a more general level, however, the development of queer fashion, needs to be seen as dependent on the development of queer theory and discourse. For one, like queer theory, the entire point of queer fashion is to resist the overarching heteronormativity prevailing in clothing norms in terms of styles and colours associated with either gender in the binary structure. More importantly, however, like queer theory, queer fashion has never attempted to define itself. Structurally rooted in resistance, there are no quintessentially queer characteristics in queer fashion. Its power lies in appropriation and abrogation.

What constitutes queer fashion depends almost entirely on what the mainstream defines as normal. Due to this nature of the queer discourse, its fashion remains limited to the confines of being a reactionary rhetoric, entirely
that of resistance. As a result, it is bound to change every time the normal changes. Thus, the minute women wearing trousers became normal, it stopped being a statement made by the lesbian community. Similarly, men wearing feminine clothes stops being revolutionary and political the minute the mainstream defines it as the normal fashion. As real and as revolutionary it is, queer fashion is essentially a bricolage, and thus its potential will perpetually be determined by the extent of the mainstream.

References


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