

Dialog

A Journey for Cloth

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I took a trip to Pakistan in search of fabric. It wasn't just any old fabric I was after, but the special kind that so many relatives brought back from their visits. Such amazing cloth, so easily obtained, if—I was always told—you were prepared to participate in the obligatory dance of tongues in the age-old tradition of haggling. With this enticement, however, there came a warning. Be aware, our indigenous relatives told us, that in the bazaar, even the slightest hint of our foreignness would result in super-inflated prices. There were many interesting observations I made on my journey. Probably the most fascinating was the discrepancy between those who made fabric and those who wore it. All the establishments that made and sold cloth were, without fail, run by men. In the darkened and twisting alleyways of the bazaar, where shops and stalls seemed to have grown without any discernible planning, the odd shaft of sunlight that managed to penetrate the covered alleyways would highlight some murky room. The inhabitants within, usually men and boys, diligently crowded around some oversized embroidery frame, busily constructing other people's dreams—a revelation illustrating a distinct gender divide:

men made and women wore. True to form, we witnessed how sales assistants, with a flourish of the utmost charm, would shrewdly and very swiftly double and even treble their prices. We became subjected, in our foreignness, to a dizzying escalation of silver-tongued sales talk, an escalation about which we would hardly be aware, unlike the ever-increasing piles of beautiful fabrics amassing with incredible speed on the dais before us. The warnings of our relatives were of no consequence however, as even these inflated prices would not match the high prices we had to pay back home. And besides, we were under no illusions, because here in the bazaar we could buy the "genuine" article.

Fabric has always played an important part in my family history you see. My mother always made her own clothes and still does, as does virtually every female relative in my family, of which there are many. From as early as I can remember, there were always lengths of beautifully printed and embroidered cloths, the raw stuff, neatly folded and stuffed in carrier bags, amorphous packages, disguising the promise of fabulous garments within. Often smelling of far-off exotic places, an alien smell,

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they brought images of the fabled bazaars of a homeland I'd never seen. And scraps were everywhere. Like the gaudy patterns of an expensive carpet, the floor of my mother's sewing room was always littered with the remnants of myriad different materials—a veritable treasure trove of silks and satins, cottons and linens—of every color and design under the sun.

My fascination with fabric, however, isn't just derived from the infinite variation on offer but stems from the fact that, as a man, I was always an observer, never a participant. The men in my family were never allowed to drape themselves from head to toe in silk brocades or embroidered damasks. Tradition and ceremony were the cornerstones of my upbringing, these ostentatious practices being designed to unite a minority community living in an alien culture, namely Pakistani Muslims living in Nottingham, an industrial city in the Midlands region of England. All things had their place and our world was organized according to an invisible and strictly bounded code inherited from generations past.

From an early age we were taught to wear our roots on the outside and, for the women, fabric became the perfect signifier for their flamboyant display. Fabric became the cornerstone of an irresistible female economy played out between family and friends, a currency to be exchanged and bartered, touched and admired with jealous eyes and envious hands, and finding its most acute expression in the ceremony of the dowry; yet another female-only domain. But something happened

you see, because I also caught the bug! I remember on many occasions peeping from behind closed doors into a room full of bejeweled women, decked to the nines in their finery, watching as garment after fabulous garment was lifted from a huge chest in the center of the room—the dowry on display, paraded for all to see.

The buzz was electric; these were no ordinary clothes made of ordinary fabric. They had been sent, months before, to Pakistan, to be dyed and embroidered in bespoke patterns and intentioned designs, totally original and on display for the first time. And always the most amazing garment of all was the wedding outfit, traditionally a shocking combination of blood red and gold. The outfit would often be made of a very fine chiffon or organza, a delicate and diaphanous red fabric which is totally transformed and often barely visible, buried beneath an intricately embroidered gold filigree, so overwhelming as to defy belief. How I envied the wearer of these amazing clothes, better in my eyes than any fine art painting, because here was a noble and democratic art form, an art of and for the everyday, to be displayed and paraded on the body, next to the skin. The richness of these decadent garments, however, was always infused with sadness, for these were the gifts of parents to a daughter who would be leaving forever the sanctity of home, destined for another family and for another life.

I wanted a dowry. After years of desiring and envying the beautiful clothes of friends and

cousins, I lusted after my own set of extravagant garments. But what would they represent once removed from the customary role that such items are bound by? By its very nature, a dowry for a man—certainly in my own Pakistani, Muslim culture, and most probably in many other cultures also—would be considered a total anathema and would be looked upon with revulsion. But I feel that the courage to live a life that is considered transgressive also enables the courage to cross many other borders. For years I searched for a reason, a justification, but then in a moment of epiphany, I realized there had to be none; I desired! And that was all. And in my eyes what better to desire than the opulent sensuality of cloth. There was no beauty in the clothes of men. They did not shimmer or rustle. There was neither elegance nor mystery in their silhouette. The clothes of men were always economic and utilitarian, never allowing for excess or extravagance.

It's strange, I feel, the symbolic value of fabric—after all, it's simply a warp and weft. But intertwined are also other threads, barely visible but strong and fundamental, necessary for keeping the whole together. Tradition and honour, identity and origin are some such, impossible to quantify but finding a concrete articulation within

the liquid malleability of cloth. Fabric becomes representative of a second skin and, in some instances, a first skin, a cliché though this may be. Daughters are bound in the very best of prints, brocades and embroideries, dressed in the hopes and dreams of fearful parents, as they enact an age-old rite of passage to mark a new beginning in their lives. And what is a rite of passage if not a boundary to be crossed, another way of circumscribing an identity. But boundaries serve a dual purpose; they are a space that marks two sides, a dichotomy of inner and outer, right and wrong, them and us. So what of the queer dowry? What would such a set of clothes symbolize? There would certainly be no inequality of the sexes to be re-balanced and compensated for with this set of garments. Nor would beauty and excess become monopolized as the sole rite and domain of one gender. What fabric would befit such a ceremony? What currency would be appropriate for such an exchange, for a new beginning that never comes? I would argue none—and so, in this respect, all. A queer dowry is unbound by custom and tradition, is iconoclastic and relies not on the ritual of ceremony. It need fulfil only one criterion; the noble task of making manifest beauty for beauty's sake.

My desires would reach impossible heights, having only the excesses of my imagination as their guide. I would become a connoisseur of fabric. I chose to study textiles at university; to draw, design, weave and dye, and learn the arts of embroidery and fabric manipulation. I would become an Artist and make my own fabrics. I gave myself full permission to nurture my fetish, to feed ferociously with my eyes and gorge myself in all color, and pattern and texture, if only for the poignant realization that connoisseurship became the sad compensation for being a perpetual outsider, always looking in. But a transgressive sexuality, although liberating, is also bound and subject to constraint. In my eyes the ceremony of the dowry is the ultimate affirmation, a symphony of opulent color and unrestrained beauty, a fundamental celebration of life. But there are no takers for a queer dowry. Without the well-oiled machinery of custom, a queer dowry cannot exist. And so there was no physical reality to my desires, my dowry was and still is hidden from view, mirroring the secret displays of its true cousin. But the strength of my desires would take me to the motherland, the symbolic “beginning”; Pakistan, where I would undertake a journey for cloth, but I was after only the “authentic” stuff.