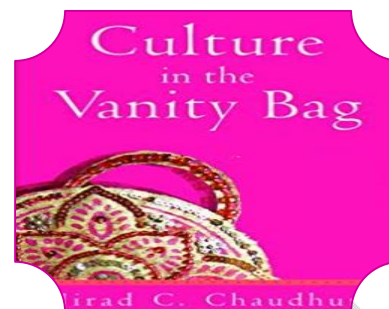




CULTURAL VANITY IN NIRAD C. CHAUDHURI'S CULTURE IN THE VANITY BAG

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ABSTRACT

Nirad C. Chaudhuri is a critic and interpreter. He stands as a great solitary and the most outstanding writer of prose during the post-independence period in India. He belonged to a tradition of prose writing in English in India that can be traced back to Raja Rammohan Roy. He stands as a towering literary personality in the domain of narrative non-fictional English prose. This paper makes an attempt to illustrate the prosperity of Indian traditional clothing, the influence of foreign invasions and the British rule which formulate revolutionized changes in clothes and costumes and losing the original traditional purpose of the clothing. Fashion becomes a passion at present. Fascinating toward fashions, the cultures or traditions are completely neglected. The cloths and costumes are madly adopted by the western countries. Most of Indians feel that wearing westernized dress in India is stylish and 'pride-felt' simply forgetting the use of the clothes or costumes. This study mainly focuses on the cultural and traditional degradation of cloths and costumes.

KEYWORDS: Clothing, Culture, Vanity, Costumes, Degradation, Civilization.

INTRODUCTION :

Nirad C. Chaudhuri's seventh book, **Culture in the Vanity Bag** which was published in 1976, is mainly about historical evaluation of costumes and seeks to illustrate their relationship with the different cultures that have been seen in India. It is a satirical description of the clothing and adornments. No Indian writer has not made any attempt about Indian clothes though it is very important in everyone's day to day life and has not observed the philosophy underlying them as Chaudhuri has made. The book is primarily an expression of Chaudhuri's interest in clothing as a form of art and culture. In the introduction, he gives an intrinsic connection between life and clothing and he believes one's clothes indicate one's interest in the life. Mr. Chaudhuri comments: "I believe implicitly that a man, who has lost interest in clothing and adornment, has lost interest in life" Mr. Chaudhuri wisely relates the life with the clothing that we wear. In olden days, when a queen gets anger on a king, she usually spends her times in 'darkrooms' by wearing black dress instead of charming attire which is symbol of 'sadness'. Most of the cases we see the people wearing beautiful clothes based on the occasions. It is mostly appreciable to Chaudhuri's forecasting about the clothing and relating to clothing with life. He is a keen and curious observer of life around him. He is able to relate his observations to his wide reading and historical scholarship and evolve a very interesting sartorial philosophy about Indians. Karnani Chetan named this book as "an exercise in erotics." The beauty of Indian women lie in the clothes they wear. India women are so charming and beautiful comparatively the women in other countries in which 'dressing' (mostly saree) is the most erotic. In this context, Chetan Karnani's comments are so much substantial.

Culture in the Vanity Bag is categorized into three main parts. In the first part of the book, Nirad C. Chaudhuri discusses various issues regarding clothing and offers a taxonomical break-up of the

evolutionary history of clothing in India. After offering a taxonomical picture of Indian costumes in general, he discusses the chief components of the typical Hindu costumes and examines the philosophy of clothing. He points out the close connection between jewellery and clothes and how ostentation is not considered by the Hindu woman as morally wrong.

In the second part of the book, Chaudhuri has discussed the conflicts and causes in various periods. He discusses the rejection of the Muslim costume, provides the information about liberal attitude developed by Indians towards the British clothing and the acceptance of the British dress, and discovers the causes of sartorial conflicts. The dislike which the wearers of one kind of clothing feel towards another is not anything special to India and finally He illustrates this hostility by taking the two groups of costumes (in India) namely, the Hindu costume and the Muslim costume.

The third part of the book, Chaudhuri gives a lot of exciting titillation. He discusses the battle of clothes which has been fought out from age to age in India. He finds the change of dressing in our politics due course of time. Later he turns to feminine clothing and fashions in contemporary India. He describes them with a special taste, elegance, aesthetic beauty and erotics. He discusses how the sartorial fashions become so unhealthy from the Indian point of view that they become matters necessitating police control.

As we all know, India is one of the civilized and cultured countries in the world. Every country respects Indian traditions, cultures and civilization. If we observe clothes and costumes of any country in the world, they have only one type of clothing style. But it is only India which has distinct traditional clothing for men and women for each and every state of India. For instance, the sari is traditional attire of women in Andhra Pradesh; the salwaar kameez is for the women in Punjab, the Mekhala Chadar for Assamese women and so on. However, all types of Indian clothing look very elegant and Indians wear them with a lot of pride. The festivities and other special occasions are the time when you can see maximum Indians donning their ethnic garb, be it sari, kurta pyjama or dhoti. Clothing in India varies widely and is closely related to local culture, religion and climate. The clothing for men and women traditionally is different from place to place and religion to religion.

CULTURE BEHIND THE COSTUME:

Chaudhuri says that the culture behind the costumes can be studied as a science like Physics or Chemistry. As a language is the dress of thought, Nirad uses this dress of thought very capably, effectively and gracefully on the dress and ornaments worn by the diverse peoples belonging to different regions, religions and races in the Indian subcontinent.

As a keen observer of Indian life, he has made every attempt to connect the Indian clothing and its history. Clothes are, undoubtedly, the external manifestations of the innermost cultural habits of the people adapting themselves to the peculiar geographical, social, religious and even political phenomena around them. He aptly says in the introduction of this book

"the evolution of clothing in India has been only a part of the historical evolution of the peoples of India, possessing similar features, following similar lines, and producing similar results"³.

Clothing becomes an important tool in any other human activity like politics, social and economic life, culture as embodied in literature or art could be as the man is identified with the dress in the function. Man is as important as his dress. It is not only speech, erect posture but also dress that differentiates man from the rest of the creatures in nature. The epigram, 'God made man, tailor made a gentle man' shows the importance of dress in man's life.

India is known for its hand-woven textiles, richly embroidered fabrics, and authentic drapes in exclusive designs. These clothes have also been praised by western civilization for centuries.

Indian men and women have always loved to dress up in their traditional costumes, attires and accessories during festivals and other occasions which are an integral part of Indian life. Recently, Indian costumes have been successful in attracting the attention of and capturing the global market. Indian clothing has been influenced by diverse cultural influences since time immemorial. The sari itself, historians say dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization which flourished in 2800-1800 BC, in the north-western part of India. In fact studies show that the men's dhoti is a prototype of the sari and both the sexes wore the former till the 14th century. The choli or the woman's blouse is believed to have come into existence with the various European colonial powers that once occupied a major portion of the Indian subcontinent. The British have influenced women's clothing in great extent. Indian high society ladies have started wearing long-sleeved blouses with frills, very similar to the Victorian upper garment, during the last 19th and early 20th centuries.

The first and foremost influence on Indian clothing and costume is of the Muslims. The Muslims imposed the Hindus to wear their clothing and the rejection of the Muslims costume by Indian Hindus. The most significant thing in the history of clothes is not that they have coexisted, nor that matter they have partially overlapped and intermingled but they have always stood in irreconcilable and unbridgeable antithesis. As India had been invaded and ruled by different foreign races, they had left their cultural influences on Indian culture.

Even the Muslim, the first invaders of India could not influence the Indian culture. The reason for the rejection of Muslim clothing in India is that the Hindus believe in non-sewn garments whereas the Muslims believe in sewn garments. More over Hindus do not encourage the proselytisation. The Hindus are not the people given to proselytizing. They do not want to transmit their culture to those who are not theirs by birth or in any case by a legal fiction of birth. If anything, they are positively in favour of withholding their way of life from non-Hindus. But the Muslim has left some traces over here. So the Hindu civilization is not only the highest civilization in the country. It is the only civilization which has irresistible political power behind it.

After twelfth century i.e. the conquest of India for second time by the Muslim, most of the Hindus have adopted the Muslim culture as the Muslim has created an open society. Anyone from any religion can accept the faith of the Muslims and afterwards he is accepted equal with the Muslim. So they try to encourage the adaptation of their clothes as well as their religion by the Hindus and they have encouraged the proselytisation and later on they forced the Hindu to adopt their culture.

Mr. Chaudhuri rightly pointed out that salwar and karmiz were originated from the Muslim culture. At the beginning, it was adopted by the Hindu-turned-Muslims. Later the North Indian Hindus started wearing the salwar and Karmiz. Now everywhere in India, it is found that most of the girls are wearing this sort of dressing. Moreover, the advent of women in employment makes the usage of these dresses enormously as the women feel very comfortable with slawar and karmiz.

As a religious policy, the Hindus do not like the use of Muslim clothes at all except by the way of self-denigration or contamination. Chaudhuri is perceptive enough to show the evolution of the sartorial battle between the Hindu and Muslim culture. He shows how, in spite of the initial Hindu hatred for the Muslim clothes, the Hindus - some of them at least - have adapted it for the purposes of pleasing the Muslim leaders and authorities in social life.

The second influence falls on the Indian clothes and costumes is of the British. During the British rule, the Hindus have confronted with a new problem; a set of foreign clothes again are brought into the country. The Hindus are forced to wear the clothes of the Muslims when they are ruled by the Muslims. The British don't force Indians to wear their dressing but Indians develop a liberal attitude towards the British clothing. Indians have followed the British culture as they have a positive outlook over the British. The reason is that, Indians felt, the British have rescued them from the oppression of the Muslim and from the political anarchy. The civilization of the West with its secular outlook has promised to release Indians from the prison of their hard-bound and primitive existence. So the Hindu does not

have pre-existing antipathy for the British as they have for the Muslims. So it is easier for them to adapt western clothing, among many other things from the west.

The Hindus, in spite of their religious rigidities, jump at the opportunity of imitating the British (or the Western) clothes for the purposes of fashionableness, snobbery and worldly success. But the British do not like Hindu imitation of their clothes as they think it to be equivalent of the contamination of the superior British culture by the inferior Hindu culture. The Hindus do not bother about the British superiority-complex at all as majority of Indians begin to feel like Chaudhuri. Mr. Chaudhuri comments on this in the preface of his *Autobiography*:

"To the memory of the British Empire in India which conferred subject hood on us but withheld citizenship; to which yet every one of us threw out the challenge: "Civvis Britannicus Sum" because all that was good and living within us was made, shaped, and quickened by the same British rule."

Consequently, the Hindus go on adapting the British clothes like suit, tie and hat for their social life, if not for their private, religious or sectarian life. The impetus for wearing the new foreign costume is not convincing out of compulsion as in the case of Muslim clothing but it comes from the Hindus themselves. One might easily say that imitation of the British clothes is the strongest aspect of the Westernization of Hindus. Among many effects of the British clothes on the Hindus is the growing Hindu tendency towards covering the body is one among many effects of the British clothes on the Hindus.

The evolution of Indian saris has started in Bengal. It is the wife of Satyendra Nath Tagore, the first Indian member of the Indian Civil Service and brother of the poet, Rabindranath Tagore, who introduces the new way of wearing the sari in Bengal. It is really an adaptation of the Gajarati (Parsi) manner with the addition of European adjuncts. So far as the sari itself is concerned, the new fashion of wearing it is a reversion to the Aryan manner which has fallen into disuse in Bengal. In fact, the struggle went on almost till the end of the First World War. Thus, in the first decade of the twentieth century, the Bengali Hindu society taken as a whole, the women are seen in two types of clothing: the old and scanty Bengali dress and the new Aryan-European costume.

The clothing bears on the most important prejudiced factor in clothing, its beauty, which is no less important than its cultural associations. Whenever men and women show pride in their own attire and their contempt for the others, they do so above all in the name of beauty and magnificence. The new Indian ruling class is snobbish in the interest of the meanest conceivable ugliness. There are differences between the Indian politicians and the Indian officials over many things. But they are allies in a new war which is a war of every form of ugliness on every form of beauty. It is an exceptional ugliness with an exceptional arrogance which poses the final question about clothes in contemporary India.

The situation which has been developing in India since Independence with an accelerated momentum of squalor with regard to clothing is much more untidy than what is inevitable in the mere heterogeneity of the clothes. What is seen today is an expanse of ugliness in which a casual and debased Westernization is being added to the degeneration of the different types of indigenous clothing.

"The bridegroom has a bright scarf or turban on his head and his face is covered with strings of jasmine hanging from a band passed round the head. If he is a Sikh he carries a curved scimitar under his arm. His small nephew sits behind him on the croup, tightly clasping his waist with his arms. The father stands by or walks along, his head in a pink turban."

The pure ugliness in what is the most glorious day for magnificence of clothes and elegance of appearance is dreadful. After independence, a tremendous change occurs in the way of dressing. All try to follow the English way of dressing as they want to show they are superior to others.

The clothing of our famous politicians gets influenced and changes. Mahatma Gandhi imposes the wearing of handspun and handwoven clothing to spiritualizing the activities of the Hindu politicians and nationalists. But the Hindu politicians rule out to wear this clothing; even handmade textiles can be

very beautiful. The enforcement of homespun in its coarsest and cheapest form has deprived the Hindu costume of its characteristic beauty, semi-nudity, achieved through flowing lines, graceful draping, and lightness. In stark contrast, a sharp and cutting angularity or an unrelieved rotundity marks the Hindu politician who observes the dress regulations of the Congress Party.

The Hindu costume has been added two of the ugliest imaginable adjuncts from non-Hindu families of clothing which add to the unattractiveness of the political costume. These are the so-called Gandhi cap and the so-called Jawaharlal waistcoat. The cap is an eroded form of the Muslim fur cap. The Muslims of India find that fur cannot be worn with comfort on the plains and therefore they convert the fur cap into a velvet or fine cotton cap with embroidered designs. The so-called Jawaharlal waistcoat is also an adaptation of a Muslim garment which is worn from the Balkans to Afghanistan. Chaudhuri says:

"When the miserly Congress Party had to prescribe headdress for its members it naturally hit upon the cap as the prototype which could be most easily degraded and cheapened. I was glad to learn that when Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh visited Jaipur, the Maharaja forbade the wearing of this cap at receptions and insisted on the Rajput turban, which, of course, is beautiful."

A RUTHLESS FASHION

Mr. Chaudhuri turns to womanly clothing and fashions in contemporary India. He describes them with a special taste, stylishness, visual beauty and erotics. They are becoming more and more splendid from day to day. They dress gracefully making delightful for the eye. Even the countrywomen are expensively dressed. Chaudhuri is of the opinion,

"a woman cannot be elegant externally without success in bringing about an internal transformation, an alchemy which gilds the personality with a gold that only the spirit can detect."

Women have not heard the saying that true art is concealment of art. Mr. Chaudhuri condemns at the absurd, extravagant and inartistic way of the dressing of Indian women. The extravagance of the denouncers is only inciting their objects to be extravagant in a far more efficient way. Western fashions are taken over from very inferior sources: The pictures of Miss World and from the western and Indian films. Many modern Indian women are cutting off their hair. They are sacrificing their luxuriant curls, not out of religious fervour or patriotic motive. It is due to the sheer imitation of the West. They follow the fashion as if they are real film stars but they look like the caricatures of Indian film stars.

Chaudhuri gives an absurd blow to the Hindu woman's love of erotic fashions. The woman in olden days got her blouse conveniently stitched in order to feed her baby. But the modern woman, quite contrary to the love of her umbilical cord, with their amorous fashions of aping the cine stars, get their blouses stitched exposing their luscious backs in 'V' shape or crescent shape to the lusty eyes of the on lookers. The beauty of clothes is to be supported by the beauty of human body. Chaudhuri shows how the Hindus have failed to achieve the necessary concordance between the body and the clothing. The linear beauty of woman when seen from a lateral angle depends a lot upon the poetic cascade of long hair. He says:

"If the women are like destroyers when seen from front, in their back view they are like great liners with throbbing sterns".
But the Hindu woman, as Chaudhuri deplores, has begun to spoil it by cutting her hair thus playing the sedulous ape to the western woman. He also shows the folly of the Hindu woman who instead of achieving a 'glossy finish' for her hair by oiling it turns it into 'horse hair', thereby, spoiling

the cranial beauty. Similarly, the Hindu woman's habit of powdering her face takes away the ivory look from her and turns her skin in to 'suede leather.' Chaudhuri says powdering the nose continually is not a natural practice with them, and its effect is certainly not felicitous:

"it makes their elegance mouldy, dampens their anger and extinguishes the waves of light which otherwise ripple away from their smiles."

The habit of painting the lips with red does not always produce the happy effect. The contrast between the red colour on the lips and the dark face of the Indian woman is so sharp that it creates a meretricious look. The growing habit of 'mammary and even mamillary ostentation' and 'the exhibition of the posterior' by the Hindu lady is deplorably ridiculous, sensual, ugly, provocative and shameless. Obviously, all these recent habits of the Indian-Hindu woman are shown by Chaudhuri to be old-fashioned and incompatible in the Indian context and produce a look of cheapness and vulgarity.

The eve-teasing and molestation of girls and women, which have been growing in the streets and on the university campuses in India are all directly or indirectly caused by the 'provocative' and 'glamorous' methods of feminine dressing or clothing, which have a touch of sensuality. Chaudhuri is very correct when he shows the connection between the cheapening of clothes and the vulgarity of the Indian film world. Then Chaudhuri shows how the Indian politician also has a large share in contributing to the sartorial ugliness of the people.

The entire world knew about '2012 Delhi gang rape' having involved a rape and fatal assault which is the root cause of Nirbhaya Act' in India. On this issue, one IPS officer from Kolkata commented that the main reason for eve-teasing or molestation is 'provocative dressing' worn by the women. One must understand that the ratio of sexual assault has been increased for last 5 to 6 years. It is because of showy and provocative dresses being worn by the women. In this context, we must appreciate Mr. Chaudhuri's forecasting warnings against women dressing in India and its consequences.

In this context, the parents and the teenagers must identify their roles and responsibilities over wearing dresses. The parents too should take blame because they allow their children to wear provocative clothing. The parents should not buy the provocative clothing to their children. If they go to shopping with their friends, parents should inspect their purchases. If the parents find their children wearing or buying those dresses, they should warn them. Parents should not think that wearing such dresses by their children as a fashion today. As parents, it is their responsibility to teach their children to respect themselves and to demand respect from others. When the children dresses are in provocative manner, they are inviting disrespect from men either young or old.

Teenagers too should be cautious and careful about selection and dressing up their clothes little bit today. Girls often wear the clothes which are so tight that it seems whether they can take breath or not. Teenagers should identify their age. They are not supposed to be sexy. Their dresses should give beauty appeal but not sexy appeal.

Culture in the Vanity Bag shows Chaudhuri's serious approach to the sartorial habits of Indians. He analyzes the philosophy of clothing in a very sophisticated manner armed with the historical sense. He has shown how the Hindus are casual and mindless in their imitation of the Muslim or British clothes and how they are not bothered about contradictions in their sartorial habits. Basavaraj S. Naikar says:

"The book is historical, analytical and satirical at the same **time and holds a mirror to Chaudhuri's microscopic** intelligence and incisive analysis"

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