CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

From patriarchy to postmodernity, fashion has positioned women in ways, which have become synonymous with being woman. The 'gender act' or 'doing femininity' is no longer an apolitical position and this dilemma is acted out impeccably through the act of fashioning the body. Fashion is a part of the culture of a society and culture is determined by the conduct of social actors. Fashion has come to be an important constituting element in the construction of class, gender, sexual and ethnic identities in a postmodern world.

The conflict theory of Simmel and our data enable us to explicate that one of the most significant functions of fashion is to articulate class positions. This is so especially in the case of stratified societies like India. However our fashion paradigm draws upon several approaches. These range from Bourdieu's theory of culture, Barthes' semiological analysis, to Baudrillard's postmodernism.

A study of fashion as a system of meanings enables us to understand that fashion is not just a superficial gloss or an ephemeral fad of a social group, rather it represents cultural forms, which are an articulation
of the structural characteristics of a society. With the emphasis on the break
down of binaries such as high and low, postmodernity values change itself
as beautiful. This ethic is consumed as the most valued goal in fashion,
whose essence is change for the sake of greater consumption thus fuelling
the machinery of capitalism with a logic which cannot be countered by
anything lesser then the system itself.

Baudrillard (1997) says 'fashion is the central logic of our consumer
society'. In a world where the referential and the real dissolve in an
enchanting play of floating signs, fashion embodies the processes of
simulation and the rule of the code. Rather then the real itself, Baudrillard
argues that fashion creates a world of representations or models of the real.
Fashion becomes the "Jouissance de L'arbitraire", at once exceeding the
purely economic domain even as it remains the highest expression of the
working of commodity capitalism. Because fashion is a code, it works at
the level of connotative analysis, signifying therefore the many layers of
social realities that are embedded in the social matrix. The exploration of
the fashion system and its use in the construction of identity is a relatively
new one. The antinomy that characterizes fashion embodied in the
patriarchal 'double bind' is the underlying problematic of feminist thought.
For the common man however fashion is essentially a reconciliation of
tradition and modernity. It is our project to analyse women's understanding and interpretation of fashion between these two dichotomies.

Dress is the essential tool of defining the gender binary and therefore constructing gender. There are three prominent related approaches in the construction of gender identity. The one is by feminist authors who seek to primarily 'get out' of fashion and who see the fashion system primarily as a means of patriarchal oppression. If we look at de Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex', Germaine Greer's 'Female Eunuch', Kate Millett's 'Sexual politics', Naomi Wolf's 'Beauty Myth' and Susan Faludi's 'Backlash', feminism has taken a strong position on the iconographic feminine image that is disruptive, oppressive and renders woman's subservience to man as nature's classification of gender.

Representations of Femininity and Masculinity play a central role in the formation of the subjectivity and sexuality of women and men. We understand ourselves as woman in relation to the social representation of what it means to be so in relation to historically and culturally specific definitions and constructions of femininity and masculinity. Both feminists and sociologists contend that our knowledge about these constructions is not inborn or inbuilt. We continuously learn and rehearse what it is to be 'woman' in a process of negotiating these symbolic representations of femininity and sexuality.
The second approach is that of Dorienne Kondo and Jennifer Craik. Craik and Kondo concentrate on the way society demands women to be aesthetically awakened and aesthetically produced subjects in other words doing fashion as a part of playing the script of perfect femininity. However the same patriarchal norms that dictate the rules of femininity to women, also condemn women doing fashion as frivolous, flighty, unintelligent and silly.

This paradoxical condemnation of fashion which Kondo calls 'the patriarchal double bind' can be seen as a part of social structure. The negative connotations arising out of the social condemnation is what we call 'Fashion Labelling'. Fashion labelling is therefore a part of social structure. Due to the labels that society puts on fashion, women as its subject do not acknowledge doing fashion, while either doing it or being kept away from doing it due to the traditional Indian mindset. This leads to the process of repressed fashion urges or the phenomenon which we have termed as "Fashion Repression".

Fashion Labelling and Fashion Repression can therefore be seen as a part of structure and process of a society that articulate the dichotomy of Essence/Appearance of which woman is the prime victim.
A third approach has been taken by Valerie Steele, the Editor of the 'Journal of Fashion Theory' and the author of 'Fetish' and Stella Bruzzi the author of 'Undressing Cinema'. Steele and Bruzzi contend that the Feminist condemnation of Fashion has made feminists join the traditional conflation: that while becoming 'potentially disruptive,' the vicissitudes of female dress ultimately undermine the women and render her subservience to (and the victim of) the man who retains his iconographic stability. Bruzzi and Steele contend that in the feminist thought a dangerous extrapolation is made that accentuation of femininity is a natural correlative of male rather than female fantasy.

The objective of the present study is essentially to elucidate the construction of femininity by the fashion system. Thus the present study is a study of culture in its relation to gender. The primary purpose is to understand the appearance of the construction of femininity and correlate it to the consumption of the images of femininity and the structural differences in society. There are several structural differences in the advanced capitalist societies of the West and India in terms of economy, education, religion etc., which makes the Indian case, new and interesting to explore. The following hypotheses have been advanced for the Indian case and tested as an exercise to examine fashion relations to the structure.
HYPOTHESES

1. Fashion is not monolithic. It is differentiated according to Class, Region, Religion, Educational Background etc. Differences in fashion consciousness reflect structural differences in society.

2. Differences in fashion consciousness reflect differences in norms of sexual and moral behaviour, which reflect structural characteristics.

3. Fashion Repression occurs because of Fashion labelling.


This research is divided into eight sections. The present chapter introduces the subject and gives a broad overview of the contents of the thesis. Primary and secondary objectives have been mentioned here as are the various approaches to be followed and hypotheses to be examined.

Chapter Two, is an expository exercise, which explains the nature of fashion by defining, contextualising and focusing on its facets. It points out the interrelation of fashion to culture as a signifying system.

Chapter Three, is an exegesis of the various theories of fashion put forth by mainstream sociologists. It elucidates the understanding of the function of fashion and a critical appraisal of these theories.
Chapter Four, is an attempt to understand femininity in the social construction of gender. Here we examine the eroticized, sexualized, narcissistic image of the female form produced by the fashion industry.

In Chapter Five, we explicate feminist theories in order to explain the feminist position regarding fashion. This position has undergone several changes in each succeeding decade since 1950 concomitant with the Hippy and punk movements. These have therefore also been reported in some detail.

Chapter Six, records cultural attitudes to fashion as an index of structural characteristics in Indian society. In doing so we have used Simmel's, Veblen's and Bordieu's theories of fashion as an articulation of class positions, the labelling theory of deviance of Howard S. Becker and the feminist positions on fashion as a tool of the patriarchal order in the oppression of women.

This study is a contribution to the sociological analysis of culture, and fills a gap, in an area which is relatively uncharted. Apart from the reasons stated for undertaking the present study, we believe that several of the findings of the study are of some interest.
Firstly, we believe that we have been successful in recording a widespread cultural phenomenon regarding fashion namely Fashion Repression.

Secondly we have, by the use of labelling theory, succeeded in explaining the mechanics of the phenomenon and of its relations to the structural characteristics of society. In particular we have been able to link and examine the relation of cultural attitude vis-à-vis fashion to class positions.

Thirdly, we have better understood the effect of sexual repression on cultural attitudes regarding the fashion system and the mechanism through which it works.

Fourthly we have better understood the effect of gender consciousness of the lack of it on attitudes regarding Fashion and the Fashion System.

Finally, We have examined the applicability of various theories developed in the West to the Indian scenario; of these the theories which had maximum applicability were the class theories.