

The Influence of Hindi Cinema on the Sari Blouse

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Abstract: In the ancient past, fashion changed gradually, wherein the royalty initiated new trends that were adopted by the masses over a period of time. Nowadays, fashion changes rapidly owing to the fast paced technology and topical information available at the click of a button. Consumers have access to fashion knowledge through different channels of communication. In India, Bollywood plays an important role in fashioning new trends. The celebrities especially Bollywood actors are fashion innovators, who serve as brand ambassadors for fashion designers and are often visible on the fashion ramps.

Sari is a classic unstitched, draped garment accompanied with a blouse that marks the identity of an Indian woman. In the 20th century, the attire has evolved with Indian icons setting trends that have been followed by the masses. The paper attempts to examine the influence of Hindi cinema on the classic sari blouse ensemble. The research aims to document the sari blouse trends from the 1950s till the 21st century, through an in-depth visual observation conducted by reviewing images of prominent personalities retrieved from popular Bollywood films and photo archives of museums and periodicals, and designer collections. To acquire an extensive understanding on the subject, personal interaction was carried out with fashion experts from different fields.

Keywords: Sari, Blouse, Style, Trends, Bollywood, Icons

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I. INTRODUCTION

The most typical attire that marks the identity of the Indian woman across the globe is the unstitched draped garment, sari that is teamed with the underskirt called the petticoat and a short fitted blouse known by various names in different parts of India. The most broadly used term for the blouse is the 'choli'. The other indigenous words for the blouse are 'ravikalu' in Andhra Pradesh, 'ravikkai' in Tamil Nadu and 'kuppas' or 'kupsa' from 'kurpasaka' in Karnataka. The sari and blouse are acknowledged worldwide as the representative costume of the Indian woman [1].

The origin of the Indian sari blouse can be drawn from the ancient past, wherein unstitched breast bands from the Vedic period gradually transformed into tailored tight-fitting bodices generally called the 'choli', worn either with the 'ghagra' or sari. According to historians, the fitted blouse along with the sari was the costume of the women from Central and Southern regions of India, except in Orissa, Bengal and extreme South, where the sari was worn without the blouse. It was during the British rule that the traditional sari and 'choli' underwent modifications in an endeavour to meet up with the standards laid down by the missionaries and conform to the dressing styles of the British women. The European influence brought about distinctive changes in the sari drape, addition of a petticoat and a sari blouse that incorporated elements from the Victorian dress like frills, ruffles, pleats and decorative trims. The transformed sari blouse was widely adopted by the educated Indian women who were socially active with increased participation in pursuits outside the realm of their homes.

By the 20th century, the sari along with the blouse and petticoat became the universal dress for the Indian women. The increasing social and political participation of women led to the introduction of a multitude of blouse and jacket styles [2]. Changes in the sari blouse were visible during the Indian Freedom Movement, wherein the sari blouses worn by women freedom fighters were made of hand spun and hand woven 'Khadi' fabric that gained precedence over the imported fabric.

The changing fashions over the 20th century has witnessed a variety of style variations in the sari blouse by way of fabrics – woven or embroidered, different necklines, varying sleeve and blouse length, and method of fastening. A myriad of styles, from modest necklines to halter necks and noodle straps, full length sleeves to sleeveless, in diverse fabrics like lace, georgette, knits, brocade and even leather are available for the young, modern women of today. Over the years, several factors have contributed in shaping the Indian fashion and influencing women's clothing preferences. Evolving communication channels and predominantly Bollywood fashions are noteworthy influences that have impacted the styling of the sari blouse ensemble, popularizing distinctive trends at a particular time in the past till the present times.

II. METHODOLOGY

The qualitative approach was undertaken to map the evolution of the sari blouse, which was achieved through content analysis of secondary data. The sources of information included publications like books and periodicals, pertinent dissertations and museum archives. The trends of the sari blouse were documented from the post-independent period, as it is considered the onset of the golden period of Indian cinema. An in-depth visual study was carried out decade-wise by observing images of prominent personalities retrieved from Bollywood movies and database available with museums and periodicals, as well as designer collections. To gain a better understanding on the subject, personal interaction was also undertaken with textile and fashion experts from diverse fields such as textile and costume historians, fashion writers and editors, and designers. The visual data was analysed and inferred, keeping in view information obtained from secondary sources and viewpoints of subject specialists.

III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In order to assess the sari blouse trends post-independence and study the impact of Bollywood and Television, a detailed visual analysis was carried out from 1950 to 2010. The following section has been categorized decade-wise to examine the sari blouse fashion trends prevailing at a particular time.

1950 - 59

Post-independence, the sari continued to be a symbol of national identity, recognised across the globe. The changing role of the post-independent elite women as politicians, actors, musicians and dancers, and the growth of the new middle class enhanced the appeal of the sari [3]. Industrialisation paved the way for mill-made saris that were favoured over the simple understated khadi saris, popularised during the Indian freedom movement. Although modernisation was promoted, the Indian Government made efforts to promote hand woven fabrics and Indian clothing styles. Hand woven saris from different regions of India were also endorsed by eminent women like Puppul Jayakar and Indira Gandhi. The visual study of the sari blouse of the 1950s verifies that one section of the urban society donned the machine made saris worn with mismatched blouses, whereas the other segment comprising of politicians, intellectuals and artists preferred the hand woven saris with blouses that were either plain coloured or in patterned handloom fabric, matching to the sari design.

During this decade, the dress of urban India was influenced by the growth of the film industry that portrayed heroes and heroines in distinctive clothing styles. Indian cinema was a dominating factor that became an important means of recreation, and the sari blouse styles donned by the leading ladies on the big screen were gradually adopted by the masses. Fashion writer Meher Castelino (personal communication, 1 October 2014) gives the example of actress Nadira's blouse baring the back as seen in the movie *Shree 420* (1955) that became a big hit among the people. Besides movies, women were also exposed to new fashion through magazines like *Eve's Weekly* and fashion shows. There was also the launch of a boutique by *Eve's Weekly* that displayed Indian garments including embroidered blouses designed by costume designer, Bhanu Athaiya [4]. In the 1950s, the alleviation of the economic and social standing of the women impacted the sari blouse styles, which became more trendy and contemporary in nature.

1960-69

The 1960s witnessed the growing trend of the working class women, who were acquainted to latest fashion through different media, predominantly Hindi cinema as well as English films, and fashion magazines like *Femina*. It is expressed that the then editor of *Femina*, Dr. K.D. Jhangiani was instrumental in conducting joint fashion shows and beauty contests as an all-India event, followed by participation of winners in international beauty competitions [4]. Exposure to western culture and fashion images brought about socio-cultural changes, influencing lifestyles and clothing styles of the urban women. Though the 'salwar kameez' gained prominence, the newly styled sari drape and modifications in the blouse were visible in mid-1960s, thus ascertaining the role of costume designers like Bhanu Athaiya and Leena Daru, who styled the leading film stars.

In the sixties, Bollywood mastered romantic films, and actresses like Sharmila Tagore, Mumtaz and Sadhna became the trendsetters [5]. The tailors were requested to copy styles from images in Mumbai magazines. An array of sari blouse styles was being preferred by women, mainly guided by fashion showcased by Hindi movie stars. An example is the 'butterfly knot blouse' worn by Sharmila Tagore that became a style statement [6]. There is also mention of hipster saris teamed with smaller blouses that had narrow shoulders and deep cut backs [7]. Film star Mumtaz in the Hindi movie, *Bramhachari* popularised the hipster sari, that was tucked below the navel and draped twice around the hips. It became widely known as the 'Mumtaz sari'. From the visual analysis it can be drawn that in the early 1960s, the sari blouse was simple and understated with sleeves till the elbow, which later became sleeveless, and towards the end of the sixties became more audacious with emphasis on the back and revealing a lot of skin.

According to fashion writer, Sathya Saran (personal communication, 20 November 2013), the sixties saw very tight blouses with 'katori' stitching that accentuated the figure, and the sleeveless blouse made popular through cinema was now acceptable for 'good girls' to show off their arms. The visual analysis of sari blouses worn by celebrities corroborates the trend for sleeveless blouses with wider necklines as well as low cut back finished with a fabric bow.

1970-79

In the 1970s, the sari reigned supreme as synthetic saris became popular with the masses. The 100% polyester wash and wear saris were manufactured and promoted by brands like Garden Silks, Bombay Dyeing, Khatau Group and Vimal by Reliance Industries. The printed or plain synthetic saris preferred by working women as well as homemakers, were teamed with solid coloured blouses, matching to the dominating colour of the sari. The see-through quality of the synthetic chiffon and georgette saris made the short and fitted blouse more visible and noticeable.

The visual analysis of the sari blouses of the seventies cites examples of knotted blouse styles showing off more skin, sported by popular film stars. Prof. (Dr.) Sudha Dhingra (personal communication, 10 September 2013) is of the view that blouse styles such as short puff sleeved blouses and deep neck blouses with ties in front became popular, as donned by actors Mumtaz and Zeenat Aman respectively. Sathya Saran (personal communication, 20 November 2013) adds that the knotted blouse became popular during the seventies. She elaborates that though actress Dimple Kapadia had teamed up a knotted blouse with a skirt, it found a fresh lease as a sari blouse.

The halter neck sari blouses were preferred by the socially active women daring to bare, whereas the comeback trend for puff sleeve blouses from the 1930s was accepted by women who emulated actress Jaya Bhaduri [4]. The visual study of sari blouse styles also substantiates the prevalence for both daring halter neck blouses as well as modest short sleeved blouses, either fitted or puffed.

1980-89

In the 1980s, there was a renewed interest in the handloom sari by the intellectuals, artists and politicians who understood the importance and uniqueness of Indian textile heritage. According to the visual analysis, the traditional handloom saris were coordinated with plain blouses in matching or contrasting colours to the sari.

The eighties also highlight specific blouse styles displayed by Bollywood stars that were promptly copied by the masses. There were changes in blouse styles, and a new trend was initiated by every actress [8]. Writer and textile specialist, Sabita Radhakrishna (personal communication, 27 June 2013) recalls style icon, Rekha's magyarsleeved sari blouse with a mudpot neckline, high at the back and spreading out to form a scoop at the front, as donned by her in the movie *Silsila* (1981). The 'Rekha sari blouse' gained popularity among the people. The chiffons and crepes were the fabrics favoured by Bollywood stars [5]. The visual study of blouses indicates actresses like Rekha, Dimple Kapadia and Sridevi in plain coloured chiffon saris with matching coloured blouses in distinctive styles. Some examples are Parveen Babi's blouse with scooped neckline as seen in the movie 'Arpan' (1983); Dimple Kapadia's blouse with criss-cross strings that reveals the back, as sported in the movie 'Saagar' (1985); and Sridevi's sleeveless blouse, as donned in the movie 'Chandini' (1989).

In the 1980s, ethnic fashion was embraced by the elite in order to differentiate themselves from the west [9]. TV serials like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are attributed for making the 'ghagra-choli' fashionable during the 1980s [4]. During this time fashion heightened due to upward social mobility, expanding middle class consumers, Bollywood and television portraying trends that reached out to the masses, and the growth of the fashion industry.

1990-99

In the 1990s, Bollywood continued to be the key influencing factor dictating fashion trends that were quickly adopted by the masses. In the early 1990s, the embroidered 'choli' blouse, nearly backless worn with solid coloured saris became a rage with the masses, when Madhuri Dixit flaunted the blouse in record breaker numbers like 'dhak dhak' in the movie *Beta* (1992) and the popular, yet provocative 'choli ke peeche kya hai' from the movie, *Khalanayak* (1993). In 1994, Madhuri yet again donned an embroidered backless choli with a purple sari in the film 'Hum Aapke Hain Kaun', which became very popular among the masses. The knock-offs of this ensemble were stitched by tailors to cater to customers in large numbers.

In the nineties, fashion designers also started showing keen interest in designing costumes for Bollywood movies, thus amalgamating Bollywood glamour with fashion. In 1995, designer Manish Malhotra gave a makeover to leading Bollywood actresses, and introduced the sensuous sari in solid coloured chiffons and nets that was paired with low neck slinky blouses in delicate lace fabrics. The visual study cites the example

of Kajol's short sleeved blouses in lace fabric teamed with matching coloured plain chiffon saris, as viewed in the movie 'Kuch Kuch Hota Hai' (1998).

It was in the early nineties, when the broadcasting industry opened up new horizons with the onset of the satellite television that led to the entry of foreign channels and thus exposure to global fashion. Around the same time beauty pageants became even more popular, following the success of beauty queens Sushmita Sen and Aishwarya Rai as Miss Universe and Miss World respectively. There was admiration for the young confident Indian women, who set forth new concepts of beauty and fashion, enthused by the west. The women of the nineties were comfortable to show their skins and flaunt their bodies. There was experimentation with the sari, and it was resurfacing as an 'erotic wrap' that reveals and at the same time conceals [9].

It has been observed that towards the end of the 20th century, the experimental upper class complemented their saris with sensual blouses like halter neck and corset styles. However the middle class ingrained with strong Indian moralities preferred less revealing raised neckline blouses with their sari. According to costume historian Ms. Archana Shastri (personal communication, 17 September 2014), the nineties ushered in the new image of the liberated woman freely adapting from her global counterparts as well as the 'on par' and unisexual look as reflected in the structured and corset styles created by modern designers.

2000-10

In the 21st century, Bollywood remains an important factor influencing Indian fashion. The popular film stars are styled by designers, and are also show stoppers to display designer collections on the ramp. There are many designers like Neeta Lulla, Manish Malhotra and Sabyasachi Mukherjee, whose creations are visible on the screen as well as on the runway. Meher Castelino (personal communication, 1 October 2014) elucidates that in the beginning of the new millennium, the retro look was brought back by period movies like Devdas (2002) and Parineeta (2005). Blouses with long sleeves or at least reaching the elbows became fashionable. Fashion icon of the 21st century, actress Vidya Balan styled by designer Sabyasachi, is known for her backless or deep cut blouses baring the back with full or three quarter sleeves, teamed with traditional handwoven saris.

At the start of the 21st century, television also became a major source of entertainment that reached out to both the urban and rural masses of India. Popularity of daily soaps on air like 'Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi' (2000-2008), 'Kahaani Ghar Ghar Ki' (2000-2008) and 'Kasautii Zindagii Kay' (2001-2008) and the fashion portrayed by favourite characters was promptly followed by the masses. Designer Nim Sood, known for her expertise in styling TV actors according to the character enacted by them, introduced innovative blouse styles on the idiot box. The stylist's one-shoulder blouse design became an instant hit with the public. The sari blouse ensembles sported by favourite soap characters like Parvati, Prema and Akshara were retailed in their names and preferred by the masses.

In 2003, an eye catching blouse style was the noodle strap blouse, a signature style of TV presenter and cricket show anchor, Mandira Bedi. There is mention of Sushmita Sen's sleeveless blouse with a low back depicted in the movie 'Main Hoon Na' (2004) that gave ideas to women to appear sensuous by making changes in their sari blouse [8]. In 2008, the 'bikini choli' became fashionable when actress Priyanka Chopra donned the style in the song 'desi girl' from the movie 'Dostana'.

In the 21st century, the metamorphosis of the sari and the accompanying 'choli' blouse has instilled interest in the younger generation who is keen to wear saris with a blouse that is more westernized in styling. Further leading actresses and fashion icons like Sonam Kapoor, Priyanka Chopra and Deepika Padukone dressed in chic sari styles have had an impact on the new age women. Sabita Radhakrishna (personal communication, 27 June 2013) affirms that over the years, film stars have influenced sari trends, and they continue to do so in the 21st century.

IV. CONCLUSION

Over the years, the definition of modesty has changed. The sari blouse ensemble has become more revealing and glamorous. It is analysed that Bollywood has been one of the most important influences on Indian women's fashion. Over the decades the sari blouse styles displayed by leading actresses of Indian cinema have trickled down to the masses. The strong connect between Bollywood and fashion is evident, a resource to gain insight into the Indian socio-cultural beliefs and values. In the 21st century, the Bollywood stars are the fashion icons, who are styled by leading fashion designers and serve as show stoppers to showcase designer collections on the ramp. Television has also served as an important medium to communicate fashion to the masses. The diverse sari blouse styles donned by well-known television personalities are readily emulated by both urban and rural segments of the society.

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