THREADS OF IDENTITY: A METHODOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF COSTUME DESIGN IN INDIAN CINEMA AND ITS REFLECTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY AND SOCIETAL NORMS

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ABSTRACT
Reflecting the vast diversity of India's communities, it can be observed by the costumes worn in the Indian cinema are of fundamental importance for the development of cultural identities and social norms. In this work, through emphasizing how clothing is used to express specific cultural stories and beliefs of ideology, this research adds to the layered function that costume design serves to represent traditional and contemporary values. The long history of various fields is manifested in traditional dress, often bordered by historical meaning and act as social status, gender, and community group marker. On the other hand, contemporary Indian filmic garments, for the most part, question and recontextualize these venerable norms and exhibit a style of hybridity consistent with evolving socio-cultural values. In addition, the representation of the characters through costumes in various Indian narratives offers information on the broader dynamics between tradition and modern values, which affects the understanding of the spectators of their cultural heritage and social expectations. This exploration underlines the importance of costume design as an essential element in the cinematographic representation of identity, which finally demonstrates its deep impact on the psychological and cultural frameworks of Indian society. Through this lens, the analysis emphasizes the relevance of costume design in the configuration of contemporary Indian cinema and its continuous evolution.
Keywords: Costume Design, Indian Cinema, Cultural Identity, Societal Norms, Bollywood, Visual Storytelling

Introduction

Costume design in Indian cinema acts as a potent vehicle for reflecting and constructing cultural identity as well as social values, demonstrating the complexity of the intersections of visual styles and social narratives. Costumes, an essential component of cinema, enhance the visual appeal of a film but can also convey additional meaning about the history, the social stratification, and the cultural nuances of the characters being portrayed. The affiliation between the design of costumes and cultural identity is noticeable in a country such as India, which represents a diverse range of regional, religious, and historical contexts that all contribute to the culturally rich visual of costumes carrying social implications with both local and contemporary influences.

Historically, Indian cinema has depicted many cultural narratives, appealing to the audience at the emotional and cerebral levels. For example, in the portrayal of characters from varying socio-economic backgrounds, the design of costume functions to visually narrate identity and context. The hero, or protagonist, may wear a costume that displays a customary or traditional configuration of dress that connects to their cultural lineage, whereas the anti-hero, villain, or contemporary character may wear costumes that indicate a rupture in these conventions, signifying a shift in cultural norms. The distinction of costume suggests that processes of transformation are occurring within Indian society. This distinction notes that costumes can maintain and challenge the existing cultural norms.

Additionally, the role of Bollywood and regional films cannot be overlooked in the formatting and contextualization of social accounts directly through the vehicles of costume. Indeed, traditional cinema utilizing contemporary and global fashion trends often leads to a renewed idea of beauty and opportunity for youth. As the characters present in films wear contemporary looks, not only do they adopt current styles, but they may also serve to negotiate traditional values and modern aspirations that react to social change more broadly. Historical films utilize costumes authentic to a certain time in history but are also a way for the public to engage with the past to understand their heritage and their identity collectively. Costume design engages gender standards, which are especially unique in the cinematographic space; female characters are often represented through an empowerment as well as objectification lens, which is a tension that exists in social norms. The costumes characters wear or do not wear mean empowerment through modern clothes but also still perpetuates as a strength of a traditional female

idealism through historical costume. It is this tension of design that demonstrates how costume design engages the individual journey and contributes to a much larger social discourse within the genre.

Research Questions

- What is the impact of Indian film costumes on cultural identity?

- In what way do they challenge or reinforce social norms?

- How have Indian film costumes changed over time?

- How are Indian film costumes different from or like filmmaking in other countries?

Scope of Study

The research examines Bollywood and regional Indian cinema with an analysis of costumes as represented in historical films, contemporary films like *'Queen'*, and independent films. The study examines the visual aesthetics of the costumes, participant interpretations, and the social and cultural contextual meaning of costumes.

Literature Review

Bhaumik (2018) argues that postcolonial modernity in Bollywood is mediated through gendered costume choices, blending tradition with global fashion.

Mankekar (2015) examines how streetwear in films like *Gully Boy* reflects urban youth's negotiation of class and identity.

Dwyer (2014) discusses how Bollywood costumes create a public fantasy of India, shaping global perceptions of Indian culture.

Wilkinson-Weber (2014) argues that costumes in Bollywood influence mainstream fashion trends, shaping societal perceptions of beauty and style and also highlights the cultural hybridity in Bollywood costume design, reflecting India's postcolonial identity.

Ganti (2012) explores Bollywood's global expansion, noting how Western aesthetics and high-fashion brands have integrated into costume design.

Methodology

Qualitative Study:

- Visual Ethnography: Analysis of color, fabric, silhouette, and historical accuracy in selected films.

- Case Studies: Examination of films from different periods and genres.

- Audience Perception Surveys: Understanding how costumes shape cultural and emotional engagement.

Films Analyzed:

- Historical Narrative: *Jodhaa Akbar* (Gowariker, 2008) - Representation of Mughal and Rajput traditions.

- Contemporary Film: *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) - Urban streetwear and class struggle.

- Regional Cinema: *Malayalam and Tamil films* - Unique representation of local identities.

Case studies

Jodhaa Akbar (Gowariker, 2008): Historical Costume as Cultural Representation

Directed by: Ashutosh Gowariker

Costume Designer: Neeta Lulla

Background & Context:

Jodhaa Akbar is a historical epic set in the 16th century that depicts the marriage alliance between Mughal Emperor Akbar and Rajput princess Jodhaa Bai. The film's design of costumes is important in showing the splendour, cultural differences, and representations of political significance of the period.

Key Costume Elements:

Jodhaa's Attire:

Jodhaa's saffron and red lehengas represent Rajput cultural customs, as red is historically associated with marriage, prosperity, and femininity in Hindu practices. Her ensemble features heavy gold jewelry, Kundan work, and Bandhani fabrics, which illustrate Rajastan's textile history. Jodhaa's head is covered with an odhani (veil) for most of the film to further establish her status as a royal Rajput woman, which is a culturally relevant representation of modesty and respect.

Akbar's Regal Costumes:

Akbar's clothing comprises garments made of emerald, green, and deep blue, and robes embroidered in gold, which symbolize the authority of the Mughal empire. His silk and velvet sets indicate the Persian-inspired fashion characteristics that were also adopted by the Mughals. Decadent turbans (bejeweled) and shoes (embroidered) were also indicative of his royal standing.
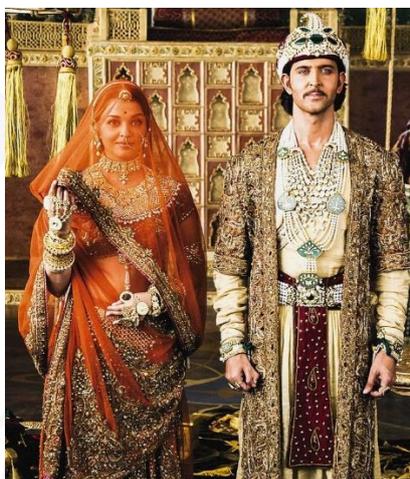

Fig.1 Jodha and Akbar's Costumes
Image Courtesy: https://www.reddit.com/r/BollywoodFashion/comments/15ujpid/aishwarya_and_hrithik_in_jodha_akbar_costume/

Symbolism & Cultural Significance:

The visible difference between Rajput and Mughal clothing highlights the cultural and religious divide between Jodhaa and Akbar. As Jodhaa slowly accepts Mughal practices, her costumes slowly change & begin to incorporate Mughal embroidery but still include Rajputana features. The mixture of Hindu and Muslim dress styles in her wedding dress identifies with one of the themes of the film, unity amid diversity.

Audience & Critical Reception:

The movie was praised for its historical accuracy in the costumes, which added to the spectacle of the Mughal-Rajput period for the viewers. However, some historians went on to question the accuracy of some individual pieces of jewelry. This certainly emphasized the need for a historian to delve into research into the historical representation of costumes.

Gully Boy (Akhtar, 2019): Streetwear as a Reflection of Class Struggles and Youth Identity

Directed by Zoya Akhtar

Costume Designer: Poornamrita Singh

Background & Context:

Gully Boy is about a young boy named Murad who is an aspiring rapper from the slums of Mumbai. The film is set in contemporary Mumbai and follows Murad as he deals with class issues and socio-economic challenges while expressing his emotions through music. Costumes play an important role in the film, highlighting class differences, evolving character, and teenage rebellion.

Key Costume Elements:

Murad's Streetwear Evolution:
In the opening scenes, Murad wears large, hooded sweatshirts, loose jeans, and cheap sneakers, consistent with the social position of the lower-middle class and with his goal of fitting into the hip-hop subculture. His clothing palette consists of dark, muted tones, embodying his emotional repression and a feeling of being invisible to society. As he gains confidence in the world of rap, he shifts to sleeker silhouettes, branded sneakers, and layered street style, signifying self-empowerment, a break from social constraints.

Safeena's Traditional Yet Rebellious Attire:
Safeena, who is Murad's love interest, sports traditional pastel colors with a salwar kameez outfit that signify her middle-class background and conservative family beliefs. Although her clothing is conservative, her bright, red lipstick, dearth of accessories, and fervent persona is atypical of a meek Muslim woman. The dupatta that is commonly associated with her character is a prop for aggression or rebellion, specifically during her moments of agency.

Fig.2 Murad and Safeena's Costumes

Image Courtesy: *https://www.filmfare.com/news/bollywood/zoya-akhtar-shares-pic-of-ranveer-singh-siddhant-chaturvedi-vijay-varma-as-gully-boy-turns-4_-56945.html*

Symbolism & Cultural Significance:
Murad, moving from affordable streetwear to custom, high-end hip-hop fashion, showcases his switch from a destitute slum dweller to an artist finding comfort in his own identity. The juxtaposition of the family's traditional clothing (Safeena) with urban streetwear (Murad) shows the clash between traditional family expectations of conservativism with youth culture/post-modernism that is not bound by millennial forms of conservativism.

Audience & Critical Reception:
The film received acclaim for its authentic representation of urban street culture in India, with critics noting that the costume design realistically reflected Mumbai's underground hip-hop culture.

Regional Cinema: A Contrast with Bollywood's Grandiosity
While Bollywood pays homage to spectacle and glamour in costume, regional cinema—especially in Malayalam and Tamil films—asks for groundedness and cultural authenticity as a preference.

Malayalam Cinema: Costumes as a Medium of Realism

Malayalam films such as *Kumbalangi Nights* (Narayanan, 2019) and *Maheshinte Prathikaaram* (Pothan, 2016) feature costuming based on realism rather than cinematic punctuation. In Kumbalangi Nights, the characters wear

unembellished cotton lungis, faded shirts, and polished footwear, reinforcing the working-class authenticity. The lead female character, Baby, wears understated makeup and brilliant cotton sarees, standing in stark contrast to highly styled Bollywood heroines.

Fig.3 Scene from the movie Maheshinte Prathikaaram
Image Courtesy: https://www.thenewsminute.com/news/uma-maheswara-ugra-roopasya-telugu-remake-maheshinte-prathikaram-out-ott-129711

Tamil Cinema: Traditional Costumes and Cultural Representation

Tamil movies such as *Kaala* (Ranjit, 2018) and *Ponniyin Selvan* (Ratnam, 2022) have a strong investment in traditional South Indian clothing. In Kaala, Rajinikanth wears black dhotis to symbolize revolution and Dalit assertion; the same black dhotis are contrasted with the upper-class antagonist's white clothing. Ponniyin Selvan recovers the costume history of the Chola dynasty through temple jewelry and Kanjeevaram silk, as well as saving some historically human ventilation.

Fig.4 Poster of Ponniyin Selvan movie
Image Courtesy: https://www.thenewsminute.com/news/uma-maheswara-ugra-roopasya-telugu-remake-maheshinte-prathikaram-out-ott-129711

Discussion

In Indian cinema, the design of the costume serves as a living cultural mirror, representing the ongoing objects of rules and identities of the society. The visual stories made through costume tell us something about the variety and complexity of representations of gender, class, and regional identity in the company. Costumes are presented not only to strengthen, develop, or challenge the respective identity of the character but also to reinforce or contest the socially dominant norms.

Through an analysis of visual culture, we may engage in a deeper exploration of costume design regarding social expectations and public perceptions. The costume design-social identity-narrative intersection allows for a deeper analysis of characters and their placement within the environment. The

visual narratives may be interrogated to explore the narratives of aspiration, tradition, and resistance that permeate and shape Indian society. Therefore, in addition to being an aesthetic component of the film event, costume design is an important part of the ongoing dialogue about cultural identities and social values in Indian cinema. Through methodological canvasses, engagement with costume design is central to the analysis of cinema within cultural identities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the costume design in Indian cinema serves a fundamental function in showcasing cultural identity, providing a vibrant tapestry that conveys the varying narrations particular to the subcontinent. Given its precise crafts and aesthetic choices, costume design reflects tradition and regional identities but also modifies and adapts to relate to contemporary social constructs. The transformation of fashion reflective in the films characterizes changing paradigms of India, revealing the dialogue between tradition and modernity.

The design of the costume thus functions as a potent cultural signifier that shapes public consciousness, as they model the characters and their narratives within the cinematic landscape. Even as the filmmakers and designers contend with the intricacies of the representation, the costumes serve as the pivot points that immerse the public in the diversity of identities within India. The interactive dimension of fashion and representation within cinema shows that the costume is not just a visual embellishment but an intimate commentary on social issues, genre roles, and cultural expectations.

The ongoing evolution of costumes in Indian cinema signifies an important cultural shift; it exhibits the personal aspirations and apprehensions of a society. Ultimately, it enhances the viewer's investment in the story on screen and enables us to better appreciate the nuances of cultural identity in Bharat, thereby situating costume design as part of both the story on screen and social position.

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