



sultry and sensuous: the seduction of the sari...

WHEN we were merely girls of seven or eight, my cousin Sonia and I used to love to imitate our mothers in our games; their friendship, their love for life, their laughter, their loving tantrums with our fathers, but mostly their elegance and the stylish art of wearing saris. We were so fond of this impersonation that we literally played wearing saris that were hung on the clothes line in the huge open veranda at our grandmother's house.

It was a real comical scene. Half of the six yards of cloth was stuck on the line by a wooden peg, while we pulled on the flowing half to create makeshift aanchals, all the time standing under the sun, we two played 'bhabis'. Oh, we also plaited the dupattas hanging around the line and wore them on our heads to emulate braids. So much was our love for saris and playing adults.

I guess all little girls of Bengali mothers go through this phase at least once, because interestingly my eight year old is demanding me to add few more to her already existing sari wardrobe.

I think this fascinating piece of cloth has this hypnotising effect on all of us sub-continental girls. I remember this Jamdani walla who used to visit our mothers with beautiful saris stacked in his canvas bag. What a festivity it would be when he displayed each one with pride while the ladies went crazy picking the ones they liked.

The sari has often been described as 'the apparel that covers all...yet reveals all'. What is it about this length of cloth wrapped around a woman's body that adds so much allure? Visitors from distant kingdoms and empires to this part of the globe since time immemorial have been tantalised by bewitching women clad in saris.

Legend has it that when the beautiful Draupadi, wife of the Pandavas, was lost to the enemy clan in a gambling duel, the Lord Krishna promised to protect her virtue. The lecherous victors, intent on "bagging" their prize, caught one end of the diaphanous material that draped her so demurely, yet seductively. They continued to pull and unravel, but could reach no end. Virtue triumphed yet again in this 5,000-year-old Indian epic, the Mahabharat.

Legend, fantasy, history or fact, it is the first recorded reference to the enduringly attractive sari - the longest, most popular style in the history of women's fashion. The traditional six-yard sari, however, is a classic and allows for generous pleating and draping around the body and over the shoulder - almost Grecian in its elegance.

The basic draping of a sari, the folding, tucking and pleating, beyond that, the sari is a Bengali woman's statement to the world. It could be of shimmering silk

or the finest gauzy cotton. Perhaps a pastel-hued solid colour or a riot of woven flowers. It may even be embroidered with golden threads, or finished with a richly tasselled border.

It speaks of romance or riches, of sobriety or gaiety, of sophistication or innocence. Men are intrigued by the demure floor-length attire and tantalising display of a bare midriff in the back. It is said that a sari rarely fails to flatter a woman, making her feel fragile and feminine.

It is an instant fashion, created by the hands of the wearer and subject to none of the vagaries and changes that plague the fashions of the western world. The success of the sari through all the centuries is attributed to its total simplicity and practical comfort, combined with the sense of luxury a woman experiences.

"The sari, it is said, was born on the loom of a fanciful weaver. He dreamt of woman. The shimmer of her tears. The cascade of her tumbling hair. The colours of her many moods. The softness of her touch. All these he wove together. He couldn't stop. He wove for many yards. And when he was done, the story goes, he sat back and smiled and smiled and smiled," narrates an ardent fan of the apparel.

Actually like mentioned earlier the women love to wear saris because they saw their mothers, grandmothers wearing it. It is this urge to replicate that elegance for which women throughout the ages are passionate about this apparel and this opinion was very enthusiastically seconded by a lovely lady-Sadya Afreen Mallick.

"I love to wear saris, it always makes me feel like dressing up, a bangle or a bead necklace maybe, it always makes me feel and look graceful. Remember our mothers used to wear glass nylon saris and had lovely machine or hand embroidered petticoats with them? Often the petticoat was more fancy than the sari itself, some even had cut work or chikan material bordered by intricate laces. I mean those were style statements made by the wearers themselves. They were their own designers," she recollects.

Young girls today opt for shalwar kameez or jeans simply because they feel they don't have the time to dress. After all they do lead high pace life today than they used to in yesteryears. What they're missing out on, is the unbeatable impression created by a cotton sari starched in aap (a silver shimmer used when starching or washing a sari, a fashion quite lost today), with beli phool in the braid. It's sheer enchantment, one that even the most 'modern' madam isn't immune to. So why fight the inevitable? Here's to losing oneself in the sensuous sorcery of the sari.

By Raffat Binte Rashid



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