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Year 3 BA (Hons) Fashion Journalism
Cultural and Historical Studies Dissertation

Kabul: The Forgotten Fashion Capital

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I'd like to express my sincere thanks to Dr Serkan Delice, who helped me develop my interest in Afghan fashion into a tangible research topic and for his patience, knowledge and feedback, which helped me in the successful completion of this project.

To my mom, dad and sister – thank you so much for providing long hours of support through endless video calls and for suggesting potential avenues of research I can look into for the dissertation. I'm truly grateful to you!

I also wish to acknowledge the support received from writer-in-residence Nathalie Abi-Ezzi and LCF librarian, Marta Cassaro.

Last but not the least, I'd like to express my gratitude to all the oral history participants who shared their memories of Kabul with me.

INTRODUCTION

“If you look up stories about Afghanistan, it's always about violence, it's about displacement, it's about the drug trade, it's about the Taliban, it's about the U.S. initiatives.

There is precious little about the Afghan people themselves.” – Khaled Hosseini

On 15th August 2021, a 20-year mission in Afghanistan came to an end. As the American troops backed out of the capital city of Kabul, Taliban gunmen conquered the country – marking the 2021 fall of Kabul.

When the news of Taliban taking over Kabul first broke the internet, there were international concerns expressed for what lies ahead for the city and its people, particularly for women.

Around this time, a few independent blogs came under spotlight for sharing images of Kabul

in the 1970s. Images that depicted women attending university wearing miniskirts, hair adorned in fancy hairstyles, and not a burqa in sight.

These images were widely circulated, speaking of Kabul's connection with the western world and how a modern period existed in the 1960s and 70s, presented in a stark contrast to today's images of blue chadri-clad women of Afghanistan.

As a fashion journalism student, I hadn't come across any fashion history more fascinating – although Afghan women's burqa or chadri tends to monopolise media coverage around the world, hardly are there any articles written on Afghan fashion, which has such a rich cultural heritage exceeding far beyond the scope of burqa. Consequently, it was a conscious decision to focus solely on women's fashion for this dissertation.



Figure 1. Text: 1972. In the neighbourhood of Shar-E-Naü, a new area, a few young liberated and emancipated women wore miniskirts despite the virulent criticism of the majority of Afghans still faithful to the Muslim tradition. The Mullahs (Muslim priests) did not hesitate to throw acid on the bare legs of such impudent young women. Photography by Laurence Brun/Rapho in book Unveiled

While some may contest that fashion is the last thing a woman living in Afghanistan has on her mind, where the longing to unshackle patriarchal norms, education and to live a life of dignity, far outweighs any other concerns such as clothing, it is worth noting that fashion has always remained an important discussion in Afghanistan's discourse – even when it's about decoding the symbolism of a burqa. As Emma Tarlo (2010) aptly writes about veils in her

book *Visibly Muslim*, “There are feminists critiquing it, anthropologists interpreting it, religious authorities prescribing it, hijab wearers defending it, politicians and activists promoting or opposing it, legal professionals judging it, governments prohibiting or imposing it and artists and novelists exploiting its multivalent semiotic potential for expressing a whole range of ideas about beauty, eroticism, secrecy, mystery, piety, holiness, freedom, protection and oppression.”

Covering years of history of any country in 7000 words is a formidable task. Especially, of a country such as Afghanistan, which witnessed one invasion after another - Macedonians. Suddanians. Arabs. Mongols. Soviets. America. And now Taliban. The purpose of the essay is not to dwell deep into the history of traditional Afghan fashion, as that’s a discourse in itself. Nor is it to discuss if burqa is empowering or enslaving. Rather, it is to record the golden age of Afghanistan in the 1970s, when the country was experiencing some modernity, and at a time was awarded the moniker of Paris of Central Asia. This is followed by how fashion is used as a tool of resistance (in its varying forms) by Afghan women. I am aware that as the capital city, the modernisation was restricted to the elite few of Kabul. However, it is still an important part of history that is looked back by Afghans with nostalgia – gives them hope for what the country could’ve been, where women had freedom to dress the way they want, which can explain the decision to exclusively discuss Kabul’s fashion scene.

In the first chapter, I look at how ‘modernity’ in Kabul first came to be between 1930s to 1970s. Contrary to my earlier beliefs, a modern Kabul was not a result of foreign invasions by America, Britain or Soviet Union. The change was local - although coups emerged and control of power changed hands, there was a brief period of relative stability in the region, and by 1960s, there were a semblance of a national government, with democratic reform and emerging western fashion.

Although a task that proved to be challenging at first, the second chapter looks at 1970s and what the women in Kabul were wearing at the time. As very few credible records were available online, which documented the westernised fashion scene of Kabul, so I had to rely on interviews conducted with Afghan women living in diaspora, who shared memories of

Kabul as they remembered it. Power of nostalgia is also briefly touched upon, as that was a recurring theme noticed during oral history interviews.

Finally, in the last chapter, I analyse the contributions of Afghan women in diaspora and the role they play in reviving Afghan fashion. In this context, revival does not intend to suggest that Afghan fashion was dead; it has always existed in its various forms, with impositions or without. Rather, when Afghanistan's cultural identity, or fashion here, is threatened to erasure, these women stepped up to change how the world views Afghan fashion as, and to open its eyes to how they view their culture as.

Before proceeding to the next section, it is important to define a few terms that are important in the context of understanding Afghan fashion:

1. Hijab – Headscarves worn by women; they cover the head and neck but leave the face clear.
2. Burqa – The most restrictive form of Islamic veils; it covers the face and body with a narrow mesh screen to see through.
3. Chadari – It is an Afghan term for burqa.
4. Shariah Law – Shariah or Islamic law is a legal system derived from the Quran, Islam's holy book, which includes stories of the Prophet Muhammad and details a guide to live life morally.

METHODOLOGY

To conduct research for this dissertation, I have used textual analysis to analyse the written word of academic texts, journals and articles that allowed me to come up with necessary interpretations to support my presented arguments. However, due to a lack of legitimate resources available relating to westernised clothing of 1970s Kabul, I found support in the introduction of Oral History in my research methods, which allowed me to gather legitimate evidence of the fashion scene at the time and document an important part of Kabul's history.

It also helped me to achieve a better understanding of the lived experiences of those whose lives have been directly impacted by the many changes Kabul has gone through. As someone who is not ethnically Afghan and whose interest developed in this topic solely from a fashion journalism student's perspective, I found that conducting oral interviews with people living in diaspora helped me overcome my own limitations of how I approach this topic and even challenged some of my existing perceptions.

Oral history can allow us to gather records that are unlikely to be produced by other research methods and adds personal voices of experience, which can help contextualise texts.

Analysis of memory can be a critical research tool, however as the oral historian Robert Perks warns us, "People forget things, their memories play tricks by 'telescoping' events together or changing their order. They will subconsciously repress painful memories or artificially highlight their own role in a particular event The important point, of course, is that all historical sources, whether they are documentary or oral, are subject to the same influences of selectivity, interpretation and partiality"

(Perks, R. 1995, p.7).

The interviewees were chosen keeping in mind their professions, present geographical location, and relevant connection to Afghan fashion. I have made use of three semi-structured interviews in my second chapter, where I document how the period of 1970s is remembered by Kabuli women living in diaspora, so that it serves a dual purpose of obtaining personal accounts of their experience and also connects to my research in chapter 3, where I've discussed the role of diasporic individuals in reviving Afghan fashion.

CHAPTER 1: KABUL'S MODERNISATION – A BRIEF HISTORY

"Kabul is... a thousand tragedies per square mile." – Khaled Hosseini

To discuss the modernisation that existed in Kabul in the following chapters, it becomes imperative to define the term ‘West’ as many of the sources used and interviews conducted, interchangeably use the words ‘modern’ and ‘western’, both in the wider context of how Kabul was perceived in the years between 1930s and late 1970s, and the clothing worn by women living in the capital city.

In his book ‘West and the Rest: Discourse and Power’, Stuart Hall finds that “the West” is a historical, rather than a geographical construct. He writes that any society, which is “developed, industrialised, urbanised, capitalist, secular, and modern can be called western”. Further, he adds that the meaning of the term is virtually identical to the term ‘modern’ (Hall, 1992).

After the fall of Taliban in 2001, America launched an ambitious mission to reconstruct Afghanistan. In its minimalist version the aim was to eliminate ‘terrorist safe havens’, reconstruct the state and kick-start the economy; in its maximalist form the plan was also to develop and ‘modernise’ Afghan society (Sukhre, 2007).

In his article, *The Imported State: The Westernization of the Political Order*, Bertrand Badie (2000) discusses how Western European cultures used their own experiences of liberal political development and economic growth to create a model of ‘modern state’ that allowed them to govern conquered regions. The idea of a modern state was grafted onto different cultural realities, and was not limited to the West but also locals with a fascination of western ideology. To make the model work, he finds, that ‘cooperative nationalists’ or ‘importing elites’ are essential. This is visible in the working of international aid community, which works on the principle of ‘local ownership’. Ideally, it would be seen as locals working collaboratively with foreign countries to build or modernise their societies, however, in its essence, the term is a misnomer as donors, external agencies design and fund the projects, and the role of locals is restricted to implementing them. This results in externally generated influence and knowledge on a local region’s ‘modernisation’. [Arjun Appadurai](#) (1996) notes that the view of modern world by past modernisation theorists as “a

space of shrinking religiosity and greater scientism” is problematic as feelings of religion are stronger than ever in “today’s highly mobile and interconnected politics”.

Referring to Kabul as ‘modern’ also indicates that the democratic reforms and developments which took place in the previous era was a by-product of foreign invasions. However, Afghanistan was already heading towards a gradual modernisation as an effort of monarchy that existed at the time. As [Astri Sukhre](#), (2007) finds, “As one of the few states in Asia that escaped European colonial conquest, Afghanistan has always been more shaped by influences from Asia and the Middle East than from the West. Growing interaction with Western countries from the mid-20th century and onwards left its mark mainly on the urban population, a few areas selected for development projects, and some formal political institutions”.

The 1964 Constitution of Afghanistan was drafted by a committee of foreign-educated nationals appointed by Mohammed Zahir Shah. The purpose of this constitution was to prepare the Afghan people for a gradual movement towards democracy and modernisation. Some of its provisions included precedence of constitutional laws over Sharia laws and provided equal laws for both men and women. Most notably, King Amanullah and his wife, Queen Soraya are remembered for their efforts towards a modernised Afghanistan.

Many of King Amanullah’s ideologies were inspired by the West and he believed that European superiority was a result of its cultural, economic, industrial and technical achievements. His father-in-law, Mahmud Beg Tarzi also played a major role in pushing the country’s development. Previously exiled, where he experienced European modernism first-hand, Tarzi returned in 1911 and launched Afghanistan’s first newspaper, *Seraj ul-akhbar-e-Afghanistan* (Torch of Afghan news). The newspaper promoted two main ideas – 1) Muslims must modernise or perish; and 2) colonialism and imperialism must go (Aqab M. Malik, 2011).

They believed that Afghanistan’s indigenous population could adjust to the modernisation process and that modernisation didn’t necessarily had to incorporate all western values. Queen Soraya was a pioneer in her own right as she advocated for women’s rights and

education. On the day of Afghanistan's independence, seven years after the defeat of British in third Anglo-Afghan war, she delivered a provocative speech: "to all of us ... Do you think that our nation from the outset needs only men to serve it? Women should also take their part as women did in the early years of our nation and Islam ... we should all attempt to acquire as much knowledge as possible." (Gornall J. and Salahuddin S, 2020).

Together, this royal couple, campaigned against polygamy and veils, with Queen Soraya know for publicly taking off her veils to encourage other Afghan women to follow suit. Young girls from affluent Kabul families were sent abroad to Turkey for higher education and women were granted rights to divorce. However, as many of their gender policies were in conflict with beliefs of Afghanistan's extremely orthodox society, their efforts were met with resistance and they were forced to renounce the throne and flee to British India.

CHAPTER 2 – PARIS OF CENTRAL ASIA

"There would be really striking women in short skirts," he recalls. "Beautiful, very outspoken, temperamental, endlessly – in my young mind – interesting. Drinking freely, smoking." – Khaled Hosseini

This chapter aims to document the modern fashion of Kabul and how it is remembered by Afghans – with the support of Harriet Logan's book *Unveiled* and interviews conducted with Afghan women living in diaspora, who have all lived in Kabul at some point in their lives. The interviewees share stories of Kabul in the 70s, as it exists in their memories, either resulting from lived experiences or stories passed through generations. Evidently, oral history is the primary research method used in this chapter, followed by textual analysis, which will be used to explore concepts of *silent resistance* v/s *symbolic resistance* and *negotiation*. The latter is used to examine how Afghan women exercise their agency, by negotiating family and societal constraints to maximize their opportunities (Amin S. and Alizada N, 2020).

FASHION THAT EXISTED

Before the Soviet invasion of 1979 and rise of radical Islam, the Afghans living in Kabul – also known as Kabulis – experienced democratic reforms and modernisation to an extent that was even ahead of the United States in terms of empowering women.

During the country’s stable period of 1930 to 1970, Afghan coat became a Western fashion’s world’s must have. ‘Afghans’ as these coats were called, were made of goatskin or sheepskin and came from Ghazni province, between Kabul and Kandahar. Worn by John Lennon in May 1967, when he donned a yellow-tanned coat with red flowers embroidered on the coat’s front and sleeves, their popularity only increased in the late 1960s, ultimately becoming a standard symbol of hippie youth culture.



Figure 2. John Lennon wearing an Afghan coat. Courtesy of John Downing via Getty Images

Afghan coats made by designer Isa Seret were featured on Harper Bazaar’s August 1968 cover. Secret & Sons writes on its website: “In 1968 Ira discovered several Afghan sheepskin coats that had found their way to NYC. Partnering with the late Anne Klein, he was soon on a plane to Kabul, searching for the coats that would become one of the era's iconic fashions. With the help of his mentor, Diana Vreeland, fashion spreads in Vogue and

Life magazines were scheduled as Ira set off on that first trip to Afghanistan. He found the coats in Istalif, a village covered in orchards and vineyards, high in the mountains north of Kabul. Bearded, turbaned village elders sat with him to conduct the first business transaction over endless cups of tea. Entranced by the setting, Ira spent the next few years working with the villagers, while exporting thousands of coats to New York. Demand for the coats kept growing as the fashion exploded, propelled by the Beatles and Jimi Hendrix. A few years later in NYC Sylvia was introduced to Ira as a designer of hand-stitched velvet coats. The two spent the next five years in Afghanistan together creating both personal artwork and building cottage industries which employed hundreds of local craftspeople.”



Figure 3. Harper's Bazaar August 1968 magazine cover

Similarly, British Vogue featured an Afghan fashion designer in its 1969 December issue, when it ran a fashion story titled ‘Adventure in Afghanistan’ featuring Safia Tarzi, a Kabul-based designer and photographer, whose fashion style can best be described as a blend of western and traditional designs- she would often pair Afghan turbans and waistcoats with boots and skirts from the western world.



Figure 4. Vogue 1969 December issue featuring Safia Tarzi



Figure 5. Fashion designer Safia Tarzi in her Kabul studio, 1969. Photographed by Eve Arnold.

ORAL HISTORY

Dr Bahar Jalali, historian, recalls 1970s as a time when “downtown Kabul was a very cosmopolitan area”. Her family is Pashtun, however, she describes them as “urban and secular, and not at all ethnically-conscious”. Before moving to United States with her family in 1980, she describes her school uniform of first grade as: “cute outfits with black skirts, stockings, and pullover, worn without a head covering. When girls reached grade six, they would wear a light chiffon scarf, with hair flowing. It was not a hijab.”

Later in the interview, she added: “I remember seeing Western tourists there. There was a really fashionable children's boutique, which I often visited with my mother. Those clothes were mainly imported from other western countries.”

Below is an image of Jalali’s mother, who is seated in the middle, on the day of her wedding in 1969. Jalali said: “Traditional Afghanistan is a world I’ve never been able to relate to. I come from an urban background, where my mom used to wear miniskirts. My parents dated before they got married, they went to nightclubs together. Like every other country, Afghanistan has different classes of society and culture.”



Figure 6. Dr Bahar Jalali's mother's wedding dress (middle), 1969 Kabul

Lema Afzal, fashion influencer and founder of *Camese*, was born in Kabul and moved to Belgium with her family when she was four, to escape Taliban’s rule. Her mother, a Tajik woman, is from Panjshir Valley and her father, a Pashtun, is from Jalalabad. From the stories that are passed onto her by her grandparents and parents, she shared that Kabul was a very

modern and western city; one where educated women wore miniskirts and heels, and had the freedom to dress the way they want.

Her mother, she told, was born and brought up in Kabul. However, as she still belonged to a conservative family, she was not allowed to wear makeup and her clothes were ‘more covered up’. Afzal said, “My mom would see other people wearing lipstick, and used to think how much she wanted to try it on. Or she would see people in miniskirts and think to herself, ‘If I get married or older, I want to wear skirts and heels like that.’ However, she didn’t really dress like that. At the time, Afghanistan was heavily inspired by Bollywood, so young women would take postcards of Bollywood actresses, buy fabrics and take them to the tailor to make their own outfits. Young girls were heavily influenced by Bollywood actresses; their hair and clothes. That’s something my mom has done too.”

Coming from an orthodox family, Afzal shares other stories of her mother, incidents where she would experiment with fashion ‘in secret’. She shared, “Once my grandparent’s guests had come over and the lady was wearing heels, so my mom secretly tried on her heels to see how they would look on her feet. Other times, she used to go bare-faced to university, and once there, she would put on lipstick. Then before leaving for home, she would take it off so no one would know.”

Often subcultures demonstrate a form of ‘symbolic resistance’, which is not physical resistance but is resistance conveyed through ‘fashion and dress’, which is usually loud and conspicuous. Here, Afzal’s mother’s story can best be described as a form of ‘silent resistance’.

Political scientist James C. Scott (1987) describes silent resistance as “the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups.” He argues that although this form of resistance avoids direct confrontation with authority, they should be included in the larger view of social protest.

It is important to note that even when Kabul was experiencing modernity with no dictated restrictions on dress code, religious sensibility is another factor to consider, which may explain why some women remained hesitant to experiment with western clothing.

Afghanistan is a patriarchal society and “there are women whose stated attitudes, aspirations and their practices seem to suggest agreement with the dominant gender norms of their society. They may agree that it is the man’s absolute right to control and decide for all members of the family, both as a question of honor and what God has ordained” (Amin S. and Alizada N, 2020, Pg. 363).

Understandably, it can be confusing to justify why women would actively support patriarchy. Often people discuss if Afghan women are oppressed or not, in regard to whether they wear burqa, however, this discussion seems to apply that oppression is always something external. Whether the reasons for ‘choosing’ to wear a burqa are motivated by concerns of safety or religious sensibility – “feminist theorization on gender consciousness points to cognitive importance of awareness of that self-regulation as part of empowerment. (Stromquist, 2000, quoted in Amin S. and Alizada N, 2020, Pg.364).

Disguising one’s actual feelings and intentions in order to protect themselves from harm is a form of empowerment (Stromquist, 2000, quoted in Amin S. and Alizada N, 2020, Pg.364) and personal resistance as this creates a barrier against the oppressive person (Wade, 1997 and Scott, 1990, quoted in Amin S. and Alizada N, 2020, Pg.364). As Wade (1997) writes: “In the most extreme cases of violence, where the victim has every reason to believe she will be killed or seriously harmed in some other way for even the slightest opposition, the only possibility for the realization of resistance may be in the privacy afforded by the mind (p.30).”

Even after the oppressive regime of Taliban came to an end in 2001, people in West assumed that women would take off their burqas the minute they were not required to wear them. However, Durkhanai (2001) in the book *Unveiled* shared: “Men in this country are hungry to see women, and eventually we must be strong enough to say good-bye to the burkha. But now is the holy month of Ramadan, and at this time we are more respectful; however, we hope that when Eid [the three-day celebration marking the end of Ramadan] comes, we will get rid of our burkhas.”

As evident from Durkhanai's story, Afghan women may choose to wear a burqa for reasons of safety and religious sensibilities. In here, if she would remove burqa at the very chance she gets, her action might be construed as an act of overt resistance and she might face opposition from the conservative society around her, despite the absence of Taliban-imposed dress codes. Further, by considering the holy month of Ramadan, she chooses to continue wearing burqa to pay her respects, therefore, she demonstrates a sense of 'negotiated resistance'.

Sara N. Amin and Nazifa (2020) find that persuasion techniques, often through the use of Islamic narratives (in this instance, Durkhanai uses 'concerns' about honour) are responses used by women "as responses against the rationalisation of their subordination. Women's efforts to negotiate out of and through patriarchal constraints on their aspirations and actions through these techniques can have important spill-over effects that fracture the power structures that uphold these constraints. In persuasion, one starts creating and expanding networks of support; in strategizing through trade-offs, new resources may be accessed that can produce alternative ways of acting; in creating distance, new/modified models of relationships and families are produced; in adaptations to disruptions, new/modified models and experiences gain legitimacy."

Therefore, while one may view the visibly modern clothing worn in the streets of Kabul by the educated elite as resistance to a society governed by patriarchy, it is important to recognise and acknowledge movements of resistance that existed through myriad of acts—either as silent resistance or negotiated that women in Kabul demonstrated in constrained surroundings.

As James C. Scott (2020) aptly summarises:

"Everyday resistance does not throw up the manifestos, demonstrations, or pitched battles that normally compel attention. It makes no headlines. But just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, so do thousands of individual acts of insubordination and evasion create a political and economic barrier reef of its own."

NOSTALGIA

Through the interviews conducted, a conclusion can be derived that the golden period of Kabul is only viewed with nostalgia by those who lived in Kabul and were part of the educated elite. Modernity was limited to urban centres of Kabul, Kandahar and Herat. Dr Bahar Jalali shared: “How that period is viewed depends on who you’re talking to. I think people who lived in that period definitely view it with nostalgia because they remember that they could dress the way they wanted to. Whereas some people might consider those 1970 images of westernised women as offensive, viewing them as a purview of a small, privileged group in Kabul.”

However, as will be explored in the next chapter, the educated elite who are now a part of the diaspora, are the ones using their work to promote traditional Afghan fashion.

In the past, nostalgia was viewed as a bad thing – as a coping mechanism when confronted with uncertainly or difficult situations. However, a series of investigations by psychologist Constantine Sedikides (2014) suggest nostalgia may act as a resource that we can draw on to connect to other people and events, so that we can move forward with less fear and greater purpose. Here, nostalgia is viewed as a powerful tool for reviving traditional Afghan fashion, which connects the interviewees with their memories of a modern capital, which enabled fashion to exist freely, to the potential that lies for the city’s future. Instead of limiting its connection with sentimentality, nostalgia fuels a greater purpose of driving social change. In this next chapter, we look at how nostalgia allows diasporic individuals to reflect on past, but allows one to reimagine new possibilities and work towards creating a change.

CHAPTER 3: ROLE OF DIASPORA IN REVIVING AFGHAN FASHION

Memory is how we make sense of our life. It's this amazing gift – to treasure all those things that matter to us the most, that form our identity. – Khaled Hosseini

The ones who manage to escape oppressive regimes, are the ones who create a fertile diasporic culture abroad. And often, this culture is inspired by their home countries.

In this chapter, I spoke to Dr Bahar Jalali, founder of a popular social media #DoNotTouchMyClothes, Lema Afzal, a fashion influencer and Anjilla Seddeqi, founder of an Australian eponymous label inspired by her Afghan heritage. Additionally, as a fourth case study, I have included Fatimah Hossaini, a fashion photographer who hopes to change the face of modern Afghan women with her images, by extracting information available of her life and work with the help of online resources. Despite currently residing in different countries across the world – United States, Belgium, Australia and France, they all lived in Kabul at some point in their lives and are unified by their efforts to change West's perception of Afghan fashion.

Dibyesh Anand (2009) in his article 'Diasporic subjectivity as an ethical position' describes diaspora "as a collective of people with shared ethnic markers of identity who live away from their homeland and in significantly large numbers in their new hostland."

He finds that the diasporic condition forces one to confront differences. Although in the article, the differences are referred to as values of a diasporic individual and the 'native population' of host country. In this context, differences are referred to as the multitude of ethnic identities that exist in Afghanistan. Anand writes that, "you cannot be comfortable and ignorant of your identity if you're diasporic. You cannot but be aware of how you are similar and different from the majority around you. Some in the diaspora find it hard to reconcile their 'original' beliefs and values in a different context." This is especially true in the case of Afghan diaspora, as Dr Bahar Jalali, an interviewee, noticed an increase in ethnic divisiveness over her trending social media #DoNotTouchMyClothes. When she posted an image of her wearing a traditional Afghan dress, many commented on her post that a Pashtun

dress is not representative of an Afghan dress. While this relates to ethnic differences that exist in Afghan diaspora, where minority ethnicities associate Taliban regime as a product of Pashtun superiority, surprisingly in the three interviews conducted – that were a mix of Pashtun and Tajik ethnicities, all three interviewees acknowledged Kala-e-Afghan, or Kuchi (a nomadic tribe of Pahtun ethnicity) dresses as an important part of Afghan culture.

This can be explained by Anand’s definition of culture in his article, where he writes: “Without a consciousness of commonality among the collective, culture has little significance. This does not mean that everyone has to be equally conscious for it to exist, but a general consensual consciousness has to be there.”

The role of diaspora in this context is extremely essential for the preservation of Afghan identity, as they are the ones who are not constrained by the current restrictions imposed by Taliban in Afghanistan.

Dr Bahar Jalali, historian and founder of #DoNotTouchMyClothes



Figure 7. Dr Bahar Jalali

Born in Kabul in 1974, Dr Bahar Jalali moved to the United States in 1980 with her family, where she also completed her PhD in Middle Eastern studies. Presently working as a History professor at Loyola University of Maryland, she is responsible for founding the first gender studies program in the American University of Kabul and starting the

#DoNotTouchMyClothes, which became a social media phenomenon and led to Afghan women across the world sharing selfies in traditional Afghan dresses.

She describes her campaign as a ‘diasporic movement’, which was founded to combat against Taliban’s attack on Afghan culture and a way to reclaim her Afghan identity.

She first posted her picture in the hashtag as a response to hundreds of women attending Kabul university in fully veiled dresses under Taliban’s command. In the interview, she said: When I saw these women wearing gloves with their faces covered, it was confirmed to me that Afghan culture is under assault and I felt very upset, very helpless.

“I didn’t want people to think that was Afghan culture. Images are very powerful and they spread really quickly. When I woke up the next day, the post had gone viral. It was wonderful as it gave me a platform to raise awareness about something I very strongly believe in. It’s a very painful to feel like your identity is being erased. So, I’m fighting back with my dress, and with my traditional Afghan jewellery. For me, they are not just articles of fashion. They’re my most prized possessions and part of an identity which I have to keep alive.”

Lema Afzal, Fashion influencer



Figure 8. Lema Afzal

Lema Afzal was four years old when her family moved to Belgium. Born to Pashtun father and Tajik mother, Afzal started posting images of herself in traditional Afghan dresses on Instagram, and saw an increase in her number of followers after US troops withdrew from Afghanistan last year; and was most recently featured in Vogue in a story titled ‘How one Afghan woman is embracing her traditional dress.’”



Figure 9. Lema Afzal aged eight

Her fascination with Afghan clothing only grew as she attended the traditional weddings and saw the guests perform ‘Attan’ – a customary dance. She shared: “The bigger your skirt, the bigger swirl it would create when you dance.” Drawn by her fascination with these skirts, she started requesting her father who frequently travelled to Afghanistan to bring back traditional Kuchi dresses. As she started posting her photos wearing these dresses on Instagram, her followers would often ask if the dresses were available for sale as well.

Believing that clothing is very personal to oneself, she was initially hesitant to sell her curated collection of Afghan dresses, however later, she started a small business *Camese*, which allows her to sell imported Kuchi dresses to people who want to own the same dresses as hers.

Anjilla Seddeqi, Fashion designer



Figure 10. Anjilla Seddeqi

Anjilla Seddeqi was born in Kabul to Tajik parents and moved to Australia in 1989. Originally trained as a lawyer specialising in refugee law and helping asylum seekers, she later turned her focus to fashion and design, and started her own clothing brand. Recently featured in Harper's Bazaar Australia, her eponymous label came to existence after the many difficulties she faced in shopping for modest fashion clothing. Her collections are primarily influenced by her Afghan heritage but also feature many contemporary fashion elements, resulting in a unique blend of western and traditional clothing.

In a recent fundraising event with UNHCR for Afghanistan, she repurposed a burqa into a traditional Afghan dress. She said: "I incorporated the mesh embroidery of the burqa, which covers the eyes onto a new dress. I think it is important to explore that side of fashion. For me, the message was to show how a burqa should like, to make into an Afghan traditional dress. Rather than imposing a burqa on someone, it should be embraced and should be worn by all the women in Afghanistan – whether in villages, cities or during special occasions."



Figure 11. Burqa repurposed into traditional Afghan dress

In another collaboration with UNHCR, Seddeqi and her friend, Stephanie Boyle created Arezu dolls, made by Afghan women living in India and sold internationally. All the profits are then donated to UNHCR for Afghan women empowerment. So far, they have raised over \$12,000 AUD from this initiative.



Figure 12. Arezu dolls

“I think my design is a reflection of who I am. I guess my upbringing, my heritage, and I are an amalgamation of the west and the east. As I've been raised in Australia, that's my upbringing. And my heritage is Afghan.”

Fatimah Hossaini, Fashion photographer



Tehran-born Fatimah Hossaini is a fashion photographer, who was part of the art faculty at Kabul university from 2018-2019. Recently featured in a short BBC video produced by Gabriela Pomeroy titled ‘The World doesn’t see this part of Afghanistan’, Hossaini hopes to change the face of modern Afghan women.

In the starting of the video, she can be heard saying, “Fashion is a part of our culture”(Hossaini, 2021). By photographing women in the streets of Kabul, Hossaini wants their faces to be seen. She told BBC: “A sense of fashion – I think it can be a sign of Afghan women’s resilience.”



Figure 13. Photography by Fatimah Hossaini

CONCLUSION

After engaging with multiple texts on the history of Afghan politics, my understanding of Kabul's history broadened and I was able to identify multiple reasons behind the city's awarded moniker 'Paris of Central Asia'. I deemed the story of King Amanullah and Queen Soraya as pertinent to the modernisation efforts which took place in Kabul, which is the reason for not including many small scale efforts by other monarchs in the first chapter, which in their own ways contributed to the democratic reforms and relative stability of the time.

As for any trend which gets a seal of approval once featured in Vogue, by finding an image of vintage 1969 Vogue magazine on 'Afghan Adventure', I was able to confirm the growing fashion influence Kabul had on the western world in the second chapter. The oral histories, both conducted and sourced from the book 'Unveiled' offer the reality of how Kabul at its pinnacle of westernisation is remembered as and extends an analysis to how fashion is used by Afghan women as a symbol of resistance.

By writing this dissertation, I was able to engage in a research process which I thoroughly enjoyed and one which gave me a chance to speak to incredible women across the globe – to listen to their beliefs, ideologies and visions for the future of Afghan fashion. It allowed me to recognise their role in protecting their cultural identity through clothes and how they are using their memories of the past as a driving force to make changes at a global level.

To further the scope of this research, it would be interesting to explore diasporic women's relation with burqa. During my research process, I came across many conversations which gave me a range of insights into the ethnic divisiveness that exists and how that impacts a diasporic woman's view on burqa. Furthermore, the essay focuses solely on Kabul,

recognising that as a capital city, many of the socio-political advancements were restricted to this place and were not seen in other small cities.

Lastly, I hope this dissertation serves as a legitimate and helpful source to its readers, who wish to know more about Kabul's modernity, and view it as a city rich of culture and life, one with the potential to even become a fashion capital someday.

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