

## **“PIONEER OF THE CLEAN GIRL AESTHETIC”**

- Janani. M

India gained its independence in the year 1947 from its colonizers, that was supposed to be the end of thievery. Yet here we are, in 2025 still being taken advantage of, being looted from, by the same colonizers who were once shunned from this very land. But this time it's not spices, not resources but our culture, our fabrics and our practices. Colonization arrived masked as fashion. The world has grown very comfortable stealing from India while pretending they invented something new. Every few months, there are instances that coming up which makes us wonder, why not just give the credit where it is due?

Indian concepts rarely get any credit. Fashion loves labelling everything as “Korean-inspired”, “Parisian-chic” and “Scandinavian-minimalism”. The cultures are celebrated and uplifted but why is it not when its Indian? Its renamed as “boho”, “exotic”, anything but Indian. New words are invented to hide their robbery. Why is it when trends are taken from any other cultures, they openly celebrate the influence, but when it is Indian why are the origins not identified and acknowledged?

Dupatta is a basic, everyday garment which is being worn by the South Asian women for centuries and it was suddenly marketed as a “Scandinavian scarf”. It was renamed, stripped of its cultural identity and was advertised as something that was entirely different. The internet blew it up, argued over it but this is not the first time this has happened and definitely won't be the last. This was not just a mistake, it was a pattern.

Then the Prada's Kolhapuri fiasco happened. These handcrafted chappals born out of Indian craftsmanship, perfected over generations were turned into just a designer slipper with no credit for where they originated from whatsoever. No mentions of the artisans, no Maharashtra. It was just seen as Prada's minimalist slippers with a cultural twist. But this was nothing more than just a rebranded existing Indian product demonstrated as if this was brand new product born out of the creativity of their minds. Once again, someone else profited from India's efforts.

The west has been ripping off Indian culture for a very long time. They pick, rename it and introduce it as something they created. The “face jewels” influencers wear during Coachella are nothing but just bindis. The bindis that people of South Asia have been wearing for as

long as their culture existed. They are not rhinestones facial accents, not colourful dots but just bindis stripped from their cultural significance.

It didn't stop there, the slick-back hairstyle of the "clean girl aesthetic" or the "model off-duty" is the hairstyle that Indians has been wearing for years. The same hairstyle, they were ridiculously bullied for oiling their hair and tying it back for generations. They were called smelly, nasty, unhygienic, greasy and now the same hairstyle is called luxurious and sophisticated.

Decades of Indians being insulted for their skin colours, called slurs for being too dark and made it seem like it was a problem that should be solved by offering fairness creams and was shamed into believing light skin was beauty. Yet the same people pay to get the same skin they bullied people for by tanning to look sun-kissed. When the west does it, its "aesthetic" but when people with melanin do it, its wrong. And fashion pretends its not racism when it absolutely is.

Looking at the ingredients in skincare, one of the main elements is Turmeric, Haldi/Manjal has been used in South Asia for centuries for healing, skincare and rituals. It is not new. But in 1995, US tried to patent haldi for wound healing, as if they discovered it. It took us an actual legal battle to reclaim something we own. Even now, brands rename turmeric as "golden root" and sell them in overpriced bottles without acknowledging where it came from.

This pattern runs in fashion as well. Influencers wearing Maang-tikkas and calling it "forehead chains", shararas as "flared pants", Gajras called "floral ties". Indians are glamourized when convenient and erased when profitable. It wants the beauty but not the people, culture but not the credit. India's culture is good enough to use but not good enough to acknowledge. It is still colonialism, back then they stole spices, silk, cotton jewels and today it is fabrics, hairstyles and even ingredients. Only the tools have changed and not the mindset.

The fashion world still sees India through a colonial lens, poor, backward and unfashionable. This is exactly why giving India credit is difficult. The global luxury brands are ashamed to admit that something is 'high-fashioned' since it comes from a culture they have historically looked down on.

Indian artisans are one of the most skilled artisans out there the embroidery workers, weavers, jewellery makers. But when luxury brands rip them off without giving them credit, they lose

the support and global opportunities. A pattern which takes an artisan months to develop, is being mass produced by a brand and sells it for 30-40% the price. This directly affects the livelihood of these artisans.

The colonization has conditioned Indians to internalize double standards. A lot of Indians think that the western culture is superior. When brands rename Indian garments, people even applaud the west for making Indian items “cool”.

Indian fashion is living tradition shaped by its rich history, community and artistry. It deserves respect. It deserves celebration and it deserves acknowledgement.

Independence in 1947 did not exploitation, it merely evolved. Instead of diamonds and spices, its prints and bindis. Instead of taking through force, they just took it through branding and least they can do is give credit where it is due.