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## Fashion and Feminism: A Theoretical and Historical Background

**A B S T R A C T**

The study explores the relationship between fashion and feminism. Throughout history, fashion has been considered as a mechanism of oppression, focusing on the historical role of restrictive garments such as corsets in the objectification of women due to patriarchal influence and societal norms. In the context of corsetry, the paper traces the origins of these garments and their role in physically and metaphorically constraining women to fit into the narrow and idealized standards of beauty dictated by patriarchal societies. It delves into how these oppressive clothing items have been portrayed in literary texts, highlighting the struggles of female protagonists against societal constraints. The study further examines how the feminist movement has actively challenged and rejected these restrictive garments, defying norms and advocating for women's autonomy in clothing choices. The analysis of literary works from various eras reveals how authors have captured and critiqued the oppressive nature of these garments, exposing the damaging effects on women's physical well-being. The study further explores the performative aspects of fashion within the context of patriarchy, drawing upon Judith Butler's theory of performativity to critically analyze the ways in which gender is constructed and reinforced through clothing. The study then delves into the contemporary portrayal of clothing as a means of empowerment and autonomy for women, with focus on chick lit genre. It discusses how authors within this genre have utilized fashion as a form of self-expression, empowerment, and agency.

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### الموضة والنسوية: خلفية نظرية وتاريخية

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### الخلاصة:

تستكشف الدراسة العلاقة بين الموضة والنسوية. على مر التاريخ، اعتبرت الموضة آلية للقمع، مركزة

على الدور التاريخي للملابس المحددة مثل الكورسيه في تجسيد المرأة بسبب التأثير الأبوي والقيم المجتمعية. في سياق الكورسيه، تتبّع الدراسة أصول هذه الملابس ودورها في قيود المرأة جسديًا ومجازيًا لتتناسب المعايير المثالية للجمال التي يحددها المجتمعات الأبوية. تتعمق الدراسة في كيفية تصوير هذه الملابس في النصوص الأدبية، مسلطة الضوء على صراعات الشخصيات ضد القيود المجتمعية. كذلك تستكشف الدراسة الحركات النسوية وكيفية رفضها لهذه الملابس المقيدة، متحديّة القيم لاختيارات المرأة في الملابس. يكشف تحليل الأعمال الأدبية من مختلف العصور كيف قام الكتاب بنقد الطبيعة القمعية لهذه الملابس، كاشفًا التأثيرات الضارة على صحة المرأة. تستكشف الدراسة أيضًا جوانب الأداء في الموضة في سياق الأبوية، باستنادها إلى نظرية جوديث بتلر للأداء لتحليل الطرق التي يتم بها بناء وتعزيز الجنس من خلال الملابس. ثم تتعمق الدراسة في تصوير الملابس المعاصرة كوسيلة للتمكين والاستقلالية للمرأة، مع التركيز على نوع الرواية النسائية. تناقش كيف استخدم الكتاب ضمن هذا النوع الموضة كشكل من أشكال التعبير الذاتي والتمكين.

الكلمات الرئيسية: الموضة، النسوية، النظام الابوي، التجسيد، القوة.

## 1.1 Fashion and Feminism Across History

The fight over your dress is tied in with the larger fight for women's rights. A contribution to that cause can be made by a woman whose spirit is strong enough to free herself from the ridiculous and demeaning clothing that fashion has forced her to wear. No other woman can. (Smith as cited in Riegel, 1963, p. 390)

Feminism is defined as the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes (Haslanger et al., 2012). There has been, without a doubt, an inextricable connection between feminism and fashion throughout the course of history. Women's fashion progressed along with the progression of the women's liberation movement. Women ditched constricting attire in favor of more practical pieces, and the movement's colors and garments became emblems of its identity. When women started looking for independence in their lives, they started looking for it in their clothing as well.

Throughout history, the patriarchal system has always instructed women on how they should behave to be considered respectable and submissive. They were forced to wear constricting corsets and other cumbersome clothes, which not only prevented them physically from moving freely but also metaphorically restricted their independence. In the past, women's clothing was determined by strict conventions and gender roles. Women's wardrobes and clothing preferences were influenced by rigid conventional customs and gender roles that were imposed on them.

As far back as the 19th century, people have been using fashion as a political means for demonstrating their social identity. Clothes were closely related to several political movements, such as Women's Suffrage movement, which took place in the 1850s which advocated for the right of women to vote. Women encouraged one another to break free from the constricting and dangerous clothing options that were available for women in order to achieve equality and gain the same rights that were awarded to men.

Dress reform movements emerged in Europe and the United States in order to enhance the range of fashion choices available to women. These movements garnered support from both men and women who had a variety of reasons for doing so (Cunningham, 2003). Despite the fact that men are involved in various aspects of the fashion industry, such as production, sales, promotions and design, fashion is considered to be a "feminized industry, and as a result, a feminist issue" (McRobbie, 1997, pp. 84-85). Throughout history, women have faced societal pressure to adhere to restrictive conventions, prompting them to actively promote alternative dress designs in order to mitigate the possible negative effects of fashion. From the mid-19th century through the early 20th century, there has been a notable scholarly and societal fascination with the notion of functional fashion (Standish, 2000).

Dress reform movements, which aimed to improve women's clothes by gaining support from both men and women with a variety of different objectives, took place at various points in history. Corsets, chemises, crinolines, cage crinolines, and numerous layers of petticoats have been common forms of underwear for ladies to wear since the late eighteenth century of fashion history. Due to the large number of undergarments that were worn, it was difficult for

women to move, sit, and carry out their daily responsibilities. During the latter part of the 18th century, a period marked by the emergence of industries, Mary Wollstonecraft initiated a movement aimed at promoting equitable access to education for women in Europe amidst the changing social and economic landscape. Mary Wollstonecraft's seminal book, "A Vindication of the Rights of Women," (1792), holds significant recognition as a pioneering feminist text. In her book, she challenged women's passive acceptance of the roles that had been predetermined for them in society, writing, "I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves" (Wollstonecraft, 1792, p. 65). Wollstonecraft was the impetus for a shift in thinking, which had its repercussions throughout all aspects of women's lives, including the fashion industry.

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the sartorial choices for women underwent a notable transformation. One prominent feature of this era was the adoption of a higher waistline in women's attire, which drew inspiration from Neoclassicism. The construction of columnar silhouettes involved the utilization of lightweight cotton textiles, which effectively lifted and provided support to the breasts. This design choice allowed freedom of movement in the lower part of the body as it eliminated the need for restrictive undergarments. Figure 1 depicts an exemplar of this particular silhouette. As the course of the century unfolded, the shapes of clothing gradually deviated from their natural forms, and an increased reliance on undergarments for the purpose of shaping the body was required (Glasscock, 2004, para. 1)

### Figure 1

*"Empire Style" Unstructured Muslin Gown*



Note. Bryant, Julius, Editor. Art and Design for All: The Victoria and Albert Museum. London: V&A Publishing, 2011. ISBN 9781851776665p.235,pl.294. Accession Number: 444-1888

During the 1860s, there was a concurrent shift in fashion towards a slender waistline accompanied by a voluminous skirt, coinciding with the replacement of many petticoats with crinolines. Crinolines were structural undergarments worn beneath women's gowns to provide them with the desired form. Cage crinolines were constructed using materials such as whalebone, cane, or steel, which were subsequently concealed by fabric, as shown in Figure 2.

### Figure 2

*Crinoline (Hoop Skirt) of 1850-1870*

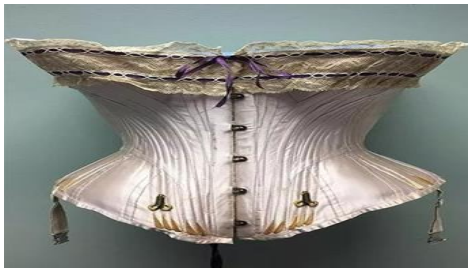


Note. Submitted by Maria Dmitrieva on 16 September 2012. Accession on 13 September 2022. By earlydance.org. url: <https://earlydance.org/node/11924>

The corset is an indispensable piece of apparel that has been worn for centuries. It has been worn as underwear, over garments, and it was considered as a sexual object. The corset was made out of whalebone, and satin, as shown in Figure 3. Women and young children wore corsets in order to improve their physical appearance, and enhance their social status in society. All of this was accomplished while restraining, suppressing, and tormenting the body from an early age.

### Figure 3

*Corset of the Victorian Age*



Note. On exhibit at the University of New Hampshire Museum through Dec.18,2015. <https://library.unh.edu/museum/exhibits/whalebone-to-steel>

Despite the detrimental effects of wearing corsets, women persisted in wearing them due to the symbolic significance they represented. In the Victorian era corsetry embodied the ideological tension between power and restraint that was imposed on the female body. This is the reason that corsets were associated with both elegance and repression, empowerment and victimization as Susan Bordo states in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (1993) that the "corset caused its wearer actual physical incapacitation, but it also served as an emblem of the power of culture to impose its designs on the female body" (Bordo, 1993, p. 143). According to this context, women were treated as sex objects and were obliged to follow certain standards of physical beauty, regardless of what they liked or disliked. This finds its echo, for example, in the Victorian dress which was also influenced by fantastical ideas and it was meant to highlight the ideal female form while calling attention to the virtues that made her so.

Valarie Steele further states that "the image of Victorian women has been that of a person who was both sexually restrained and socially subjugated"(Steele, 2001, p. 3). This was mainly because the constraining nature of corsets has been used to signify the societal constraints that women experienced. Additionally, extravagant ornaments brought attention to the reality that women were expected to endure "pain to look beautiful and respectable" (Steele, 2001, p. 3). Accordingly, theorists have frequently argued that Victorian women were basically compelled into subjugation as a result of their rigid socialization and their limited function within society. Because of this, theorists argue that Victorian women "had relatively little choice other than to make a "profession" of being pleasing and attractive to men" (Steele, 2001, p. 4).

In fact, in the middle of the nineteenth century, between the years 1830 and 1950, corsetry placed an emphasis on the "Hourglass Figure," which alluded to an "ideal" feminized shape named "Southern Belle" and was emphasized by corsetry. It featured a small waist, accentuated shoulders and thighs, as shown in Figure 4. This was accomplished through the use of crinolines and caged corsets. In a nutshell, women's bodies were repressed both within and outside the household due to the Victorian corsetry and the Victorian morals that went along with it. In other words, the figure of the hourglass was an intelligible symbolic form, representing a domestic, sexualized ideal of femininity (Bordo, 1993).

#### Figure 4

*The Hourglass Shape with Cage Crinoline (Southern Belle)*



Note. <https://ellie-valsins.tumblr.com/post/132119109316/womens-fashion-ca-1830-day-dresses-part-1/amp>

The shift in Victorian perspectives about women and fashion took place at the hands of feminist activists like Amelia Bloomer, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony who condemned female attire on the grounds that it restricted the physical mobility of women and was harmful, as such, to their health. They viewed the very extravagant and impractical clothing that women wore as a wasteful extravagance that was emblematic of women's economic dependence on men. They developed an alternative for women that they termed "Bloomers," which was more comfortable than traditional clothing, as seen in Figure 5. Because they were effectively dresses worn over baggy pants, they eliminated the requirement for wearing a number of different clothes. The reformation of women's clothing that resulted from this transition came to be recognized in later years as the Victorian dress movement. These feminists were of the opinion that "women's dressed bodies were indicative of various kinds of social and cultural tyranny such as household confinement, economic reliance, and intellectual deterioration" (Strassel, 2013, p. 38). In essence, the attire that was considered appropriate for women to wear was a visible manifestation of the subjugation that women were subjected to in traditional societies: "Let men be compelled to wear our dress for a while and we should soon hear them advocating a change" (Bloomer as cited in Joelle, 2017, para. 4).

#### Figure 5

*Photographic Print of The Bloomer Costume*



Note. Woman wearing bloomers dress and trousers fashion Date: 1851. By <https://www.prints-online.com/bloomer-costume-7251005.html>

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a number of authors popularized the concept of the "New Woman" to the general public as women were actively advocating for suffrage rights, as seen in Figure 6. The Library of Congress's exhibition titled "*The Gibson Girl's America: Drawings by Charles Dana Gibson*", describes America's "New Woman" as "an independent and often well-educated, young woman poised to enjoy a more visible and active role in the public arena than women of preceding generations" (The Gibson Girl America, para. 1). The design was influenced by the attire worn by bicyclists, which held significant symbolic value within the women's suffrage movement (Ewing, 1992).

### Figure 6

#### *The Gibson Girl*



Note. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/alexalvarez/razzmatazz-and-all-that-jazz>

One of the most revolutionary changes that occurred for women was the gradual acceptance of trousers, which were no longer regarded as either eccentric or solely functional. This was one of the most significant advancements. It was borne out by the fact that Chanel, who was crucial in the acceleration of this trend, was frequently seen throughout the day wearing pants in a sailor-like design that were referred to as "yachting pants." Pants represented freedom and liberty of movement.

The adoption of practical clothing styles facilitated increased mobility for women while concurrently serving as a requisite measure due to their integration into the labor force against the backdrop of World War I. During the beginning of World War II, women who were active in the women's rights movement shifted their focus to nationalism. In 1947, Christian Dior introduced a fashion concept known as "The New Look," characterized by sloping shoulders, a well-defined bust, a tightly cinched waist, and enhanced hip padding, as shown in Figure 7.

**Figure 7**

*Christian Dior's "The New Look" Dress*



Note. <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/christian-dior-the-new-look/kwWhkHJ-Ok8UIg>

Around 1960, radical feminists boldly proclaimed what suffrage movement leaders had frequently implied: that women needed “economic opportunity, sexual freedom, and civil liberties to achieve full emancipation” (Tong, 2009, p. 23). Some feminists joined anti-fashion movement by cutting their hair short, leaving their legs and underarms unshaved, and avoiding aesthetics and underwear. Detractors labeled these feminists as "hippies" and "hairy women." (Hillman,2013, p. 158). Although not all feminists rejected dominant fashion, the “politicization of hairstyles, dress, and self-presentation” was a significant aspect of the second wave of feminism (Hillman, 2013, pp. 155-156).

In 1976, punk fashion emerged as a reaction to mainstream culture and its emphasis on conformity and consumerism. The punk movement was characterized by anti-establishment values. One of the most prominent aspects of punk fashion was its rejection of traditional gender norms. Women in punk fashion often adopted androgynous looks, wearing clothes that were typically masculine, such as leather jackets, ripped jeans, and combat boots, as seen in Figure 8. This allowed

them to subvert expectations and challenge the traditional gender roles that society had imposed on them.

## Figure 8

### *Punk Style*



Note. <https://www.huckmag.com/art-and-culture/photography-2/firestarters-meet-photographers-captured-punk/>

Young feminists were able to express themselves in new ways due to the advent of punk. Punk's hypersexualized fashions drew attention to the female body at the same time that they corresponded with topics that were being debated within the continuing feminist movement. In *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz explains, “in the West, on our time, the female body has been constructed not only as lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; a disorder that threatens all order” (Grosz, 1994, p. 194). The appearance of punk signified the initiation of a subversive utilization of women's bodies as a form of rebellion.

Third-Wave feminism emerged in the 1990s with the aim of reconciling divergent feminist beliefs. This movement sought to foster unity by identifying a shared adversary, society's preoccupation with an idealized physical appearance. Notably, this occurred during a period when women experienced heightened levels of empowerment and achieved unprecedented professional accomplishments (Woolf, 2002).

The discussion surrounding femininity and beauty has been a prominent subject of interest among feminists for a considerable period of time. However, third-wave feminists have exhibited a greater inclination towards endorsing

women's autonomy in defining and embracing their individual understandings of these notions. In her book *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf describes that:

Many [women] feel embarrassed to accept that seemingly insignificant issues, such their bodies, looks, hair, and clothes, play such a significant role in their lives. But in spite of their shame, guilt, and denial, an increasing number of women are beginning to wonder if it isn't the case that they are completely neurotic and alone, but rather that something significant is in fact at risk, and this is related to female liberation and female beauty. (Wolf, 2002, p. 9)

For decades, the feminist movement has influenced what women wear, what designs they adopt, and even the types of fabrics that are utilized. Numerous well-known fashion designers, have produced works aimed specifically at women throughout history. Miniskirts, women's trousers, pantsuits, and many more styles of clothing were designed specifically for various events. Feminism also gave women the confidence to express their sexuality freely through their clothing.

## 1.2 Patriarchy's Performativity in English Literature

Dress has been used as a marker of class, indicating one's position in the social order. Women's bodies have long served as a stage for a wide variety of fashion choices, from power wigs to elaborate gowns, wired underskirts to corsets, miniskirts to high heels, sometimes revealing the wearer's unique sense of style, and other times obscuring her behind a veil of societal norms and expectations. The clothing that women were expected to wear in the past served primarily as a visible symbol of women's subordination in society. It means that the clothing industry was actually serving to limit women's freedom. Women were being forced into defensive and inauthentic modes of presentation, and their cultural relationship with narcissism and triviality was strengthened by the perception that fashion imposed oppressive forms of gender identity. The fashion industry has been a product of a patriarchal society that has reduced women to nothing more than their appearance.

Ever since childhood, women have been taught to prioritize appearance when making decisions about what to wear. For the most part, society expects women to act and behave in ways that are consistent with the stereotypes of their

gender. In this way, gender is understood as "the set of social arrangements that are established around normative sex categories," (Conley, 2017, p. 283). Cultural and social norms both mandate specific dress codes associated with each gender.

Fashion is a sort of "nonverbal communication" which can reveal a person's gender identity, whether masculine or feminine (Lauer, 1981). When women choose to wear their dresses in a manner that is not conventionally identified with their gender, they run the risk of being subjected to the social stigma that is linked to their behavior. On the other hand, the demand for objectification is not stated explicitly, but it is implicit in the hostile sentiments toward women who choose not to dress in a traditionally feminine manner. A woman will, in some form or another, be forced to confront her vocation as a sex object in a variety of societies that adhere to a wide range of cultural conventions. In some cultures, it is customary for a woman to cover her entire body, with the exception of her eyes or even to cover her eyes as well. In some other societies, she has to wear clothing that is extremely constricting and uncomfortable in order to be considered beautiful. Thus, there are many variations of having a "vocation as sex object" (de Beauvoir, 2010, p. 650).

Simone de Beauvoir believes that a woman dresses only to represent herself; at home, going about her occupations, she merely dresses to go out and to entertain, she dresses up. She believes that:

Dressing has a twofold significance: it is meant to show the woman's social standing (her standard of living, her wealth, the social class she belongs to), but at the same time it concretizes feminine narcissism; it is her uniform and her attire; the woman who suffers from not *doing* anything she thinks is expressing her *being* through her dress. (de Beauvoir, 2010, p. 649)

As a result, restrictive clothes do not reveal a woman as an autonomous individual and do not serve to "fulfill her projects but on the contrary to thwart them" (de Beauvoir, 2010, p. 650).

Llewellyn Nergin argues that Simone de Beauvoir believed that being well-dressed was a form of bondage for women since it diverted their attention and resources from more important goals. While men's sense of self was largely formed

by their pursuit of transcendental projects, women's sense of identity was largely formed by their attention to their physical appearance. Women, unable to express their artistic side in other ways, have taken to altering their appearance in order to feel more complete about themselves, resulting in a neurotic preoccupation with vanity. Because of the male gaze that focused on their appearance rather than their accomplishments, women have become passive objects of admiration (Nergin, 2008).

The leading feminist philosopher and gender theorist, Judith Butler, agrees with Beauvoir's critique of women's clothing and the way women operate in society in accordance with gender norms. The word "gender performativity" was first used by Butler in *Gender Trouble*. Examining gender as an "act" that "constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority" (Butler, 1990,528). Performativity theory investigates the concept of gender as a social construction. It is related to how often harmful gender standards are reinforced. As highlighted by Liz Kotz in an interview with Judith Butler, as she asserts that "Gender is an impersonation...becoming gendered involves impersonating an ideal that nobody actually inhabits" (Butler, 1992, para. 10). For this reason, according to the performativity hypothesis, gender representations are the outcomes of compromises between an individual's internalized sense of identity and the external influences and responses to that identity in the larger society.

Similar to how Butler uses stylized repetitions of actions to reinforce gender, the repeated symbols and signs that are woven into clothing are, for the most part, copied and worn without conscious awareness. If a woman maintains a particular appearance for a significant amount of time, she will eventually come to feel that the persona she is portraying is her true identity. According to Kaiser, "many of our roles or performances do become absorbed into identities," and the roles that are played tend to have rather rigorous categories for attire, even if these classifications are not explicitly stated (Kaiser, 1997, p. 194). Because of this pattern, including fashion, women start taking some aspects of their lives which are determined by society for granted. Even further, Butler asserts that "the many acts of gender establish the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all" (Butler, 1990, p. 522). She further believes that gender is the performance that is always "forced, always on and always with anxiety and

pleasure” (Butler,1990, p. 531). Like putting on a mask, clothing is worn daily that one can play the part a woman is given. Despite appearances, many acts do become absorbed into identities, even if a garment isn't actually a mask, it can serve as one. Clothing is a crucial aspect of building one's social identity and self-presentation.

Reflecting on Diana Crane's research in *Fashion and Its Social Agendas* (2000), she highlights the importance of recognizing the role of clothes in constructing and reshaping the field of gender studies. Crane uses a mix of methods, including social history and interviews with groups of women, to investigate how clothes convey status and personality. Implying the idea that fashion is about the "social construction of identity," she explores the economical, social, and consumer consequences of clothes in Europe during the past centuries (Crane, 2000, p. 1). According to Crane (2000), what people wear is a major factor in establishing their gender. She contends that people do not dress according to their natural inclinations, but rather are pushed into conforming to societal expectations of gender roles based on what they wear. Fashionable clothing has always been used to "make statements about social class and social identity," but Crane (2000) argues that after mass production of textiles and garments, "the principal messages were about the ways in which women and men perceived their gender roles or were expected to perceive them" (p. 16). Thus, she draws the conclusion from her study that women have been using dress as “non-verbal opposition against restrictive sex norms for at least a century” (p. 101).

Alongside adornment and dress, there have been a variety of representations of physical beauty as an object of admiration and desire. These have been depictions of characters who display innocence and high morals, which are associated with beauty. On the other hand, evil tends to have an unattractive and unpleasant exterior that reflects their immoral spirit, as Anne Anlin Cheng notes "The rhetoric of feminine beauty can be argued to have also been a rhetoric concerning feminine ugliness, because the discourse of beauty is perceived to constitute an attempt to discipline women's bodies (that needs to be made beautiful)" (2000, pp. 191-192). Women were forced to wear what pleased men, they were forced to wear tight clothes to reshape and beautify their bodies to go along with the beauty ideals that were set by patriarchy as shown in Figure 9.

## Figure 9

### *Women Being Forced to Wear Tight Lacing*



Note. By <https://fiveminutehistory.com/ooh-la-la-the-victorian-secret-how-to-get-into-shape-in-just-5-minutes/>

By analyzing how different eras idealized depictions of how women have been dressed, the study contends that one can better understand the shifting sociopolitical factors that shape one's cultural perspective of women across time. The process of normalization is founded on the pre-existing gender norms that have been formed by fashion, which can be interesting to see through the lens of these labels as they reveal the way in which fashion and ideology interact to define what is to be perfect, genuine, and beautiful for females in each decade. Thus, it is significant to examine certain examples of this particular issue in literary works such as *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) by Henry James, and *The House of Mirth* (1905) by Edith Wharton.

*Jane Eyre* places a significant emphasis on how a woman dresses. The characters' personalities, moral standings, and social positions are closely tied to the clothes they wear. All the women in Brontë's story are described in terms of the flimsy garments they wear. Clothes become multifunctional in the sense that they transcend the analytical look Jane casts on the succession of vain and hypocritical people she meets like Mr. Brocklehurst, his family, and Rochester's guests, especially Blanche Ingram. The scene of "the hour spent at Millcote" is dense with sartorial references. A day after the betrothal scene, just after professing themselves as equals, Rochester takes Jane to buy rich silks for new dresses and jewels against her will: "Mr. Rochester obliged me to go to a certain silk warehouse: there I was ordered to choose half a dozen dresses. I hated the business, I begged to leave to defer it: no - it should be gone through with now" (Brontë, 1847, p. 351). This quote indicates how Mr. Rochester exercises his

power over Jane as he used to do with other women in his life. Even if she attained to reduce the number of dresses, "he vowed he would select himself" (Brontë, 1847, p. 351). What he chooses is utterly different from what Jane is used to wear. Although she loves to wear black dresses, he forces her to wear pink. Silk as "the most brilliant amethyst dye, and superb pink satin" (Brontë, 1847, p. 352) selected by Rochester for her would appeal to Celine Varens, Blanche or Adele but not her. Rochester's imposed power borrows the exotic image of the sultan donating "gold and gems" to his "harem inmates" which was already employed in the scene of the charades when he disguised like the "very model of an Eastern emir" (Brontë, 1847, p.241). In their interpersonal function, clothes here materialize the proof of inequality, presented by Rochester's exercise of power which is enhanced in another situation: "I will attire my Jane in satin and lace, and she shall have roses in her hair; and I will cover the head I love best with a priceless veil ... I hope to pour jewels into your lap: for every privilege, every attention shall be yours" (Brontë, 1847, p. 493-4). Being treated as a doll is completely rejected by Jane:

I told him in a new series of whispers, that he might as well buy me a gold gown with a silver bonnet at once: I should certainly never venture to wear his choice... the more he bought me, the more my cheek burned with a sense of annoyance and degradation... I never can bear being dressed like a doll. (Brontë, 1847, pp. 511-512)

It is clear that Jane is aware of the patriarchal rules imposed on women, and though she refuses to be dressed like a doll but eventually she submits to Mr. Rochester and marries him.

The well-known novel *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), written by Henry James, portrays Isabel Archer's life, as that of a young woman who is caught between making the wrong choices in life and living up to the expectations she has set for herself. Henry James, in fact, successfully depicts womanhood, female sexuality, and the feminine body by having the protagonist wear restrictive clothing that "certainly do not reflect who I am, and heaven forbid that they should! My clothes may express the dressmaker, but they don't express me. To begin with, it's not my own choice that I wear them; they're imposed upon me by society"(James, 1881, p. 260). A woman with an independent spirit, who is also intelligent and beautiful, and who has the desire to live her life on her own terms;

however, at some point in the story, she falls victim to the allure of marrying the patriarch of the family in a world in which she eventually takes her place as an object of sexual pleasure.

*The House of Mirth* (1905), written by Edith Wharton, depicts the idealized feminine who desires an existential nothingness; yet, she is imprisoned in a social being fueled by patriarchal norms and traditions. Wharton presents Lily "as the victim of the civilization which had produced her, and the chains of her bracelet appeared like manacles chaining her to her fate"(Wharton, 1905, p. 10). According to the author's interpretation of the character, Lily appears to be an adorable but pointless ornament, as she is unable to freely express herself due to the corset and lengthy skirt that she wears, as well as the bracelet that sparkles on her arm. Fashion, accordingly, plays a key role in that coercion in the sense that Wharton exhibits an acute appreciation of its harmful lure as both a means of attaining one's own sense of fulfillment and as a tool for societal regulation.

The term "femininity" is sometimes used synonymously with vulnerability and ridiculousness, and it is attached to women in order to easily manage and chastise them. In many depictions, femininity is represented by varying degrees of decency or potency, both in terms of dress and behavior. This is because femininity encompasses both the outward appearance and the behavior of a person. This rings especially true for Lily because everyone looks up to her as the ideal of what a woman ought to be. As Wagner expresses it: "her ultra-intelligibility creates a different problem altogether. She is an ideal, an original, and a feminine icon of culture that is so known for what her image represents that she is curiously caught in the stage of categories and labels. She is forbidden the privilege of invisibility" (Wagner, 2016, p. 122).

In her novel "*The House of Mirth*," Edith Wharton makes a significant point of societal critique regarding the unequal distribution of wealth according to gender. When Wharton recounts Lily's living conditions, she says that "it seemed to her natural that Lily should spend all her money on dresses, and she supplemented the girl's scanty income by occasional 'handsome presents' meant to be applied to the same purpose" (Wharton, 1905, p. 60). However, Lily says that:

The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don't make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop\_ and if we can't keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership. (Wharton, 1905, p. 18)

Lily's speech highlights the social pressures placed on women to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations, particularly with regards to their appearance. Women are expected to be physically attractive and well-dressed in order to attain success and failing to attain these standards is viewed as a form of degradation. As it reinforces the notion that a woman's worth is tied to her youth and beauty rather than her abilities and accomplishments and her intrinsic worth as a human being.

### **1.3 Postfeminism and Women's New Fiction**

Feminism encompasses a wide range of ideas, discourses, and theories concerning gender roles and women's empowerment. Postfeminism is a current iteration of the feminist movement that emphasizes individual agency: "Postfeminism is a concept fraught with contradictions. Loathed by some and celebrated by others, it emerged in the late twentieth century in a number of cultural, academic and political contexts, from popular journalism and media to feminist analyses, postmodern theories and neo-liberal rhetoric" (Genz & Barbon, 2009, p. 1). Postfeminism can be found in academic literature, just like other "post-" discourses, such as postmodernism and postcolonialism, and it alludes to a shift in the way one conceptualizes and creates identity and gender categories in this context. Similarly, Postfeminism has been interpreted in the fields of politics and social studies to mark the beginning of a "post-traditional" period characterized by radical shifts in fundamental social connections, role stereotyping, and ideas of individual agency. Postfeminism symbolizes the conclusion of a distinct period in feminist history and represents a generational shift in how women see power relations between them and men and among women themselves. As one will see, many younger feminists use postfeminism as evidence that women are not currently experiencing a second-wave feminism.

The term "Postfeminism" implies that there is a theoretical and lexical relationship with feminism; nevertheless, this link grows to embrace postfeminist's

ties with various social, cultural, theoretical, and political domains that may be in conflict with feminism, such as consumerism, popular media, and neo-liberal discourse. Hence, Postfeminism is neither the substitute for nor the (illegitimate) offspring of feminism. The origins of postfeminism are significantly more complicated and even contradictory, reflecting the tensions of a world in the late 20th/early 21st century in which feminism's concerns have grown popular while being voiced in politically inconsistent ways. Therefore, "the fact that Postfeminism cannot be delimited and defined with a clear sense of finality and certainty points towards its interdiscursivity and intercontextuality, which inevitably take the form of boundary-crossing" (Genz and Brabon, 2009, p. 7). Postfeminism is not merely a revival of feminism, or even a straightforward rejection of the feminist movement, but rather a delicate resignification that brings with it the risk of reaction and the promise of new ideas. Because of the contradictory characteristics of the postfeminist movement, this study believes that any attempt to define it would be a fruitless exercise serving only as a convenient short cut. If the study falls into the trap of relying too much on definitions, it risks coming up with easy answers at the cost of deeper, more interesting inquiries.

Postfeminism builds a path for women to feel comfortable being identified as feminists to embrace their femininity without feeling seen as weak or unaggressive. That femininity and feminism are not mutually exclusive is a central tenet of the postfeminist movement. Postfeminism, in contrast to feminism, views women's sexuality as a form of personal liberation rather than as a way to make them objects of the male gaze. That which Postfeminism advocates is "a journey beyond feminism, to a more comfortable zone where women are now free to choose for themselves" (Beck as cited in McRobbie, 2004, p. 259). Whatever they decide to be, women can still feel empowered and secured in their femininity. Furthermore, a postfeminist woman, through her enlightened perspective, embodies a harmonious realm that reconciles the inherent contradictions between her feminist principles and her feminine embodiment, the delicate balance between individual achievements and collective progress, and the intricate interplay between her professional pursuits and personal connections. Consequently, she presents a myriad of avenues for women to identify with and find inspiration from.

Postfeminism places a strong emphasis on style and fashion. According to Anna Konig (2004), "dressing up equals fun, and fun equals empowerment"(p. 140). Fashion, in this sense, can serve as both a representation of one's power and a source of pleasure. As such, "fashion feminism" refers to the process of gaining power by means of the body, the image, or fashion, and the term is used rather frequently (Genz and Brabon, 2009, p. 333).

Postfeminism is represented in the media and literature. Most media depictions of Postfeminism have heralded it as a movement that, in contrast to second-wave feminists, enthusiastically welcomes rather than condemns mainstream of cultural productions. Some famous television programs from the 1990s and early 2000s are considered postfeminist works due to the fact that they centered on strong female protagonists in leading roles who draw strength from positive role models in popular culture. *The Princess Diaries*, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The Devil Wears Prada* are all examples of such works of fiction.

Postfeminist literature, or "chick lit," is a subgenre of women's writing that is often acclaimed for its boldness, humor, and complexity; it often features feminist themes that challenge traditional narrative structures. Chick lit fosters a sense of solidarity amongst women who experience similar forms of sexism in their daily lives by giving the protagonist the ability to speak for herself. As a result, chick lit introduces a fresh approach to politicizing the individual and special experiences of women. New female subjectivities that have arisen in the postfeminist age are produced and legitimized in the genre of chick lit.

Chick lit novels are known for their intellectual content and fast-paced narratives that focus on the lives of young, primarily white women as they navigate their personal and professional lives. They are independent women who make individual choices about their own lives. Chick lit often employs first-person narratives to give a vivid voice to the experiences of young women, which is in line with postfeminism's emphasis on the individuality of women. This provides chick lit fiction with a sense of realistic tincture. Stephanie Harzewski (2011) observes that texts like chick lit provide "a lens" through which to examine modern gender relations because of the reality they portray, which has been revolutionized by women's rights (p. 15).

The greater realism of chick lit is one of the significant distinctions between traditional romances and this postfeminist genre. Chick lit, in contrast to romance novels, which tend to romanticize marriage or relationships, focuses on the practicalities of modern cohabitation. Chick-lit, as postfeminist fiction, moves beyond victimization to depict women as active sexual beings who value sexual freedom, in contrast to the representation of women as objects and victims of male passion in romance novels.

Chick lit protagonists are typically successful career women who are employed in the publishing or media industries. According to Harzewski(2001) , “chick lit protagonists can experience romance, desire, or self-esteem solely through commodities” (p. 12). Chick lit protagonists are constantly engaged in various forms of consumer behavior, such as shopping sprees.

It is important to keep in mind that Chick Lit genre is written by women writers, about modern women, and for women readers, thus the fact that being a woman is really a very big deal in this subgenre of writing. The reader woman wants to know that someone in her age has grasped the problems facing modern women, and she wants to know that women like her have put pen to paper to address her contemporary issues, including fashion and beauty.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the intricate relationship between fashion and feminism has shown how clothes has affected women throughout history and literature. Patriarchal and cultural restrictions that controlled women's bodies and limited their beauty have objectified them through corsets. Literary works including Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth, and Henry James' A Portrait of a Lady have addressed the repressive aspect of clothes, shedding light on women's historical struggles. Butler's theory has shown how clothing shapes gender in society by analyzing patriarchy's performativity of fashion.

Fashion, a powerful cultural force, perpetuates patriarchal norms and expectations that shape gender performance, often enforcing restricted gender binaries and stereotypes. Feminism fought for women's rights and against body objectification in response to these constraining garments and social standards.

Feminist movements rejected fashion industry norms of femininity and beauty and sought to overthrow patriarchal hierarchies.

In contemporary times, the concept of empowerment through fashion has gained prominence, particularly within the framework of postfeminism. Postfeminism emphasizes individual agency and the idea that women can reclaim their bodies and fashion choices as tools for self-expression and empowerment. This perspective is often portrayed in the chick lit genre, which celebrates female protagonists who navigate their lives on their own terms, including their fashion choices.

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