Are You a Designer Bride? Power Relations Between Popular Media and the Indian Bride

Jhilam Chattaraj
RBVRR Women's College, Hyderabad, India

Abstract

In recent years, the Indian bride has become a representative fashion icon for the clothing, cosmetic, and entertainment industry. Designers like Sabyasachi Mukherjee, Manish Malhotra, Ritu Kumar, and Anita Dongre among others seem to project the bride's access to bridal couture as a symbol of empowerment, emancipation, and sometimes even nationalism. However, statistics would prove that Indian brides still carry the burden of cultural evils like dowry, domestic abuse, and psychological pressures of marriage and child-bearing. Indian television shows like "Band, Baajaa, Bride;" lavish weddings of Bollywood actors like Anushka Sharma and Deepika Padukone have evoked new aspirational images within the Indian middle class. The present paper attempts to question the proliferation of wedding couture as a symbol of power and resistance to power. It aims to explore the complex route maps of capitalist desire and the seduction of women into this ambiguous role-play. The paper questions if fashionable brides dressed in hot pants are foolish consumers or artful minds who bend patriarchal structures even if for a short time. The paper will be premised on theories of popular culture, post-feminism, everyday feminism, and cultural studies. The paper will study the influence of designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee and the consequent creation of 'Sabyasachi brides.' Here, Sabyasachi, the brand, is only a representative example. The paper will enable us to address the reductive approach of contemporary capitalism towards complicated ideas of gender, class, caste, money, religion, and region in the context of Indian marriages. It will refer to ideas by Germaine Greer, Gloria Steinem, Stephanie Genz, Maitrayee Chaudhuri, and Ipsita Chanda to investigate the empowering images of young brides — as curated and exhibited by popular media.

Keywords: Bride, Couture, Media, Feminism, Fashion, India

Introduction

Indian fashion designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee is a renowned figure in the field of global bridal fashion. Popular models, Bollywood actresses, and affluent brides of the Indian Diaspora communities consider his clothes as the ultimate symbol of joie de vivre. A cursory study of the present popular cultural trends and social media will testify that being a "Sabyasachi bride"

is a much-coveted aspiration of an Indian bride and the wedding itself. The bride is no longer a woman to be united with her partner, chosen either by her or her parents, but a representative fashion icon of the contemporary media and beauty industry. There are several other designers like Manish Malhotra, Abu Jani, Sandeep Khosla, and Masaba Gupta who influence the bridal couture market in India. However, the paper is particularly interested in studying the way Sabyasachi Mukherjee's brand has shaped the culture of bridal wear among Indians.

The "Sabyasachi bride's" expensive lehenga, or the sari replete with detailed ethnic embroidery is not just an attire but a conscious social, cultural, and political statement. Recently, Aditya Birla Fashion and Retail announced a strategic partnership with Sabyasachi by acquiring a fifty-one percent stake in the Sabyasachi brand for Rs 398 crore. It is India's largest and most popular luxury designer brand with strong Indian roots and global appeal (Malviya par.1) Sabyasachi's clothes are exquisite representations of Indian heritage. They have created new and exciting social, class, and gender dynamics that deserve scholarly attention.

The pandemic and the consequent lockdown did not affect the Sabyasachi brand. Weddings happened and brides fulfilled their aspirational images. A glance at the Instagram account, "bridesofsabyasachi" will reveal that at least three hundred brides from different cultures, countries, religions, and genders chose Sabyasachi couture during the pandemic. Popular media and the photographic representation of these brides seem to project the bride's access to Sabyasachi's bridal couture as a symbol of empowerment and emancipation. However, statistics would prove that Indian brides still carry the burden of cultural evils like dowry, domestic abuse, and psychological pressures of marriage and child-bearing. Popular Indian television shows like "Band, Baajaa, Bride," and lavish weddings of Bollywood actors like Anushka Sharma and Deepika Padukone have ignited the imagination of the Indian middle

class with aspirations. This paper attempts to question the representation of wedding couture by popular media as a symbol of power and resistance to power. It aims to explore the notion of capitalist desire and the seduction of women into an ambiguous role-play. Are fashionable brides dressed in hot pants foolish consumers or artful minds who aim to bend patriarchal structures even if for a short time? We need to reconsider: how wise is it for a young woman to invest in bridal clothes, shoes, jewellery, and makeup, rather than sustainable nutrition, health care, fitness, and mental well-being?

Backdrop

The Indian bride has been studied in several cultural and sociological projects. Some of the noteworthy works are *Bride Burning in India* (1998) by Mohammed Umar, *Dowry Murder: The Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime* (2002) by Veena Talwar Oldenburg, *Bollywood: Popular Indian Cinema Through A Transnational Lens* (2009) by Raminder Kaur and Ajay J Sinha and books like *Bollywood Weddings: Dating, Engagement,* and *Marriage in Hindu America* (2010) by Kavita Ramdya, and *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture* (2012) edited by Vasudha Dalmia and Rashmi Sadana, *Marriage, Migration and Gender*, edited by Rajni Palriwala, *Matchmaking in Middle Class in India* (2020) by Parul Bhandari, and Patricia Uberoi's "Aspirational Weddings: The Bridal Magazine and the Canons of Descent Marriage" in *Patterns of Middle-Class Consumption of India and China* (2008), edited by Christophe Jaffrelot and Peter Van der Veer. The above-mentioned works highlight the way weddings influence the life of an average Indian. They also focus on the role of popular culture in determining the cultural, social, and financial future of a woman.

Before beginning my study, it would be useful to offer a critical account of the notion of popular culture. Critics mention that Stuart Hall's "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular" (1981) studies "popular culture" as straddling poles of containment and resistance. Hall

suggests that the two terms "popular" and "culture" when put together, create "difficulties that can be pretty horrendous (Cruz and Guins 21).

The term popular broadly refers to that which claims its allegiance to the people and represents their interests and wider cultural patterns. Raymond Williams avoids any simplistic celebration of the "popular", while at the same time refusing to be drawn to an elitist dismissal of the "popular" as trivial (Conboy 1,5). Popular culture is a discursive condition and subject to a changing relationship with people. The popular is said to speak the language of the people. Martin Conboy writes in his book, *The Press and the Popular Culture* (2002) that "the popular is also said to speak the language of the people. In this sense, the idea of the popular may be studied from Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque. The popular might sometimes seem to represent the voice of the marginal or of a counterculture where the normal way of perceiving the world and power relations is altered. Also, modern popular culture has been perceived as a "technologized appropriation of earlier folk culture" (Chattaraj 2018: 26). The popular may provide a voice to the marginal, or to a counterculture where the normal way of perceiving the world is altered. This paper will study if "Sabyasachi brides" are objects of capitalist seduction or successful ploys for masquerading feminist freedom, or a brief but illuminating triumph of women in societies rooted in cultures and traditions.

Representative Agents of Popular Culture

Today, the entertainment media as Arjun Appadurai calls it — a "mediascape" – is dotted with several channels aiming to captivate the public imagination (Hopper 44). Emboldened by the power of brands and labels, the media has transformed the domestic ritual of marriage into a public spectacle. Over-the-top media services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime have had successful shows based on Indian weddings. Web series like *The Big Day* (2021), *The Indian*

Matchmaking (2020-2023), *Made in Heaven* (2020) and *A Suitable Girl* (2018) have portrayed affluent Indian youth who are ready to splurge their hard-earned money on weddings.

One of the most popular and effective of them all is reality television. Heather Timmons, in the article, "In India, Reality TV catches on, with some qualms," observes that Indian reality shows reflect a uniquely "Indian form of chaos" and they are so popular that they generate about thirty to forty percent of their revenue from texting and mobile phone interaction, which is more than twice of the rest of the world (Timmons "Financial Times" par. 15). In the context of the Indian wedding and specifically the bride, shows like "Band, Baajaa and Bride" on New Delhi Television (hereafter NDTV) Good Times, "What Not to Wear" on TLC India, "The Bachelorette," "My Big Fat Indian Wedding," "India's Perfect Bride," "Grand Indian Weddings" on Zoom TV and several NRI weddings on Wedding TV Asia have gained much popularity among viewers. These shows contain extensive interviews with the bride about her clothes, jewellery, make-up, and wedding events. These brides are primarily from upper-middle-class Hindu families who often have a source of income of their own. Many of these series often become a consumerist celebration of their culture (Chattaraj 2020 168-169).

Similarly, there is an increasing rise in aestheticizing the ceremonial processes of weddings through photography and videography. Shilpa Kannan in her article "How Technology is Changing Indian Weddings," published in the online edition of BBC News Asia, writes about the success of Canvera, a Bangalore-based photography company started by two techies, Dhiraj Kacker and Peeyush Rai. They help photographers publish top-quality wedding albums and have over fifteen thousand photographers as clients. They have estimated that there are at least 250,000 active wedding photographers in the country. Freelance wedding photographers registered on websites such as Candid Wedding Photography, Indian Wedding

Photographers, Shadigrapher.com, Weddingsutra.com, and The Wedding Filmer attempt to capture the essence of the wedding, especially the bride (Chattaraj 2020 169).

Aesthetics of popular culture often influence the images of the bride and the groom as they narrate themselves through photographs and films; they create a cinematic narration of weddings where the bride and groom are the lead actors, dressed in designer clothes and dancing in front of a Bollywood-inspired backdrop. In every generation, Bollywood has offered a model bride. One can recollect the Hindi film, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* 1995 (hereafter, *DDLJ*) as a film that offered the prospect of a culturally traditional bride, yet dares to go beyond patriarchal conventions. But those were the days when the neo-liberal cultural trends did not influence Bollywood cinema, and directors did not bother much about the "look" of their actors. So, the film's poster depicted characters who might be considered unglamorous according to the present beauty standards prevailing in Bollywood. It would be fruitful here to mention that the Hindi film titled *Humpty Sharma ki Dulhania*, 2014 offers a revised version of DDLJ, suitable for the yuppie Indian audience around the globe. This film begins with a small-town bride, Kavya, who runs away from home so that she can buy a designer *lehenga* worn by popular Bollywood actress Kareena Kapoor. Also, unlike the character of Simran, who was dependent on her lover, Raj, for her emancipation, here Kavya takes control of her life as well as the very ordinary Humpty Sharma (Chattaraj 2020 169).

Added to these are the real-life pageants of the bride in bridal fashion shows. These shows are held in major cities and showcase the works of top-notch Indian designers who redefine the standards of luxury attached to Indian weddings. For the brides-to-be, it is a platform for a choreographed display of the possibilities — of opulence, of mythic, ethnic, historic, and modern narrations on bridal wear (Chattaraj 2020 170).

The Sabyasachi Seduction

The bridal industry in India has been tremendously successful. It is a recession-proof business. Sukhada Tatke, in her article "Why Indian Wedding Traditions Could Trump the Pandemic" (2020), writes that "In India, planning weddings generally involves striking a delicate balance between the desires of couples, dreams of families and expectations of guests. Weddings are often seen as occasions to flex social-standing muscles. Big weddings are very much the norm, and families are judged on their hospitality. Guest lists often include distant relatives and acquaintances. Budgets range from $6,000 and $13,000 for modest weddings; $41,000 and $80,000 for lavish celebrations; and $100,000 to $ 1 million for extravagant revelries, according to industry experts" (Tatke "British Broadcasting Corporation").

In the past few years, the Indian middle class has leapfrogged to a new level of social and economic mobility. The spendthrift folks are represented not only by traditionally opulent families but also by the middle class from India's provincial cities. They, as Sunil Khilnani observed in his article "Balanced on a Billion", wish to participate in the patterns of consumption as enjoyed by their counterparts in the big metropolises of Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, and Chennai. These young men and women contribute towards the commercial galvanization of the nation by setting new standards of consumption and luxury. They also include corporate-generated, transnational citizens who are willing to shed parochial sentiments to work for the neo-liberalized economy of the nation. They collectively represent the material and cultural renaissance of the Indian middle class. They form the class of people who have made the most of their education and intelligence and emerged as the new identity-markers of the nation (Chattaraj 2018: 2015-217). It could thus be inferred that the rise in the representational cultures on the bride is another agent — cataclysmic to a new form of class struggle in the nation.

Multinational business empires have infused ideologies of global consumerism into the Indian consciousness. This has been slowly but systematically carried out by the evolving agents of media which has over the years grown as dominant cultural institutions. The growing trends in online shopping along with consumerist messages from visual media have emboldened the relationship between power and the power to buy. Bhabani Sen Gupta in his essay, "India in the Twenty-first Century" writes that liberalization even at a relatively moderate pace, however, changed the face of India, and, more importantly, its mind (Sen Gupta 302).

Sukhada Tatke further suggests that "Indian society is deeply divided along caste and class lines, so precise expectations of weddings differ for each part of society. In general, parents save for decades (and often go into debt) for what they see as their biggest responsibility toward their children, especially girls. An episode of the popular television series *Made in Heaven* in Season One shows a man applying for a loan for his daughter's wedding without telling her; just to fulfil her dream of a perfect wedding. The idea of a big wedding as a marker of social status is both deeply entrenched and continuously reinforced by marketing from the wedding fashion, jewellery, and styling sectors. Sociologist Patricia Uberoi once called Indian weddings "the most visible site of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste," while according to a Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdeler (KPMG) analysis, the average Indian family spends about one-fifth of its accumulated wealth on a child's wedding" (Tatke "British Broadcasting Corporation").

Tatke analyses in the same article that "About 10 million weddings taking place in India each year, the industry is widely reported to be worth around forty billion to fifty billion dollars, annually, second only to the US. Despite periodic attempts to curb them, weddings have grown more opulent over the years. Lavish celebrations involving wealthy businesses and Bollywood

families have emerged as national spectator sports." Tatke further says, "Till earlier this year, one wondered just how big the Indian wedding was going to get. It was like a race. Grand was becoming grander, especially in high-income families," says Parthip Thyagrajan, CEO of WeddingSutra, a popular wedding portal" (Tatke "British Broadcasting Corporation").

Sujata Assomull Sippy, in her article "Why Indian Fashion Designers Are Obsessed with Weddings", makes pertinent observations like, "If we go by the sheer number of wedding fashion shows in the country— the Vogue Wedding Show, BMW India Bridal Fashion Week, Bridal Asia and Shree Raj Mahal Jewellers India Couture Week to name only a few—it seems that all our designers are doing is creating wedding lehengas. There's a good reason for this. It's called money. The Big Fat Indian Wedding is estimated to be worth over Rs 1,00,000 crore, and wedding apparel makes up about Rs 10,000 crore of that. No wonder designers will do anything to crash the wedding party." Sippy quotes designer Rohit Bahl: "basically there are three Indian silhouettes: the sari, the anarkali, and the lehenga," he says, "the challenge in Indian fashion is to make them look different and to give them a stamp. That to me is the beauty of Indian fashion" (Sippy "Hindustan Times"). "But money is the biggest motivator," says Sabyasachi Mukherjee, one of India's most commercially successful designers. This year, Sabyasachi's turnover crossed the Rupees hundred crore mark, making him one of fashion's most financially successful designers, and most of this profit came from the Big Fat Indian Wedding" (Sippy "Hindustan Times").

Sippy quotes Sabyasachi, who says "the organized retail sector in India is still very poor and corporate investments are tentative, hence for a designer in India to grow big in both stature and turnover, the only route is bridal" (Sippy "Hindustan Times"). Sippy also refers to designer Monisha Jaising: "I believe that there is a new era in bridal fashion at the moment. It's all about individual and personal style and mixing the old with the new. Basically, there are no rules"

(Sippy 2014 "Hindustan Times"). Sippy further explains the trickle-down theory by Designer Sabyasachi as follows: "since weddings are the apex of fashion and spending, what's designed for weddings will trickle down the market as festive wear and then high-street clothing. While fashion prides itself on being democratic, there is no doubt that its elitist elements give it sheen and allure. And for now, in India, fashion depends on weddings to create a feeling of fantasy" (Sippy "Hindustan Times").

Narrating the Nation

Sabyasachi's clothes are rooted in Indian heritage and tradition. In many of his interviews, he has emphasized how he aims to project his idea of India to the world. In an interview at the India Conclave with editor Kalli Purie, Sabyasachi shared that his vision of a fashionable woman was one who is 5.1 inches and wears a saree and flats to a party (Mukherjee 2017). He aims to create clothes that could be passed down the generations and are not ruffled by the critics who say that his collection is a repetition or the "same old." It seems that through the bridal couture, Sabyasachi is narrating a nation; one that is antique, moored in age-old customs; a nation where the woman is a pilot, teacher, designer, and actress but also the cultural nucleus of the nation.

Sabyasachi's approach reminds one of Timothy Brennan. In his essay, *The National Longing for Form*, Brennan writes that the nation forms an inevitable component in the imagination of postcolonial writers. In developing nations, the concept of nation plays a dual role. Such nations forge their national spirit with vestiges of the past and contemporary cultural moorings. The artist has to struggle to capture the Foucauldian idea of the nation as a "discursive formation" (Brennan 46). In Brennan's view, the nation is not simply an allegory or imaginative vision but a "gestative political structure," which the third-world artist is consciously building, or suffering from its lack (Brennan 47). Sabyasachi's brides reflect a time

when the nation is in a new phase of history and culture due to the growing control of global corporations. A study of contemporary political conditions will reveal how ideas on the nation, nationalism, and national culture have led to endless political segregation, ethnic cleansing, and culture wars. One needs to define and redefine the role of the nation in the process of human evolution. Sabyasachi's bridal couture suggests that narratives on nations need not be startling or obvious. They may find expression in everyday cultural objects such as clothes, marriage, and rituals. In an interview on the website "Border and Fall", Sabyasachi makes debatable observations (Mukherjee 2013). The following paragraphs are excerpts from that piece:

What other key areas are you responsible for as a designer?

In my own way, I preserve the textile heritage of India by creating awareness for my craftsmen and my work. A part of my job is to make sure I revive old traditions of India that have been forgotten or lost because it has not been economically viable. I make sure I don't put my design ego into it and just revive things the way they were at one point in time by creating a more purist ideology within my customer. It's a battle I fight by making crafts and tradition more commercially viable by exposing it to popular culture by putting my outfits on actresses. In India, Bollywood is a huge subculture with a very big following. This strategy is to create a demand and supply for my craftsmen who are the base of my business, so that it becomes a sustainable business for them.

The second thing, in my own little way, is to instil a sense of nationalism and indigenous identity within a customer who is grappling with confusion. Fashion can be a very unkind world because it makes a living feeding on people's insecurities. As a brand we try to keep our customer secure by helping them find an identity that is very close to who they are.

Where does your sense of nationalism stem from?

I've always been proud of being Indian, knowing that I come from a land which is very special. When you grow up 'middle class', you grow up with a lot of dignity and self-respect, because you don't have much, that's the only thing that you can fall back upon. The lack of money sometimes makes you very sloppy – or it instils a sense of great

harmony within you. I've always felt Indians have been apologetic about their sense of perception and try to fit into a mould that's been created by the West.

Almost thirty-five thousand women apply to feature in the episodes of the famous "Band, Baajaa, Bride" show by NDTV. Several women from the Indian diaspora wish their wedding to be a display of authentic Indian culture in the West. Sabyasachi is a natural choice for such brides. This is as close as they can get to their ethnic heritage. This is a way of asserting the fresh affluence of the great Indian middle class of India to the world. They are ready to grab opportunities to escalate their socio-economic status. Such people collectively represent the material and cultural renaissance of the Indian middle class. Sabyasachi's clothes narrate a nation that is trying hard not to sink into the culture of post-internet individualism. They uphold tradition and repetition as the hallmark of cultural supremacy. The brides are projected as iconoclasts who prefer the old over the new, taste over flavour, and posterity over fads. Sabyasachi's brides are represented as the matriarchs of kinship and customs. However, all of this happens in a market, a commercial space that is not as glamorous as the world of Sabyasachi's brides. Thomas Friedman's observation cannot be ignored here: "The hidden hand of the market will not act without the hidden fist." The existence of companies such as McDonald's is ensured by the coexistence of McDonnell Douglas, the designer of the F-15. Further, the "'hidden fist' that keeps Silicon Valley's technologies safe is called the U.S. Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps" (Chesney par.39).

Popular Media equates beauty with power which is true but only to a limited extent. The bride's expensive lehenga can make a powerful statement about her social background, and her economic independence but does it guarantee sustained power? Does her glamorous representation ensure that she is no longer required to carry the burden of expectations of her in-laws, family, and society?

Bridal Wear as Popular Feminist Identity

"Ask most women what's the one label they want in their bridal trousseau, and it's very likely that the answer will be a matter-of-fact "Sabyasachi (Manghnani "Vogue")." Strangely enough, in an interview with designer Ambika Anand, along with Christian Louboutin, Sabyasachi says that his clothes are meant only for a certain category of people who adhere to his kind of aesthetics. It's okay for brides who cannot wear his clothes to buy cheap knock-offs available in the market. Sabyasachi's bride operates within the complex zones of contemporary corporate-governed, world order (Mukherjee "Good Times"). It is interesting to observe how corporate firms have access to wider information and communication networks and they have better opportunities to influence the market (Trivedi 24). Corporations have ushered trans-continental job choices for women but it is accessible only to those who are highly skilled and belong to a high-income group. Women who are illiterate or less skilled remain marginalized (Trivedi 18). Hence, the marginalized can have access to Sabyasachi's clothes through knock-offs or if they are lucky enough to be selected for his show by New Delhi Television (NDTV). Sabyasachi is happy that his work is trickling down across classes and that should not be a problem.

Clothes are an embodiment of identity. Sartorial choices are one of the most common agents of popular culture that create and recreate identity. Is there a certain kind of feminist identity associated with Sabyasachi's clothes? Critics such as Hollows and Moseley note that "most people become conscious of feminism through the way it is represented in popular culture" (Brabon and Genz 19). Although much of the critical gender analysis in academic postfeminism has been written in American or European contexts, I hope to find them useful in articulating the relationship between popular culture and gender as represented by the Indian-Asian bridal wear industry. The collective socio-political and cultural issues of Indian feminism are different. In the American and European context, women struggled against patriarchal,

social structures to attain their right to education, right to vote, economic independence, marital status, body, and sexuality. These are very different from the culturally sanctioned violence against which the majority of Indian women struggle to raise their voices. The practice of sati[1], abandoning of young widows, female infanticide, foeticide, burning of brides, dowry demands, caste-based violence, rise in prices, loss of traditional sources of income, tribal displacement, ethnic cleansing, sexual harassment, and rape are some of the social evils that feminist movements in India, spread across cultures and societies are fighting against.

Young brides seem to be seduced by the sheen of urban enterprise culture. Inspired by Angela McRobbie and Ariel Levy's study of women in the serial *Sex and the City*, these brides seem to use their "feminist" freedom to choose to re-embrace traditional femininity and engage in hedonist acts of consumption that focus as much on "Manolo Blahniks and Birkin bags" (Brabon and Genz 2009 100). These women are empowered enough to choose and reject their bridal trousseau, shoes, and jewellery but can they choose their husbands? Replace them like shoes?

It is important here to analyse the "modernist consumerist version of empowerment and emancipation that media is in the process of defining as 'feminism' and rendering hegemonic among its consumers" (Chanda 12). The young bride's desire and ability to wear a brand reiterates the contemporary tendency to mistake consumerism as a form of empowerment. It seems as if presently, empowerment is no longer a collective struggle for political, social, and cultural recognition but an individualistic assertion of consumer choice and self-rule. Sarah Banet-Weiser suggests that feminism has been "rescripted" to allow its smooth incorporation into the world of commerce and corporate culture (Brabon and Genz 24-25). Sometimes, the brides parading in clothes by designers like Sabyasachi and looking mellow and joyful in Instagram photos remind us of something that we could call 'Lara Croft syndrome.' Lara Croft

is a feminist icon who is both liberating and constraining. She has multiple roles to play. She is the tomb-raiding adventurer, martial arts expert, and a sex symbol for the gamer, who has the ultimate control over her movements and actions. In this sense, Lara is a "postfeminist boundary-rider who provides men and women with new female/feminine figures of identification, deploying physical prowess to battle men and monsters" (Brabon and Genz 154). Lara, as Helen Kennedy notes, has a "bimodal" appeal. To young women, she is both an object of sexual desire and an image of emancipation. However, ultimately, Lara is after all under the control of the player, her game plan is coordinated by the person who controls the panel (Brabon and Genz 154).

More than the clothes, it is the "representation," in popular magazines, fashion shows, television shows, and social media that reinforces the idea of feminism through bridal wear. According to a study by M. Ferguson in "Forever Feminine: Women's Magazines and the Cult of Femininity," lifestyle magazines "contribute to the wider cultural process which defines the position of women in a given society at a given point of time" (Conradie 403) They construct a type of femininity that is essentially performance-based. It is here, that magazines like *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan*, emerge as cultural actors that complicate the bride's exploration and understating of herself. Mary Holmes in her book *Gender and Everyday Life* (2009) quotes Rabine's study of women's magazines: "On the one hand, women are given images of themselves as confident, free and sexually powerful individuals who can display these qualities through their skillful use of clothing and cosmetics. On the other, during the last two decades, these same fashion magazines have published reports of women's submission and vulnerability, with articles on domestic violence, increasing rape rates, salary inequalities, sexual harassment in the workplace, and other events and p[ractices] which illustrate that women are merely objects in a man's world" (Holmes 101-102).

The young Indian brides who desire designer clothes seem to be in an earnest quest for "respectable femininity." Gender studies scholar Smita Radhakrishnan explains the phrase as "The new kind of respectable Indian femininity they construct is constituted through their gender and class, which allows them to symbolize the rapid changes taking place in India. Such symbolic work is critical for imagining the nation anew". The bride who is usually a working woman uses 'respectable femininity' as an embodied "symbolic capital" representation of primary Indian culture (Radhakrishnan 198).

The connection between femaleness and femininity has historically been seen in deductive terms (that is, reversibly, "I am a woman, therefore I am feminine") (Genz 3). In her work, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture* (2000), Joanne Hollows notes how in feminist thinking from Mary Wollstonecraft in the late eighteenth century to Naomi Wolf in the late twentieth century, women's quest for femininity and beauty is often constituted as a "problem" and a major cause of women's oppression. Mary Daly, in her radical work, *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), rejected femininity as a "man-made construct" and "a male attribute" that blinds women and lures them into forgetting its "falseness" (Genz 59). It is to be investigated here if the Sabyasachi brides feel the same way or if are they even aware of such a way of thinking. They might not need a man to pay their bills. Still, they wish another person, a designer, or an artist to validate their sartorial choices fully knowing about the "no customization," policy of the Sabyasachi Brand.

Such women manage to become the prima donnas in their workspace as well as in their homes. They smoothly slip into the *postfeminist* superwoman image as proliferated by popular media. Germaine Greer in her book *The Whole Woman* offers her critique of such popular postfeminist positions. She writes: "the most powerful entities on earth are not governments, but multinational corporations that see women as their territory. It assures women that they can

'have it all'—a career, motherhood, beauty and a great sex life—actually only to resituate them as consumers of pills, paint, potions, cosmetic surgery, fashion and convenience foods" (Gamble 51). It is necessary to see if these products have been used by women for their growth and development and challenge the idea of inequality attached to them. It is important to enquire if technology is gender-sensitive and if women are equipped with economic literacy to understand where exactly they have been positioned in the emerging orders of the world (Trivedi 35).

We need to know the consumer behaviour of women. She can spend lakhs on a wedding dress to look a certain way but does she have a health insurance policy? Brides pay for make-up and photographers, but do they invest in comfortable shoes? Brides visit wellness centres to fix their teeth, nose, and skin colour, but do they invest in nutrition, mental well-being, and sustainable fitness habits? These are some of the questions we need to ask to brides understand the vectors of media and ideas of empowerment.

What does a Bride need?

On 2 March 2021, Ayesha, a young bride, ended her life by drowning in the Sabarmati River, Gujarat, India ("The Indian Express" 2021). She could not put up with the harassment her family was subjected to due to the constant demands for dowry by her husband. Ayesha belonged to the lower economic strata of the society. This was also the time when Netflix released the highly popular "The Big Day," which documented the wedding journey of six Indian couples and how they decided to make their celebrations lavish, traditional yet unconventional. The women in that show are educated, have high-paying jobs, and are seen to tweak what they consider as the misogynist traditions of Indian weddings such as the Kanyadaan[2]. They too are fighting for equality and demand that their voice be heard and respected. Women across race, class, religion, and region want their share of dignity without

having to struggle for it. We have to question whether buying an expensive bridal dress with suitable jewellery, make-up, shoes, and Insta-worthy photos should be understood as empowerment. Should women fret about how they should look on their wedding day? Should women surrender to the social pressures to make one's wedding the only grand event of one's life and the idea that weddings have to be larger-than-life? Can a woman not throw a grand party after completing PhD? Or being promoted for a job? Or celebrate in honour of the woman who chooses to take care of the family and children instead of getting a pay package?

Ideally, one should not, but weddings seem to compel women in India to normalize the demand for the extravaganza. The bride's dress is not about comfort or beauty but a symbol of the family's affluence among other social, cultural, and political statements.

Conclusion

Indian brides, whether they choose to marry in designer apparel or a dress made by the local tailor, have limitations of their own. Even though it is a fascinating time for women who are educated, salaried, have access to social media, and can afford to live single in India or abroad, women's choices, when it comes to major decisions, are limited. Popular culture shows like "Begums of Bombay" might depict women as feisty, ready to speak up against exploitative bosses, and social and political injustices, yet reality series like 'Indian Matchmaking' show that finding a suitable partner is still difficult for Indian women. The paper does not in any sense, pass a judgment or demean a woman's choice to get married in a designer dress. Still, it only questions "the choice" as a symbol of freedom, power, and resistance as represented by various platforms of popular culture. A scholarly answer would conclude that popular media and its representation of bridal wear create confusing messages on empowerment and resistance. However, the questions raised by the paper are also subjective; they depend on the idea of empowerment understood by the brides. The paper thus keeps the argument open for

further deliberations. What should a bride choose to feel empowered on her wedding day? A designer dress or an investment policy? There is more to explore in the realm of bridal couture; between its sense of power and illusion of power.

Notes

1. Sati is an ancient Hindu practice of a widow immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre. In 1829, Lord William Bentick banned the Sati Pratha (the tradition of Sati).

2. *Kanyadaan*: In Hindu marriages, *Kanyadaan*, means "giving away the bride." In Sanskrit, it is a symbolic marriage ritual for the bride's parents and the couple.

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