

Rasheeda Ackbar considers the benefits and problems with clothing.

- 1 There is no direct evidence to suggest when exactly our early human – ‘hominin’ – ancestors stopped wandering around naked and started draping their bodies with animal furs and skins. Clothes do not fossilise, so anthropologists studied the evolution of lice, revealing that we started wearing clothes about 170,000 years ago. Our direct ancestors did not have much body hair, so to shield themselves from the scorching summers and the freezing winters, they donned rudimentary clothing. Thus began history’s endless ‘catwalk’. At first, people’s clothing choices were limited to the resources that were readily available. An abundance of animals offered hide and thick forests offered leaves. More advanced civilisations pioneered the use of linen, cotton and other forms of woven fabric. As trade routes grew, people were able to expand the materials they used, and with it, a change in what clothing came to represent, how it looked like and how it affected our lives. 5 10
- 2 Before the Industrial Revolution, the lower classes made fabric out of homespun fibers. They had neither time nor money to waste – clothes were seen as merely a necessity – often cobbling makeshift garments from scraps and hand-me-downs. In contrast, the upper classes had access to luxurious imported fabric, intricate adornments and the labour of skilled artisans. Fashions became ostentatious, with hoops, wires and stays for the women and matching three-piece suits for the men. As clothing soon turned into fashion, it came to represent wealth, status, gender identity, and much more. 15
- 3 In fact, clothing has often reflected the major changes that society undergoes. When non-western societies came under the rule of a colonial master, they were forced to accept, among other things, the western style of clothing. For instance, the British colonial administration in India forbade women from wearing their traditional clothing and demanded that they wear jackets like the English would. By the time of Indian independence in 1947, the “too-sexy” sari had given way to long-sleeved blouses and petticoats, which were seen as an indication of a civilised society. Indian women in such clothes represented a visible recognition of British colonial authority. Conversely, items of clothing were also resisted as tools of subjugation. With the rise of women’s movements, the strict code of femininity that had always been imposed was rejected. Clothing became the feminists’ tool, as they refused to be subject to the restrictive corset and the voluminous folds of fabric that hindered the slightest movement any longer, signifying their defiance of patriarchal standards that had dictated their appearance for far too long. 20 25 30
- 4 In fact, no other garment has reflected the changes in what clothing represents as much as the humble blue jean. First designed as workwear for labourers on American farms and mines in the late 19th Century, jeans soon became a staple fashion item in almost every wardrobe. In the post-WWII era, it was a symbol of rebellion, aligned with the cowboys of old, and in the 1960s hippie era, apart from representing freedom from more structured clothing, protesting college students began wearing them as a token of solidarity with the working class who were most affected by racial discrimination and the Vietnam War draft. What’s more, they were also an equalising force as they were mass produced and made accessible to almost everyone. Today, jeans come in all shapes and sizes – skinny, baggy, bell-bottom, high-waisted... there’s something for everyone, and its history tells a clear story of how clothing can be a powerful symbol for individuals. 35 40
- 5 Indeed it is undeniable that clothing continues to be used in positive ways by individuals and societies. Clothier Rae Tutera knows this more than most. His job now sees him working with the LGBTQ community to create suits for his transgender clients that help them mirror on the outside who they are on the inside. These visual clues not only provide a confidence boost for the wearer, but also help others be more sensitive to their preferred identity. Even when groups 45

- of people dress the same way, there are still benefits. In institutions – schools, corporations, the military – uniforms take away class segregation and the possible discrimination that wearing our own clothes might bring. Corporations too have recognised the benefits of dressing alike, such that airlines have even collaborated with famous designers to create a uniform in order to enhance their professional image and to reflect the values of the company. In general, what a person wears can be a positive way to project one’s national identity to the international community. Participants representing their countries at international events use it to demonstrate patriotism, as in the Miss Universe Pageant. Contestants’ outfits are regularly seen as a way to display what is most valuable about their respective cultures. Today, much of traditional clothing has been modernised for everyday use and is a way of keeping culture alive. 50
- 6 Other people have made use of clothing to call attention to social issues, such as gender, politics, the environment, and so on. Take for instance the political fashion statements on the red carpet, as in the case of celebrities wearing black to protest against sexual harassment and misconduct. The powerful visual effect was a unifying force that galvanised support for the movement in Hollywood and beyond. Others have taken part in the Green Carpet movement by wearing and designing eco-friendly fashion and showing their support for the use of more sustainable materials. This increased social awareness has clearly taken effect – the demand for eco-friendly fashion is trending. More clothing companies are no longer just setting up a few racks of eco clothing in the corner of a store but considering how to make their entire range more sustainable. 60
- 7 However, clothing is also fraught with many issues. While clothing is a powerful way to assert your identity and express your beliefs, it can become a point of conflict when outsiders don traditional clothing in a disrespectful manner. For example, the sale of native American headdresses has been banned at music festivals because it is seen as offensive and a form of cultural appropriation. In addition, those who are unaware of the origins of their clothing (Is it made of organic cotton? Was child labour employed? Did any communities benefit from its making?) have been subject to criticism. Moreover, because clothing is so highly symbolic today, telling others what they can or cannot wear is seen as an infringement on personal rights. But this ignores necessary standards of propriety, modesty, and even practicality in a given context or society. In this way, what you wear (or don’t wear) often invites unwanted commentary, and can become a divisive force. In other instances, dressing in a way that is not acceptable to the majority can subject the wearer to abuse, as in the case of transgender women, or the attacks on Jews wearing the kippah or other overtly Jewish signs in an atmosphere of increasingly brazen anti-Semitism. 75
- 8 All of these simply reinforce the idea that clothing is not as neutral as it may seem. As the debate heats up, it can only get more complicated and more problematic, masking a hidden hypocrisy that exists among us all. Fashion companies that lack plus-size lines are routinely criticised for their lack of inclusivity, with empty threats from consumers to boycott brands that do not heed their protests. Millennials who have jumped on the environmental bandwagon have also made a big deal of choosing sustainable materials, yet are still as susceptible to fast fashion as their predecessors, buying cheap clothing and quickly throwing them away after a few wears to make room for more. 80
- 9 Ultimately, the usual refrain that “I don’t know what to wear” has never been more true today, but not in the way that you would expect. Today, when it comes to clothing choices, you’re damned if you do, and damned if you don’t. When every decision you make invites inevitable criticism, you would not be alone in wishing for a return to the simple days of the hominin where our relationship with clothing was straightforward – protection from the elements, with little to no symbolic meaning. 85