

Fig. 1. Dark Blue Velvet
Afghani Dress, ca. 1970s.
Toronto Metropolitan
University FRC2017.05.001.
Photo by Rehab Patel.



VELVET: COMFORT OR CULTURE?

How Clothing Influences Cross-Cultural Identity and Belonging For Afghan Canadians

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INTRODUCTION

When I think of fashion, my socialization has instinctively reminded me of a Eurocentric perspective of what is fashionable. This gives me an opportunity to not only explore but reimagine the way we consume fashion as cross-cultural and diverse, especially in a political climate where our identities are often crucified for merely existing. I would like to start by acknowledging my personal biases in this close reading of the *Blue Velvet Afghani Dress* from Toronto Metropolitan University's Fashion Research Collection. As a Pakistani-Canadian, I grew up around a creative mother who often had outfits tailored in Pakistan and conducted small tailoring projects of her own which intrigued me and contributed to my selection of this garment. Since Afghanistan and Pakistan are neighbouring countries, my personal preferences and knowledge of this style of garment heightened my curiosity to do a close reading of it. This close reading takes an intersectional approach in answering, "how does clothing influence cross-cultural identity and belonging for Afghani Canadians?"



Fig. 2. Cotton Lining and stitching. Dark Blue Velvet Afghan Dress, ca. 1970s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2017.05.001. Photo by Rehab Patel.

VISUAL ANALYSIS

Nothing says fancy like a dark blue velvet dress with gold hand-stitched embroidery (see fig 1). This garment's designer is unknown, which raises my curiosities as to the inspiration of this dress. The viewer (like us, today) can only imagine the enriched environment and inspiration that resulted in this garment. This long-sleeve dress from the 1970s recalls traditional luxury Afghani design worn by women. The dresses are usually comprised of a long, loosely fitted dress which tightened by the waistline or was worn with a belt. This dress is comprised of dark blue velvet as the main material with cotton lining sewn under (see fig. 2). This particular dress is worn by Afghani women and reflects a particular style worn on special occasions like religious holidays and/or weddings. From the touch, the velvet is very soft but does not have a glossy finish like on velour or mirror velvet. The shape of the garment is a frock style dress with pleats below the waist which is fitted and flares to a wider body and hemline. There is finely hand-stitched golden embroidering on the v-neckline and collar and golden metallic embroidery on the chest, sleeve cuffs and hem. This type of embroidery is done by hand and is also known as threaded rope work or kochi. It is often used on luxury Afghani dresses for mostly women, but can be minimally present on a kochi dress. The kochi dress is a traditional long dress for women and can be worn everyday, but is differentiated by the type of thread work (Y.Hansrod, personal communication, 2020).



Fig. 3. Collar and neckline embroidery. Dark Blue Velvet Afghan Dress, 1970s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2017.05.001. Photo by Rehab Patel.

In figure 3, you can see the gold thread work which is a unique aspect of the garment. This style of thread work can be done in any colour, however this particular dress uses a metallic gold thread to build contrast against the deep blue velvet. As Khan explains, “people from Kandahar tend to buy *kochi* clothing for women to wear on their engagement night” which can be made by machine, however, the hand embroidered version is known to be the “highest quality and is very prized, beautiful and expensive” (Khan).

The collar of the dress also has the threaded rope design similar to the body of the dress. The placement of the embroidery on this garment follows the designs of a leaf, especially on the bottom hem and sleeves and was done by hand (fig 4). Another interesting aspect of this garment is the tag on the garment which reads “hand-made in Afghanistan” in English. This can reflect the heightened exoticization of Asian fashion especially during the Beatles era (also in the 60s and 70s). The stitching on the lining appears to be done by a machine. Overall, the physicality of this garment represents the traditional cultural styles of Afghanistan that are present in today’s Afghani garments.



Fig. 4. Sleeve embroidery. Dark Blue Velvet Afghan Dress, 1970s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2017.05.001. Photo by Rehab Patel.

REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS

As a Pakistani woman, I was able to recognize this garment immediately as an Afghan style dress because of my personal adornment of this particular type of dress. The velvet has a soft touch but overall the dress is heavy compared to other garments. I can assume this is because of the heavy velvet material, cotton lining and the hand-stitched thread work. However, an interesting point is that the use of velvet in this dress, especially during the 1970s, used to be worn during the winter seasons as well as in Northern regions in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Y. Hansrod, personal communication, 2020). Through my experience, I do not expect to see this traditional Afghan dress on magazines or in museums unless it is being displayed as a traditionally cultured collection. However, with the emergence of social media, there is a large number of posts featuring garments of similar styles. A recent Instagram post displays a similar style of Afghan dress in which you can notice the commonalities in the symmetry of the thread work and the use of velvet material (see fig 5). Beyond a marketing campaign, this garment represents a diverse and culturally enriched identity among Afghan women through the use of materials and threading techniques like kochi.



Fig. 5. 2020 Red Velvet Afghan Dress. From Instagram, @mursalqh.

KALA-YE AFGHAN

To begin examining, the cultural significance of traditional Afghani dresses, it is important to note the name, the embroidery and how each part of the dress is sewn. According to Daly, this particular garment is also known as *kala-ye Afghan*, where *kala* refers to clothing for women including *pirahan* (overdress), *shalwar* (pants) and *chador* (head covering). Although, *kala* refers to everyday clothing, while *kala-ye-Afghan* more often refers to special-occasion clothing (323) (see fig 6). The embroidery stitched on the *kala-ye-Afghan* is largely hand stitched, however according to Vogelsang-Eastwood, since the late twentieth century, machines are often used for this type of decoration. Typically, a traditional woman's dress has four panels of embroidery (*doch*): a large, squarish panel that covers the upper front of the dress; the two cuffs of the sleeve; and a long, narrow rectangular panel with a triangular top, which goes from about the waistline to the hem of the skirt.



Fig. 6. Kala/Kala-ye Afghan dresses. Images from Google Images.

NATIONHOOD AND IDENTITY

Religion is an important facet of Afghan daily life. Consequently, men's and women's dress reflect their degree of observance and affiliation. Ninety-nine percent of the Afghan population is Muslim, therefore Islamic influence is strong, and everyday life experiences are generally interpreted through an Islamic lens (Daly, 328). It is important to note that head-coverings not only hold a religious meaning, but represent a connection to cultural roots for non-practicing Afghani women especially in a cultural social setting. The Canadian media tends to portray head coverings as a "foreign practice introduced by newcomers" ("them") who are not assimilating into "Canadian" society ("us") (Anderson and Greifenhagen, 55). This response of "them versus us" is detrimental to the diverse communities of Canada. It not only distances Muslim women from what they believe is their Canadian identity, but alienates them from what it means to have an intersecting identity as Muslim-Canadians. Fluri explains how women's bodies become spaces of "representing and monitoring modernity and resistance to modernity". The body acts as the site for social constructions of "gender, race and sexuality as well as the countering of these gendered, social norms" (242).

As mentioned previously, connection to cultural roots plays a large role in intersecting identities as Afghani-Muslims. For those non-practicing Muslim Afghani women, wearing traditional clothing creates a sense of belonging within their community. Luxury brands like UK-based Avizeh have become a part of the rising popularity of clothes from Asia, like Afghan dresses. With over 70,000 Instagram followers (@Avizeh), they have gained popularity as an authentic Afghan jewelry and clothing brand while being featured by *Vogue*, *BBC* and *Tehran Times*. The popularity of traditional clothing has become a label of luxury Afghan clothing and represents how migrants and their descendants can develop intimate forms of attachment. These can be to the “material cultures associated with their homelands along with high levels of emotional investments that sometimes act as ritual tools in a diasporic context” (Tarlos, 73). The popularity and normalization of such cultural dresses reflect the changing diversity within fashion and how cross-cultural it has become. In addition, it is important to examine the “contemporary trans-global approach regarding fashion and immigration” as Loscialpo discusses the idea of national identity being adopted through closed borders as a method of regulation of nationhood. Loscialpo explores key ideas of how this creates a system of self-doubt which not only places these individuals in a society where they are “othered”, but alienated from their sense of self (619). It is crucial for us to examine the multi-layered approach to belonging in comparison to ideologies of nationhood which is problematic for immigrants. Fashion can be used as a tool of expression but also as an identity marker to create diverse and accepting spaces in society. For migrant women, their bodies are monitored and regulated through a socio-political lens and to deviate from the constant regulation of their bodies, the use of culture and fashion helps create belonging their social environment. Although there is little information about how this garment was acquired by the FRC, I would like to highlight key features of how cross-cultural methods of fashion have diversified our understandings of what it means to be “Canadian”. When we conceptualize “identity” it becomes crucial for us to understand how it is multi-layered and intersectional. In this article, identity is viewed through cultural clothing and belonging in a Canadian context. There are many ways clothing and identity intersect such as through a colonial perspective and/or cultural appropriation. However, this dress has allowed me to examine the rich history of average Afghan Canadians and how culture is intertwined with nationhood. It has reflected how fashion is ever-changing and has become a part of a larger conversation regarding identity and belonging for all.

CONCLUSION

Overall, it is important to note that the materiality of garments often hold a cultural significance. This garment exemplifies how components of the dress represent an important part of Afghani culture, from the materials used, to the hand-stitched embroidery and the style of the dress. Culture and religion play a crucial role in shaping identity. In this case, beyond a religious perspective, wearing traditional clothing like the *kala-ye Afghan* creates connectedness to the cultural roots of those living in Canada. More importantly, it expands our worldview of what is deemed fashionable in different cultures.



Fig. 7. Blue and gold laced metal earrings.
Made by and photographed by Rehab Patel.



Fig. 8. Blue laced, metal earrings.
Made and photographed by Rehab Patel.

CREATIVE COMPONENT

Afghani jewelry can be categorized by cost and kinds of materials, designs and styles, and its role in signifying gender. According to Daly, the more expensive jewelry consist of precious and semiprecious stones in metal and inlay settings and are produced by metal craftsmen in public workshops.

I attempted to create two sets of earrings inspired by the Blue Velvet Afghani Dress. I started by using local materials such as premade hoops earrings, laces, and beads to create two pieces of earrings with a contemporary twist to be worn with the Afghani dress (see fig. 7 and fig. 8). I referenced popular Afghani styled jewelry and materials used such as beads and laces. I used gold and blue lace to compliment the gold thread work and dark blue velvet found on the garment.

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