

Indian 'Haute Couture': Ornamentalism and the Aesthetic Economy of Neo-Imperial Atmospheres

Indická móda: Ornamentalismus a estetická ekonomie
neo-imperialistických atmosfér

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ABSTRACT:

The dominant trend within Indian 'haute couture' has been, especially following the financial crisis of 2008, something I have labeled 'royal chic', a trend that re-imagines contemporary India through the symbols of its past greatness, which is then projected onto the imaginary canvas of India's future. The key feature of the trend is an aesthetic reworking of aristocratic styles from bygone eras, from the Rajputs to the Mughal Empire and beyond, something that enables the contemporary business elite to reimagine itself as a neo-aristocratic class within the purported Indian democracy. Trends like this has been analyzed within fashion studies predominantly as a form of 'self-Orientalization'. This article argues that in order to make sense of such aesthetic trends and the way they relate to contemporary material and ideological structures, we have to abandon such unproductive notions.

KEYWORDS:

ornamentalism, Indian fashion,
atmospheres, utopia, aesthetic economy

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA:

ornamentalismus, indická móda,
atmosféry, utopie, estetická ekonomie

"Obsessed with the nineteenth century, the postcolonial critique has forced us to look through monolithic, and hence skewed, spectacles, spectacles that prevent us from seeing anything but our previous spectacles, the ones bequeathed to us by British Orientalism" (Doniger 1999: 945).

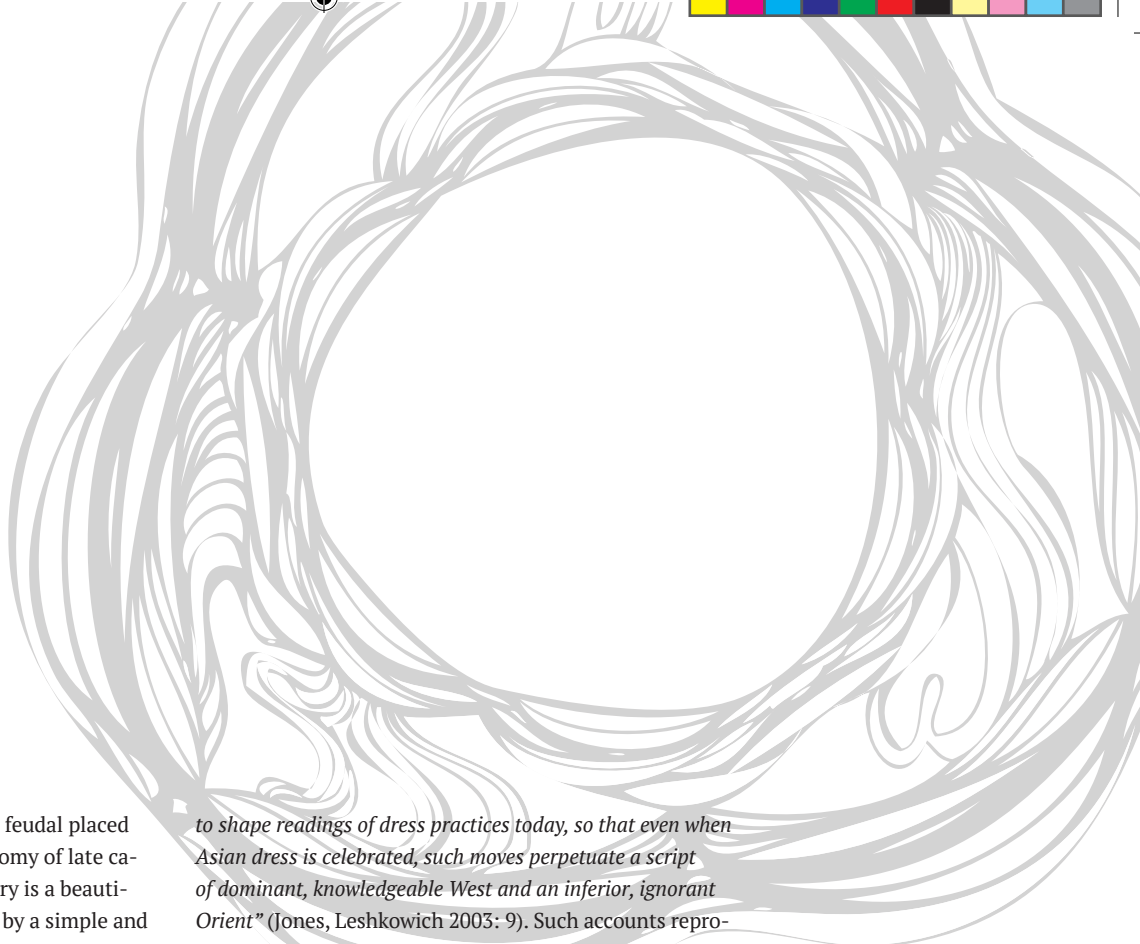
Reading through recent academic accounts attempting to make sense of contemporary India, one becomes struck by the almost monolithic logic that permeates them – one of postcolonial (Chakrabarty 2000) and anti-Orientalist critique with its almost psychoanalytical obsession of uncovering and revealing underlying agendas that are imagined to lurk behind the shared and experienced realities of both past and present. It would be naïve to claim that we could ever escape Orientalism when dealing with India (Breckenridge, van der Veer 1993), since Orientalism is inherent to the ways in which we think and imagine

ABSTRAKT:

Vládnoucí trend v indické „haute couture“ se zhruba od poloviny prvního desetiletí 21. století, a zvláště pak po ekonomické krizi 2008, změnil v něco, co je označeno pojmem „royal chic“, tedy v trend, který skrze symboly „velkolepé minulosti“ proměňuje představu současné Indie a promítá ji na pomyslné plátno indické budoucnosti. Klíčovým prvkem tohoto trendu je estetizující přetváření aristokratických stylů minulých časů, od Rádžpútů k říši Mughalů a jejím následovníkům. Tento postup umožňuje současné podnikatelské elitě měnit obraz sebe sama, jakožto „neo-aristokratické“ třídy ve zdánlivě indické demokracii. Takovéto trendy dosud byly ve „fashion studies“ analyzovány jakožto „sebe-orientalizace“ (přizpůsobování se obrazu orientálce). Abychom porozuměli materiálním a ideologickým strukturám, musíme opustit již neproduktivní výkladové rámce tohoto typu. Tento článek vysvětlení orientalismem odmítá a uděluje estetickým trendům odlišný význam.

India – and yet I urge us to crush the spectacles of post-colonial critique, thus fragmenting this master narrative and letting in a fresh breeze of alternative narratives that do not indulge in tracing everything back to the British. As Wendy Doniger rightly pointed out, India is “quite capable of inventing itself and went right on inventing itself for centuries before, during, and after British presence” (1999: 944). How long will we have to keep tracing phenomena within the Indian social universe back to some mythical western origin?

Academic accounts of Indian fashion and dress across diverse disciplines are paradigmatic, even if by amount rare, examples of arguments framed by the aforementioned logic. In what follows, I first review some of these stereotypical approaches and then, using examples from contemporary Indian haute couture, propose an alternative optics directed at an investigation into the



transforming nature of the imperial and feudal placed within the context of the aesthetic economy of late capitalism, of which Indian fashion industry is a beautiful manifestation. This inquiry is driven by a simple and yet exceedingly complex question, namely – what can we learn about contemporary Indian society if we take luxury fashion and aesthetic value seriously. This mind remind us of Erwin Panofsky's investigations in *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (1976), in which he tries to uncover the relationship between aesthetic structure (gothic architecture) and a particular structure of thought (medieval philosophy), viewing the aesthetic as a materialization of the dominant discourse where peculiarities of architectural style become tangible equivalents to philosophical ideas. In a similar way, I sketch the ways in which the tangible peculiarities of Indian luxury fashion can be read as materializations of synthetic and almost mythical notions of what I label *imperial order* and *aesthetic economy*.

ORIENTALIST AVATARS ON THE ACADEMIC'S MIND

The recently proliferating academic literature on non-Western fashion has become wonder-struck by a merger of the traditional and the modern, the western and the eastern, the local and the global, the binaries forming the core of the narratives (Jansen 2015). While such accounts typically attempt to transgress these binaries, they too often end up reinforcing them, be it by postulating multiple modernities or by essentializing tradition or modernity by connecting it to iconic objects or forms of expression (Tarlo 1996, Gibson 2000, Bhatia 2003, Bruzzi, Dwyer, Jackson 2003, Bhachu 2004, Jackson et al. 2007, Sengupta 2009, Edwards 2010, Khaire 2011, Kwon, Kim 2011). These accounts are often driven by the critique of the timeless, exotic Asia-ness as an Orientalist construction, which they then keep uncovering within the realm of contemporary global fashion. We can thus for instance read that *"the processes through which Asian dress has been globalized and celebrated within and outside Asia are also profoundly Orientalizing and feminizing"* (Jones, Leshkovich 2003: 4) and that Orientalist *"discourses continue*

to shape readings of dress practices today, so that even when Asian dress is celebrated, such moves perpetuate a script of dominant, knowledgeable West and an inferior, ignorant Orient" (Jones, Leshkovich 2003: 9). Such accounts reproduce the very stereotypes they aim to critique, identifying them as dominant while refusing to account for or investigate the multiplicity of processes at hand. Moreover, they operate with a trope of an undifferentiated Asia, while it remains notoriously elusive and unclear, who really holds these so-called dominant stereotypes.

Jones and Leshkovich even suggest that *"wearing traditional dress can be seen as trendy, modern, or fashionable precisely because it is a self-Orientalizing move that often involves a distanced gaze or nostalgia for a pre-capitalist past"* (2003: 31) and that *"self-Orientalizing and internal Orientalizing have become widespread and viable techniques for attempting to acquire material and discursive power"* (2003: 36). Does this imply that traditional dresses (whatever it refers to) can become fashionable only by appropriating Orientalist visions and standards and that only by doing so can Asia become empowered? Taken seriously, this would mean that the only way for India to be valuable, powerful and fashionable is by exploiting the Orientalist discourse, as if India was dependent on it for its very existence. This fits within the banal anti-Orientalist argument that the British 'invented' India, as if *"before British got there, there was nothing south of Himalayas but a black hole (...) and then the British came and sat in a circle, holding hands, eyes tightly shut, chanting a mantra ('Rule Britannia'), until, like Athena from the head of Zeus (...) India popped up on the map, (...) full grown, complete with the word for Hinduism and the Laws of Manu"* (Doniger 1999: 944). Predicated upon the Saidean logic such accounts deny *"autonomy, agency and even thought to the Orientals"* and view *"the mere postulation of difference as dangerous, omnious"* (Sax 1998: 293), but *"the situation is always much more complex than Said implies, with selfhood and otherness, virtue and vice, subject to ceaseless negotiation and reinterpretation (...) in the hall of mirrors, the Self and the Other cannot be neatly distinguished"* (Sax 1998: 299). ▶

And so it is claimed that Indian “designers internalize the Oriental gaze” (Nagrath 2003: 362) and that they “make fashion choices that are primarily based on the way that global fashion system operates, which includes following trends that involve seeing one’s own tradition as unique and exotic” (Nagrath 2003: 366). In other words, India has to first become popular in the West to be popular in India. Such accounts give agency to the West while casting India as a notorious imitator and thus, within the western logic of western valorization of creativity, as inferior. Within such accounts, India first had to be discovered by the hippies in order for the Indian *ethnic chic* to ever become popular and appropriated within India (Tarlo 1996) – a reductionist and problematic version of an exceedingly complex reality.

Let me give you an example of this logic: imagine a fashion garment made by a contemporary Indian fashion designer; the first thing these authors would typically do is dissecting it: dividing it into elements and then labeling those elements as either traditional or modern, looking for some mythical point of their origin. If a designer then dares to use elements somehow connected in the author’s imagination to traditional India, the designer might be accused of being self-Orientalizing – and we know that Orientalism has become a bad word. We can thus read for instance about Malini Ramani’s collection from 2002 the following:

The collection “consisted of T-shirts with words in the Hindi script printed on them. The t-shirts were presented in such a way that they decontextualized the script from the words that it spelt out, rendering the meaning of the words irrelevant (...) the script then embodies the ‘exotic’ that is India (...) Ramani also added exotic elements to her collection by incorporating traditional objects like the *nath* (nose ring) and a milk pail as part of the accessories. Used predominantly in rural India and for milk delivery in urban areas, the milk can has an element of the traditional, and is used along with the *nath* by Ramani to recreate an aura of the village and to sell, thereby, a Westernized image of an idealized rural India”, Ramanishows “a consistent use of Indian motifs and design elements to create ‘exotic’ aura for an audience that was predominantly Indian. Another aspect of this self-Orientalizing moves beyond just the exoticization of Indian fashion elements – it gets further inscribed in the way that some Indian designers begin to Orientalize what they frame as their ‘Other’” (Nagrath 2003: 367)

Reading this, what may strike us is that the one who dissects these elements and labels them as exotic and traditional is not the

designer, but the author of the text. According to Nagrath, Ramani is selling a Westernized image of an idealized rural India. This idealized rural India is again imagined as a product of Orientalist writings appropriated by the Indian nationalists (hence the accusation of self-Orientalizing), and the sheer fact of a t-shirt being used apparently implies westernization. The designer is said not only to be auto-exoticizing and self-Orientalizing but also to Orientalize the villager in the process, who, in the mind of the author, stands for tradition. In the end, we can wonder if there is anything at all that the designer could ever create which could not be read through such rigid spectacles of postcolonial critique.

Why the underlying fixation on West versus Orient? Why the fixation on traditional and modern? Why this anti-Orientalist critique strikingly predicated upon an underlying Orientalist logic? How come Duchamp could turn his urinal, a readymade, into art but Ramani cannot ever turn a milk pail, an everyday object, into a fashion statement? Why should we even read the milk pail as a feature of tradition? If there is any *everyday object* that is to be found in the houses of the poor as much as in the houses of the rich, then it is exactly a milk pail, the very object that transgresses all social classes and castes – not to mention that the significance of milk in India is immense, from everyday consumption to ritual practice. Why should we then locate the milk in the realm of past and tradition? Is it tradition when an Indian bodybuilder drinks milk but modernity and nutrition science when his western counterpart does the same? And what about the *nath* (nose ring)? Isn’t it also a precious part of bridal jewelry, can’t we find it in bridal magazines that inspire middle and upper class future brides all over India? Why should we locate it within the realm of an idealized village? And most importantly, do not Indian designers have a right to their own multi-referential aesthetics without it being always compared, judged, exposed and valorized through the lens of its imagined relation to West?

When I confronted a friend of Ramani and a fashion designer himself with such an interpretation of her work, he just waved it off as misplaced. According to him the problem was precisely in this dissecting of the whole, since to him fashion was about the ‘total composition’ and what he and Ramani do was to him more about expressing and creating ‘contemporary Indianness’ than anything else. His emphasis on *composition* and *present moment* is significant here, and should

not be dismissed. Within this logic what becomes important is the *montage*, the composition, resulting from *juxtaposition* of different elements and the *excess* which emerges from such a montage (Willerslev, Suhr 2013). This excess then creates something new, something which has not previously been there, something that transcends the meaning of the individual elements. An aesthetic montage creates a particular *atmosphere* (Böhme 1993) as its excess, which is then irreducible to the sum of its elements. This is not to say that the elements and their multiple connotations are not important to the final composition, rather, that is to say that the composition cannot be dissected and reduced to such individual elements and understood through them. The meaning of the whole composition lies within the excess of such a merger. Analyzing Ramani’s design from this opposite end would thus enable us to see beyond the dissecting gaze opening up for a different interpretation – one that takes the *aesthetic* and its experience as much as the intention of the *composition* seriously, while placing it within the present moment, within contemporary economic and political interests. It is telling that Nagrath in her description forgot to mention what the model is wearing – an atypically draped sari with a top-like blouse that *matches* in its metallic texture both the nose ring and the milk pail. Curiously enough, the author forgot to mention the silver belt as well, even though that could have served her agenda well, after all could not the belt be easily identified within the anti-Orientalist stereotyping as a feature intended at eroticizing the Other – but then, who would that Other be – the village woman, the model, or an idealized Indian woman? The composition of this design may be read more as a proposal of what casual contemporary Indian aesthetic might look like rather than an attempt at auto-exoticization and Orientalizing of the villager. And even if village aesthetics happens to become an integral part of a design, since when is it a grave Orientalist sin? May it be that the reason this provokes some is rather that high fashion is (quiet unsurprisingly) an elitist business? May it be the case that we would be better served looking at manifestations of hierarchical imperial logic that works across and irrespective of any Orient/Occident division, rather than hunting for traces of Orientalism? May it be that the elite feeds off elements of low class aesthetics, appropriates it and incorporates into its own aesthetics in an attempt to imaginarily rule over a complex territory? (Kuldova 2016)

NOMADIC ROYALTY AND CONTEMPORARY NEO-IMPERIALISM

Ten years since the publication of Nagrath's article, (*En countering Orientalism in High Fashion* (2003)), JJ Valaya presented *The Azrak Collection – The Realm of the Sultan at The Bridal Fashion Week 2012*. This collection was inspired by the Ottoman Empire and for its staging JJ Valaya created a lavish stage set¹, featuring replicas of a lively Turkish bazaar with trademark chandeliers glittering above it, balconies and domes at the backdrop, belly dancers moving through the scenery and aerial dance performed by gymnasts on fabric trails. JJ Valaya is one of the most successful Indian couturiers; for him haute couture is about the lavish, excessive, royal and potlatch-like Indian wedding – the wedding being the time of one's life when anybody can turn into royalty. His designs are notoriously steeped in embellishment, ornamentation, texture, detailing, and craft; they are pregnant with uncontrollable references to past and aristocracy that transgresses any imagined boundaries of time and space. As his mission statement proclaims, he is determined to 'show to the world the new India, resplendent with aura of blue-blooded elegance, innovative craftsmanship and modern sensibilities'². Indian haute couture is ultimately about the Indian wedding and royal luxury.

While attending a South Asianist seminar, I mentioned that I will be writing about Valaya's show, and having described it to them in great detail, I was suddenly staring into a crowd of frowning faces. Whatever Valaya was doing as much as the way he was treating history was within seconds deemed 'unacceptable', 'terrible', 'superficial', 'commercial', 'historically inaccurate' and 'blatantly Orientalist', to quote a few. Why does it provoke when Valaya does not oblige to our academic standards of historical or contemporary accuracy, whatever that means? Fashion design is present and future oriented 'myth-making' at its best, one that has little to do with historiography and itself does not claim any such expertise. Of course a fashion collection inspired by Ottoman Empire must be the very heaven for an anti-Orientalist. S/he could begin with the belly dancer, for instance claiming that by having her on the stage Valaya reinforces a stereotype of an

exoticizing, eroticizing, objectifying gaze that views the Oriental woman as a source of irrational pleasure and so on. And so s/he could tear every bit of it and publish an academic article that would uncover the internal orientalism and auto-exoticizing practices within Indian fashion and afford it the final academic mortal blow or s/he could maybe abolish the belly dancer from entering the stage? Instead, I suggest we look for alternative ways to make sense of Valaya's production by relating it to the larger context of the attempted abolition of feudalism by democratization and the remnants of the feudal and imperial logic that find their expression precisely within the realm of haute couture – a realm both *democratic*, in the sense of being *virtually* accessible to anyone with a TV or internet connection, and *imperial*, in the sense of being *materially* accessible only to those whom Valaya fittingly labels *the nomadic royals*, the members of the new cosmopolitan wealthy elite.

The haute couture in contemporary India, with its staged spectacles, shares more with the western couture of the past than with its contemporary avatar. While there are fashion weeks, fashion councils, institutes of fashion technology and many young designers who create trendy 'western wear', or present collections in natural dyes and organic fabrics and so forth, it so happens that none of these designers makes it into the top rank. The top rank is dominated precisely by those who create lavishly, satisfying the taste for royal-like status and visible class exclusivity. There is an interesting comparison to be made between the fashion industries of the West and of India. While the western fashion can be subjected to a certain degree to a linear progression of increasing democratization, individualization and industrialization with its emergence of ready-to-wear, fast fashion, accompanied by the fall of haute couture, decline in luxury, prestige and class aesthetics which was replaced by youth aesthetics (Lipovetsky et al. 2002), the Indian fashion industry appears as if containing all of these moments in western fashions history compressed within the present moment. Even if we may not fully agree with the rendering of the western fashion history by Lipovetsky, ▶

1 Stage sets have become hugely popular in Indian fashion within the last three years. They are becoming increasingly elaborate, matching the theme of the collections, which more often than not revolves around references to royalty. There is thus a clear drive towards establishing a distinct sense of aesthetics of the fashion show – as opposed to the mostly sterile and clinically white ramps of for instance New York Fashion Weeks. Ornamentation, embellishments and excessive detailing is considered an asset rather than a symptom of 'inferiority'. More is more is the motto of this maximalist royal aesthetics.

2 <http://www.valaya.com/home.html>

his point might still prove instructive for our argument: “All forms of styles were becoming legitimate in fashion. Clothes could be casual, crude, torn, worn, unstitched, sloppy, ripped, or frayed: all these features, which had been strictly taboo, began to be incorporated into the field of fashion. By recycling signs of ‘inferiority’, fashion pursued its democratic dynamic, just as modern art and the avant-gardes have done since the mid-nineteenth century (...) class appeal has been replaced by irony and eccentricity. (...) As long as haute couture kept the prestige of luxury clothing intact, as long as the assertion of hierarchical rank enjoyed de facto primacy over individual self-assertion, fashion remained at least partially dependent on a holistic social code. As soon as that primacy was discredited, not only aesthetically but socially, fashion completed its entry into a new phase governed wholly by the logic of individualism. Clothing was less and less a sign of social respectability. A new relation to the other appeared in which seduction prevailed over social representation (...) Haute couture imposed a common aesthetic of grace; following its dictates, women were to dress becomingly, with delicacy and care, engaged in a common quest for ‘high class’ and feminine charm. All aspired to be supreme embodiments of luxurious elegance and refined chic, valorizing a precious and ideal femininity. During the 1960s and 1970s, this aesthetic consensus was shattered by the rise of sportswear, marginal youthful fashions, and ready-to-wear creations: the homogeneity of the hundred years’ fashion gave way to a patchwork of disparate styles (...) Fashion has come closer to sharing the logic of modern art, with its multi-directional experimentation, its absence of common aesthetic rules (...) Eclecticism is the supreme stage of creative freedom (...) Nothing counts but the spirit of the collections, the poetic value of the label (2002: 100–104).

In light of this account, it is interesting to realize that the top Indian haute couturiers (JJ Valaya, Tarun Tahiliani, Abu & Sandeep, Sabyasachi Mukherjee, Varun Bahl, Rohit Bal, Manish Malhotra, Ritu Kumar and so on) share a distinctive almost imperial aesthetics that circles around revival of royal costumes (Kumar, Muscat 2006) thus satisfying the hunger for class, luxury, style, visual impact, excess, and extravaganza that marks the elites against the restrictive moralities of the middle classes (Kuldova 2016, 2015). With the help of haute couture the new Delhi’s elite attempts to reclaim the city once again as the city of rulers, as the city of modern day maharajas of the new India. Unsurprisingly then, the spectacular fashion shows and elite weddings, perfectly crafted by the haute couturiers and teams of

interior designers, bear a dramatic resemblance to the royal durbars. Valaya thus caters to the desire to be a part of this new neo-imperial elite, which devours in ornaments of the royals of the bygone era, emulating them in aesthetics, style and choice. However, this should not let us fall into the trap of self-Orientalization.

David Cannadine argues in his book *Ornamentalism* (2002) that the British Empire was not exclusively about race, about the distinction between the superior West and the inferior Orient, but probably even more significantly about hierarchy, one that cut across any division between West and its Other. The British indulged in what they imagined as traditional India, precisely because they could mirror their own class-based social structure within it, precisely because India still possessed something that they saw as disappearing in the West, the West which they perceived as falling prey to democratic vulgarity – India had the traditional elite, aristocratic security and thus a firm social hierarchy. That is why the British happened to ignore and disregard the emergence of the urban, educated, nationalist and modernizing middle classes. Cannadine thus points out that “depending on context and circumstances, both white and dark-skinned peoples of the empire were seen as superior; or alternatively as inferior” (2002: 124). In other words, the English gentlemen had more in common with an Indian maharaja than an East End costermonger, in fact, the British rulers found it utterly amusing that low class white settlers had an unprecedented difficulty grasping the fact that aristocratic breeding cut across any imagined racial boundaries. The empire was thus united through its hierarchy, which positioned the chiefly, kingly and royal elite across the empire, against the ‘inferior’ subjects – individual social status and position within the hierarchy was what greatly mattered. The empire, as much as Indian haute couture, which caters to the new *nomadic royals*, was “about antiquity and anachronism, tradition and honour, order and subordination; about glory and chivalry, horses and elephants, knights and peers, processions and ceremony, plumed hats and ermine robes; about chiefs and emirs, sultans and nawabs, viceroys and pro-consuls; about thrones and crowns, dominion and hierarchy, ostentation and ornamentalism” (2002: 126).

The independence turned out to be the triumph of the middle-classes and urban-based radicals, so detested by the Raj. “The matchless splendors of vicerealty, in New Delhi, and at Simla, vanished (...) the whole ceremonial carapace of durbars and state elephants and

loyal toasts and Empire day was swept away” and the rulers of the native states “lost their freedom and independence, and eventually in 1971, their revenues and their titles, in this brave new world of post-imperial egalitarianism” (Cannadine 2002: 156).

The princes have been consigned to the dustbin of history, and yet royal families still exert their power, some have turned their palaces into five star luxury heritage hotels, selling the royal experience to anyone who has the financial capital to afford it. Some have transformed into businessmen, others into socialites, fashion designers, politicians (most famously Gayatri Devi, who happened to be once named by *Vogue* among the ten most beautiful women in the world) and industrialists, thus retaining remnants of their power and remaining involved in the country’s life. However, the liberalization of Indian economy enabled the emergence of newly monied business elite, which now seeks an equal place on the top and is driven to acquire all possible markers of the newly achieved status. It is telling that JJ Valaya is patronized by the Royal house of Jaipur, as much as by the Glenfiddich whisky and a number of prominent businessmen and industrialists. It becomes slowly apparent that “orienting theory around the temporal axis colonial/postcolonial makes it easier not to see, and therefore harder to theorize, the continuities in international imbalances in imperial power – financial capital and multi-nationals” (McClintock 1992: 89). The contemporary Indian haute couture is a continuation of the imperial and hierarchical impulse, placed within the logic of neoliberalism and the spectacle of globality, where it suddenly also has to cater to the increased desire for staging of a backward-looking authenticity and distinct identity.

JJ VALAYA AS A REINCARNATION OF PAUL POIRET

This may be also the reason for the striking similarities between the designs and ways of staging between Paul Poiret, the famous French couturier, who established his fashion house in Paris in 1903 and JJ Valaya. While it may be that Valaya tries to emulate this French fashion hero, the point remains that Poiret’s strategy from the beginning of the century appears to work brilliantly in contemporary India. Paul Poiret “self-consciously staged his performance as a couturier, and eventually also as an interior designer, art collector, party giver and entrepreneur” (Troy 2001: 4). Valaya is as eager art collector, as interior designer and art photographer. Valaya’s *Home of the Traveler* label features personally hand-picked interior decorations by the designer



himself during his travels, where each piece is dated, hand-made, unique, appealing to the ideas of ancient dynasties and exhibitions of curated objects. The luxury store is ultimately turned into a museum-like display of antique, one of a kind, imperially-charged objects from all over the globe – from India, Siam, and Turkey to Russia. The items sold there, even though placed within the space of his enormous luxury store, are in principle *unbrandable* and unmarked – to the nomadic royalty fashion houses like Chanel, Louis Vuitton, or Dior no longer represent exclusivity and luxury. The real luxury lies in things that defy any association with mass production, industrialization, democratization and modernization. It is commonplace among the Indian elite to claim that ‘East is the new West’ precisely on the grounds that Asia homes the biggest luxury spenders in terms of consumption of luxury brands. Within such a climate, it becomes even more important for those who perceive themselves to be at the top, to look beyond brands, towards unique objects that defy branding, ooze value of heritage, culture, royalty and style and at the same time are, following the imperial legacy, maximalist. The understated luxury of western elites is the opposite of desirable (Kuldova 2016). Such logic also creates a discourse that aims at demystifying of the notion of western competence and superiority (Mahbubani 2009) and reclaiming the value of India, as both economic and distinctly cultural power (Kuldova 2014).

But back to Paul Poiret, not unlike Valaya, he was the master of theme parties and stage sets, such as *Thousand and Second Night*, inspired by the fantasy of sultan’s harems, during which he forced all his visitors to dress in his creations in order to create a particular atmosphere of royal extravaganza of the party set. His designs were full of stunning embellishments, eventually making the Oriental look dominate the Parisian fashion world and decorative arts of his time. However, after the First World War new designers like Chanel took over with sleek and simple looks, Poiret’s fashion house went bankrupt and Poiret struggled with poverty for the last twenty years of his life and eventually died unrecognized. Is it not striking

that hundred years later, India produces a couturier resembling in everything he does Paul Poiret? The success of Paul Poiret as much as that of JJ Valaya resides to a great degree in their ability to nourish the elite class affect and aesthetic sensibilities, which have always been cosmopolitan, or even nomadic, bringing the whole world of rarities, antiques, precious items, jewelry, costumes and so forth, into one’s living room. It did not matter where the elements came from, as long as they impressed by their lavishness and uniqueness. However, there are two other aspects that emerge as significant to the work of both designers.

Firstly, there is their shared belief in the *theatrical stage set*, in the power of an overwhelming aesthetic and in the power of creating an *aura* around the designs produced that would add something *more* to them (Benjamin, Tiedemann 1999). Secondly, there is their belief in dressing people, who possess significant social power in their designs, showing them off dressed in these clothes on the ramp, on the art photographs and in the public realm. JJ Valaya keeps notoriously turning actors, actresses, industrialists, businessmen, popular historians, and socialites into models during his fashion shows, choosing real people, with real charisma over generic young slim models, thus reinforcing the power of his garments by the power of the wearer, right there, on the ramp. For Valaya the person needs to match the garment. The garment and the person are thus imagined as empowering each other, creating in their montage an excess, an aura of power and a desirable aura of sovereignty. Poiret, too, firmly believed that for the magic to occur his mannequin “had not only to adopt behavior appropriate to each gown she modeled but also had to convince the buyer that the buyer, in turn, would look and act the same way if she were to wear the same clothing” (Troy 2001: 5), and who could do this better than real people of influence. In many ways, both of these designers reflect in their aesthetics the structure of the thought of this moment in history. Let us now identify this present moment in the history of late capitalism. This moment emerges as marked by expanding aestheticization of commodities blended with a move ▶

towards experience economy, within which aesthetically elaborate theatrical stage sets become increasingly meaningful as they produce total environments of experience for the spectators and consumers to indulge in. What we consume has shifted from the actual objects towards the intangible experience and atmosphere which surrounds these objects and which emerges in between objects and subjects (Böhme 2003). The aesthetic economy is one where authenticities (however they are imagined) can be sold along with identities and where royal lifestyle can be bought.

INDIAN HAUTE COUTURE: THE AESTHETIC ECONOMY OF IMPERIAL ATMOSPHERES

I have tried to establish a context within which we could escape the logic of dissecting, of cutting the designer's creation into small bits and pieces and then trying to make sense and critique those cut outs for sending certain messages. Instead, I suggested that we need to look at the totality of what is being staged and at what emerges as the excess of the composition and thus break from the search for the key to the meaning of signs (Belova 2006). Our exercise should not be one of unveiling of the myths of the advertisers and of decoding messages and signs (Barthes 1983, Baudrillard 1998) but rather one of making sense of the mythical space that is being produced in the stage sets, fashion shows, luxury consumption spaces, theatrical fashion events, beauty pageants and so on. These spectacles produce a mythical space, which is marked by plays with temporality and timelessness, by excess of multiple referents, by blending of incongruous elements, and juxtapositions of styles, which all lead to a point where search for origins becomes meaningless, where origins are erased and can, paradoxically, only emerge from this mythical space.

Such mythical spaces are *synthetic*, they are a montage of things, people, ideas that take on axiological features – they become carriers of value and expressions of the ways in which values are shared or not, an expression of ways in which people create divisions. What we thus *perceive*, when we are confronted with the work of the designers are not dissected elements and their attached referents, but rather this mythical space. What we perceive are relations and things in proportion to each other, and it is in this totality of the constellation of often incongruous and anachronistic elements that a particular *atmosphere* emerges. This atmosphere is then something, following Ger- not Böhme that “*proceeds from and is created by things, persons and their constellations*” (1993:

122). The atmosphere is neither objective or subjective but rather “*thinglike, belonging to the thing in that things articulate their presence through qualities – conceived as ecstasies*” and subjectlike, belonging “*to subjects in that they are sensed in bodily presence by human beings and this sensing is at the same time a bodily state of being of subjects in space*” (Böhme 1993: 122). The totality of this configuration specifically creates in this context the aesthetics of contemporary Indian business elite that seeks to reinforce and re-create feudal structures of the past within an increasingly democratizing society; the Indian elite struggles, much like the British elites did when they colonized India, to reinforce hierarchical social order and make sure that upward social climbing is difficult. At the same time as we see such aesthetics coming to prominence, socio-economic inequality is rising and the gap between the rich neo-royals and the poor is expanding. With the shift of the economy towards valorization of aesthetic labor and towards production of aesthetic value, the designers' work becomes increasingly one of creation of atmospheres that impact and have a subtle social power. In other words, the creation of display and staging of values has become a “*new type of use value, centered around the manufacture of semblance, aura, atmosphere, illusion in relation to people and things, townscapes and landscapes*” (Roberts 2003: 88).

Once, after visiting a designer boutique in South Delhi together with a friend of mine, who runs a small business in embroidered garments, she came out of the store perplexed, commenting as follows: ‘What are the people thinking (meaning customers), they can get exactly the same thing, the same saris, in the regular market, why would they go to these stores? It is not as if they are taking the ambience home. In the end, they will be left with exactly the same sari, pathetic people’. What perplexed her was precisely the shift from commodity focused economy to experience based economy, in which the intangible experience of shopping in luxury spaces and believing that there is something more to the sari, precisely because it has been exposed to and part of the atmosphere of luxury that bears a promise of a sovereign life, gains precedence. Poirer's dresses were designed to look stunning from afar (the opposite of the perfected quality of the stitch of Chanel and consequent western fashion). They were designed to create an atmosphere through their immersion in space enhanced with other objects that evoked distant times and places. Poirer's as much as Valaya's designs are precisely intended to be

viewed from afar and through immersion in the space, they cannot be dissected as that would destroy the message that emerges only through perceiving them in their totality; the atmosphere is generated in ensembles. As Valaya himself commented on his collection: “*It's an assortment of motifs and it's almost impossible to start identifying each one of them*” (Caroli 2012). Not only is it impossible, but the very meaning that emerges only through their montage, as it's excess, would be lost. The creations of the leading Indian haute couturiers are thus in their form symptomatic of the increased aestheticization, which “*represents an important factor in the economy of advanced capitalist societies*” (Böhme 2003: 72). As the marketing gurus teach us: “*goods and services are no longer enough to foster economic growth (...) to realize revenue growth and increased employment, the staging of experiences must be pursued as a distinct form of economic output (...) the greatest opportunity for value creation resides in staging experiences*” (Joseph, Gilmore 2011: ix).

The Indian haute couture is symptomatic also of another and equally important aspect of this aesthetic economy and that is the commodity's promise of transformation of the subject. Poirer wanted to make sure that his models would convince the customer that by wearing the clothes, s/he would turn into a person like her; he wanted them to believe in the transformative power of his designs. The same logic goes not only for contemporary Indian couturiers, but for an overwhelming part of our contemporary economies, in which the customer is turned into the product and where the transformation of the individual becomes the mission of the business. Such an economy is dependent on the creation of the more, of the atmosphere that transcends the object being sold and establishes an affective relationship with the subject (Anderson 2009). The atmosphere is what penetrates the body, gives aesthetic pleasure but at the same time is equally capable of aesthetic manipulation.

The *content* of the Indian haute couture, as we have seen, is strikingly unified in its desire to recreate an atmosphere of imperial splendor, of aristocratic lifestyle, reflecting the self-perception of India as an emergent global *power*. This, according to Lipovetsky would be a sign of a society with a rather clear sense of hierarchy, value and moral code, in which a standard of what is deemed desirable, is rather clear and unified (Lipovetsky et al. 2002). The structure of thought, values and society is thus nicely mirrored in the aestheticized materializations of haute couture. While heritage

and crafts and so forth have been the unique selling points of Indian fashion since its inception in the mid-80s, what we are observing here is a trend for increased opulence and spectacle that stages Indianness in its most bombastic form. This trend seems to have been intensifying during the last few years, rather than decreasing, also possibly reflecting the global identity politics with its upsurge of public staging of identities and backward-looking digging out of possible authenticities. The Indian haute couture thus operates on two levels: firstly, in terms of recreating an image of the greatness of India with its power, confidence and faith in its ancient heritage that is alive and kicking, that cannot be consigned to the dustbin of history, and secondly, in terms of catering

to the new elites, re-establishing together with the greatness of India also its visible hierarchies, designing a distinctive elite and creating products designed to be beyond the reach, available only to selected few, while at the same time sustaining the democratic neoliberal illusion that with a bit of a hard work, anybody can reach the top (Kuldova 2013, 2016, 2015). The Indian haute couturiers are ultimately in a business of creating neo-imperial utopian atmospheres, where utopias “not only offer an arresting vision of future possibilities, but because they tend to be written in the past narrative tense, also imply that their depiction of the good life, an ideal world, is eminently attainable. The future is past.” (Brown, MacLaren 1998: 279)

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