

HSC CC 410

UNIT - II

Importance of clothing – Clothing functions and theories of origin

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Introduction

Culture and society exist in the present but they derive from the past. Clothing, the material objects of society and culture, also began in the past. When did people first begin to wear clothes? In order to gain even a limited understanding of the meanings of dress and adornment for modern societies, it is important to consider theories that attempt to explain why clothes were first worn. Why did people, accustomed to nakedness, begin to cover or decorate their bodies?

For thousands of years a great deal of time, money, and energy has been devoted to clothing and decorating the human body. Various peoples have used paints, tattooing, and mutilation as well as ornaments, skins, furs, and fabrics. These articles used by people to cover and to decorate themselves can be called by many names, but clothing can be used collectively to include them all. The word clothing refers to all items of apparel and adornment. Clothing here mean body decorations such as cosmetics, tattoos, hair colour, ornaments of jewellery, extensions of the body in the form of umbrellas, handkerchiefs etc; as well as apparel or garments.

When did clothing originate? The first use of clothing was for protection from cold. Archaeological evidence indicates that early hunters and wanderers of 500,000 to 300,000 years ago moved from the tropics, where they originated, to areas with cooler climates. When people moved north they needed something to keep them warm. A cave, called *Terra Amata*, in Nice, France, was inhabited about 400,000 years ago. Fossils and sand imprints show that animal hides were used as some form of covering.

The first direct evidence that body decoration as well as body coverings were used comes from the Neanderthal burial sites of the Middle Palaeolithic era of the Old Stone Age 100,000 to 60,000 years ago. The simplest and probably the first article of clothing was the untreated bear skin wrapped around the body like a cloak. Pigments of red and yellow ochre have been found in caves and burial sites indicating that, even in this prehistoric period, the body was decorated and perhaps the inner surface of the fur coverings as well. Fragments of Old Stone Age fur and leather were also found in the northern part of the Soviet Union, preserved by the extreme cold. The remains of two young boys, aged nine and twelve, were found by Russian archaeologists in the frozen rock layers near Moscow. The boys wore leather trousers and shirts, beads, and fur-lined boots. Arrows, a spear, and a finely carved needle, all made of ivory from a mammoth, a large elephant-like animal, were found with the bodies.

The Cro-Magnons lived in Europe during the Upper Palaeolithic era, from 40,000 to 10,000 years ago. An ochre-sprinkled grave of a Palaeolithic mammoth hunter that is at least 33,000 years old was found near Moscow. This male skeleton was dressed in tailored pants and a

pullover shirt made of fur. Mammoth ivory was used as beading for the clothing decoration and for bracelets. A necklace fashioned from Arctic fox teeth completed the outfit. The Cro-Magnons strung fish and animal vertebrae or pierced teeth on leather thongs and wore them around their necks. They also decorated their clothes with coloured beads. The cave painting of 20,000 years ago reveals that the women wore feathered skirts, the men, ceremonial masks.

The wanderers of very early times settled down to farming life by 8000 B.C. the earliest direct evidence that people knew how to weave yarns into fabrics also comes from the Neolithic period starting about 10,000 years ago. In 1854, the remains of an ancient people were found at the bottom of a lake in Switzerland. Fragments of linen cloth were found indicating that the Swiss Lake Dwellers were highly skilled weavers. These are the oldest extant fragments of woven cloth in the world. The Swiss Lake Dwellers did not cut and sew their fabrics into shaped garments; they draped them loosely around the body.

CLOTHING FUNCTIONS AND THEORIES OF ORIGIN

Why did people first begin to wear clothing? What were the original functions of clothing? Clothing and clothing customs follow a well-defined general pattern. In an attempt to find a universal reason for the original function of clothing, psychologists often study the behaviour of young children. The principle is similar to the assumption made by anthropologists; young children are not under some of the strains and influences of modern society. Study on clothing draw on several disciplines – archaeology, anthropology, and psychology – to establish some major theories about the original function of clothing.

The reason why people first began to wear clothing or why they wear clothing today is uncertain. There is general agreement on four major theories and several interrelated minor ones to explain the reasons clothes were first worn. The four major theories for the original function of clothes are – **(a) the modesty theory, (b) the immodesty theory, (c) the protection theory, and (d) the adornment or decoration theory.**

The Modesty Theory

Moralists believe that our innate feelings of guilt and shame resulting from exposure of particular parts of the body date back to Adam and Eve, the first among the human race according to the Biblical version.

The idea that a sense of modesty underlies all original motives for clothing the body may be a popular belief but it is neither generally accepted by scholars in the field nor borne out by observable fact. The modesty theory has been disputed on three counts. Most people in the world do use dress to conceal parts of the body but the parts it conceals vary from culture to culture. Modesty, or a sense of shame associated with an unconcealed body part, is not universal. What is covered or left uncovered varies among societies. Even within one particular culture, variations occur depending on age sex, sub cultural groupings, locations, and situational factors. The assumption that shame is necessarily associated with a lack of clothes is disproved based on a number of illustrations given below.

The women in the **Suya tribe in the Amazon** jungle wear large cylindrical wooden plugs in

their ear lobes and disks in their lower lips and little else. They are not ashamed of their naked bodies, but they are terribly embarrassed if outsiders see them without their disks in place. The **English people or Americans** find nothing indecent about the nude in art, but they are not comfortable with the idea of the sexes bathing together. Whereas, in **Japan**, the sexes customarily bathe together, but nude art is considered indecent. The women on the **island of Yap in the South Pacific** have a strict tradition of modesty. For them what must never be exposed are the thighs, not the breasts. Mohammedan Women in certain parts of **Africa** would feel ashamed if someone watched them as they bathed, they would quickly cover their faces, not their bodies. Among the **Tuareg tribe in Southern Algeria** only men wore the veil and practically all the time – at home, travelling, eating and sleeping. It was considered shameful for a man to expose his mouth, particularly to his own people.

Even in developed civilizations such examples are found. The bull dancers of ancient Crete performed their dances wearing only their arm rings and necklaces, and the conventional Cretan feminine dress with elaborate skirts, short sleeved bodice that left the breasts exposed. So, what constitutes modesty and nakedness depends on the wide variety of ideas people have.

Another reason for rejecting the theory is that there is now evidence that indicates that modesty is not an instinct, but a culturally induced habit that varies depending on the time and place. A sense of modesty completely lacks in young children. A child at the age three is not ashamed to undress in front of house and go to visit the neighbour. The concept of modesty changes with age. A small child may be undressed in public or a baby's diaper may be changed but at some age, this practice becomes indecent exposure.

Several investigations have confirmed the idea that modesty is not a very potent force in clothing behaviour. Many people in today's society wear clothes for reasons of modesty, but it is probably not of primary importance and it cannot account for the origin of clothes.

The Immodesty Theory

Some writers are of the opinion that clothing is not the result of modesty, but the cause of modesty; children are not embarrassed by lack of clothes until they become accustomed to wearing them. The second theory explains the original function of dress as the immodesty theory. Clothing is used not to cover the body but to attract attention to it. One of arguments given by some writers is that once the sight of the human body becomes common the importance attached to sex differences soon disappears. To those who believe in the immodesty theory, the function of clothing is to enhance or attract, and the origin of clothes is exhibitionism.

According to the immodesty theory, the body was first covered as a sexual lure and clothes were used to call attention to the body parts that were covered. To support this theory there are many articles of clothing that seem to have as their primary purpose the task of calling attention to parts of the body; short skirts and pants; narrow skirts with long slits, front, side, or back; tight clothes in general, tight jeans and tight sweaters; the bare backs, shoulders, or low necklines; textured stockings and pointed shirt tails.

Through the ages women were restricted to less than direct approaches to heterosexual

relationships. They used clothing to display physical attributes in positive and classically feminine manoeuvres. This form of attraction was considered part of the customs of most societies. Women still use clothing to cover the body in various degrees, with attraction as the major purpose.

The Protection Theory

Most people agree with the importance of protection, both physical and psychological, as evidenced by the use of clothing generally and by the selection of specific items of clothing in different parts of the world. However, was protection the original reason that people covered and decorated their bodies, or did the need for protection come later in the evolutionary process is still a question to be answered. Lacking a natural protective coat such as most animals have, humans were forced to make their own. The use of clothing for psychological security, as a good luck symbol or for protection from evil is obvious in many places, more important than clothing for purely physical protection.

The reason to believe that dress was used for protection is that the earliest article of clothing was an animal skin draped around the body for warmth. However, according to Langner, since evolution began in areas with warm climates, the invention of clothes did not necessarily arise from the need for protection against the cold. He said that the need for protective covering derived from the shift to erect posture. Standing upright exposed external organs; hence, a protective apron or loincloth was devised. Physical protection of the sex organs has always been important. Most sheaths, supporters, loincloths etc., worn by primitive peoples are for protecting rather than hiding the sex organs. Certainly the conspicuously decorative coverings – beads, shells, paint, palm leaves- - do not divert attention from, but rather direct the attention to these parts. Physical protection is certainly a motivating factor for many clothing items today – face masks, lab coats, space suits, protective goggles and sunglasses.

In many instances, clothing has been used in a minimal way to adapt to the environment. Numerous people today live in extremely cold sections of the world and require little in the way of clothing. The Patagonians in South America use only a small square of animal skin draped over the shoulder which shifted from side to side, depending on the wind direction. The Onas and Yahgans on the islands of Tierra del Fuego, of South America wear only a loose fur cape and a smear of grease. African safari porters wear all the clothes they own during the heat of the day so they have nothing extra to carry. They then sleep naked through the cold desert night.

Many articles of dress in civilized society not only lack a protective function, but they actually defy it. Even though clothing is used for various kinds of physical protection, people are willing to endure, a certain degree of discomfort when fashion demands it. People may have realized gradually that clothes provide comfort in cold weather and that by covering the body they could remain active, but it is unlikely that people first dressed for this reason.

Clothing is also used for protection from dangers that are primarily psychological in nature. Many items fall into this category. Mystical or magical meaning is often assigned to ordinary

articles like a coin, a seashell, a particular colour for wedding a particular stone on a finger ring or even a lucky sweater.

Psychological protection of the genital area is as important in primitive societies as is physical protection. The sex organs, the seat of fertility and reproduction, need protection from the evil eye and must be covered. Psychological fears may also relate to real or imaginary moral danger. Some psychologists in the past believed that all feminine attire was the result of a man's unconscious fears of a woman's body and the equally hidden fantasies connected with it. According to Bergler people tend to cover their fears with moralistic standards of decency and that clothing becomes an outward sign of such fears. The fear of possible rejection or ridicule if one reveal oneself is a potential threat to ones psychological security and one from which the clothing may be a protection.

The Adornment or Decoration Theory

The most widely accepted theory used to explain the original purpose of clothing related to adornment or decoration, the creative urge for an artistic experience. To adorn means to 'make attractive' or to 'lend beauty'. Adornment includes anything worn above and beyond purely physical needs. According to this theory all people have an urge to express themselves creatively and this urge to improve the appearance is universal.

It is probable that various forms of adornment, such as body painting, tattooing, scarification, mutilation and deformation, preceded the actual wearing of clothes. Many of these practices are still found in primitive societies, or in modified form in our own societies. All such forms of decoration, including clothing, have in common a desire for admiration, a striving to make the body more beautiful than nature made it. The use of lipstick and eyeshadow falls in the same category. Piercing the ears, plucking eyebrows, undergoing plastic surgery and so on are part of the attempt of decoration. The desire for beauty is consciously recognized by most people. Consumer preference studies give further indication that a nice appearance in dress is often rated higher than such factors as price and durability in making clothing decisions. The clothing used for adornment or decoration can be divided into several categories.

(a) Sexual Attraction

All peoples decorate or alter the human form in some way to attract the attention of the opposite sex. Every society has its own concepts of physical attractiveness and its own ideals of beauty. In some tribes in Africa, for example, a woman's beauty is evaluated by how fat she is. Americans encourage girls to stay thin and to diet. In another African tribe, the ideal wife is shiny so the women use apply fat to get the shine. Some people do lip-stretching, foot-binding, tattooing, head-shaping, scarification and nose piercing in the name of beauty. Clothes have still another important role in regard to sex and sexual attractiveness. It serves as a regulating mechanism. Various types of clothes are used for difference occasions – work clothes versus party-leisure clothes. According to Langner, clothes and their sexual attractiveness are important in preserving marriage, home, and family.

(B) Trophyism

This form of decoration is used to show off the wearer's strength, courage, or skill. When the hunter kills his prey he often wears the skin, teeth or claws in order to demonstrate to his people his achievement. The war medals, merit badges, etc are other example of the same.

(c) Terrorism

As a form of decoration, terrorism refers to wearing an article of clothing or decoration to strike fear into the hearts of one's enemies. War paint, face masks, and particular medals might be included in this category.

(d) Totemism

This form of decoration uses totems or amulets of a magical or religious nature to ward off evil or bring good luck and protection to the wearer. The power or mystical qualities of a totem remain with it regardless of ownership. A totem can be bought and sold without losing its power. An amulet, on the other hand, has magic only for the intended owner and cannot be given to someone else as it loses its force. Many primitive people believed in them.

(e) Identification

Another important decorative function of clothing is that it serves to identify and distinguish people in many ways. The symbolization of clothing can indicate the wearer's status, occupation, religion, and group memberships both formal and informal.

(f) Extension of the self

Whenever an object is brought into contact with the body, the conscious existence of the self is extended into the extremities of the object, thereby giving the individual an increased sense of size, power, movement, and rigidity – whatever the characteristic of the object may be. The extension of self through the use of clothing reinforces the attitude or the emotion the individual would like others to feel. The individuals vary in the degree to which they extend their self-feelings beyond the boundaries of their bodies. Clothing does indeed function in strengthening or weakening body-image boundaries. Extension of the self is determined primarily with the individual.

Many lists of functions have been offered with little agreement on a definitive list. It is apparent that clothing does have multipurpose aspects. The innumerable functions of clothing can be classified under two categories: expressive function and instrumental function.

- The expressive function involves the emotional and communicative aspects of clothing. Through clothes one may express individually by stressing unique physical features or by using unique aesthetics. At the same time, through dress one may express group affiliation or the values and standards of the group. In an expressive sense, therefore, clothing divulges something about each human being: the beliefs, sentiments, status, rank, place within the power structure. Clothes may symbolize ties to specific social groups such as family, social class, occupation, or religion.
- Clothing may also have instrumental function, involving rational use of dress in goal-directed behaviour. Clothing may be utilitarian and protective; it may be used to attain desired rewards. Clothing may be employed to change status, perhaps to move from one social class to another. The use of special costumes at weddings, religious ceremonies, and graduation exercises to herald changes in status and accompanying changes in the rights and privileges of those involved is instrumental in nature.

Conclusion

Dress is a product of a complex set of motives, all of which are interdependent and arise out of varied physical, psychological, and social conditions. The factor of adornment alone may have many modifications. Striving for beauty may be motivated by a desire to be sexually attractive or by a need for status. Sexual attractiveness and status, therefore, become the causative factors and adornment simply the manifestation. It is obvious, then, that even if there is a primary or an original function that may be used to explain the wearing of clothes, and other contributory reasons must be included. Thus an integration of many theories is necessary in order to explain adequately the function of dress.