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Extravago wnza

What Deepika wore is a corking argument for a sari evolving gownwards

by **Shefalee Vasudev**

IN 1991, when Madonna wore the conical bra that made eyes pop at Cannes, she was making—crudely perhaps—a personal and political statement on a real fashion stage which turns style into a global media narrative. Cannes, after all, is where the most sought-after brands vie to be seen on international celebrities. Celebrity stylists are swagged, wined and dined for months by fashion houses so that a clutch, a pair of stilettos, and most importantly, a piece of couture is seen on a star there. Worn as they were on such a stage, it's no wonder that Deepika Padukone's Rohit Bal ivory-and-gold sari—followed by Aishwarya Rai's starry Sabyasachi sari—has re-energised the sari vs gown wrangle that plays itself out in myriad ways back home.

Ostensibly, the debate is based on a simple proposition. As Rohit Bal put it, "Gowns and elaborate western dresses do not represent India." But it's not quite as simple as that. As is evident from Deepika's sari statement, followed quickly by Aishwarya's (but only after she had already appeared at Cannes in gowns), this is not just a matter of the sari getting well-deserved top billing; it is also about the changing personality and adaptability of this unstitched drape. Remember, Nandita Das too wore a sari at Cannes some years back. A plain red silk accessorised by a maang tikka. Most people liked it but shrugged and left it at that. She certainly wasn't accompanied, as Deepika was, by India's best-known designer, Rohit Bal, proudly pitching his creation as a sequinned bomb. What we saw this year at Cannes was the global launch of the *badan pe sitare lapete hue*-sari, for which it looked, behaved and fell fluidly, yes, like a gown. Deepika's gossamer sari was paired with a bustier blouse, and caught tightly at the shoulder with the pallu finely pleated behind. The styling accentuated her slender arms, terrific collar bones and taut midriff, mimicking a gown with a tight bodice. Priyanka Chopra draped her Manish Malhotra sari in a similar way for the IIFA green carpet last year; the slimmed and gathered pallu rested languidly on her flat abs, snaking up from the midpoint of her breasts, leaving her lush cleavage unhidden.

No, the gown may never overtake the sari in India, but its influence on the personality and body of the sari is a new and developing story. The red carpet sari and its saucy cocktail cousins are not from Rta Kapur Chisti's 180 woven versions, documented in her engagingly researched book *The Sari*. Like the gown, the designer sari is a hothouse plant—it needs smart events, five-star floors, chauffeured cars, high heels and endless personal fittings to look good. More than anything else, it needs a particular kind of body—narrow-hipped, small-busted, tall, taut and youthful. Much as the new sari announces the modern Indian woman's focus on her identity, it also defines the new female body in India. That Aishwarya Rai's Sabyasachi sari at Cannes looked as much a hit-and-miss as her flop gowns proves that only a certain kind of figure can carry off a starry sari.

While the sari behaves like a gown on the red carpets abroad, back home, the popularity of the gown seems to be soaring among the fashion cognoscenti. Ask designers Gauri and Nainika, whose gowns are favoured by Bollywood and high-fashion circles, and they will tell you that Indian women are finally living out their Hollywood fantasies. The duo recall how they once had to cajole customers to try out a gown. Now it's the other way round. Clients, including women in their 40s, hound them for personalised gown fittings. The gown seems to be an integral part of a new Indian fashion ethos in which sexy is synonymous with showing skin. "There is no back to any bride's choli anymore," says designer Raakesh Agarvwal. "The sexy, ultra-glamourous couture look is what my customers seek; a trend that has now turned the lehnga into a lehnga-gown."

And it's far from just being a metro trend. For the ladies of Ludhiana, with whom I spent time a few days ago, gowns are the new vehicles for playing social politics, beating boredom and feeling liberated. They freely admit to looking down upon traditional clothing and wear gowns for birthday and anniversary parties—kitty parties even. In Delhi and Mumbai, gowns are worn at themed pre-wedding events like 'Oscar night' parties. Nainika donned one for her own pre-wedding Oscar night party. Shilpa Shetty's wedding reception also saw the bride in a revealing, dull gold Tarun Tahiliani gown.

Tahiliani himself doesn't blindly favour gowns. "I feel strongly about Indian women wearing ugly, knock-off gowns instead of the real thing. Indian designers don't serve original fare in this category." The "real thing", let's say a Dior gown, is barely sold in India. International fashion houses claim to "dress Indian celebrities for red carpets", but few actually buy these clothes—they are lent to them by the fashion houses. On the other hand, designer saris sell like hotcakes, and have saved the business of many an Indian designer from collapsing. The gown in India is still an item number in search of an identity. No Indian celeb has so far been able to give her gown a distinct persona like Liz Hurley did, with her famous Versace safety pin gown. We all remember Rekha's signature kanjeevarams, but whose gowns can we recall? While some Indian women—among them Bipasha Basu, Kangana Ranaut and Priyanka Chopra—can carry off western silhouettes, most others end up looking frumpy. Otherwise elegant girls like Asin, Esha Deol, Amrita Rao and Neha Dhupia, to name a few, now joined by eager fashion victim Sania Mirza, look like vamps from the Hindi heartland when they wear gowns.

As for Deepika's sari statement, it has certainly won this round, and the sari itself as has come through shining, as a flexible, adaptable garment, showing the resilience of a true survivor. Even though, in the process, it is looking rather like a gown. ◘

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Mirror, mirror From left, Asin's gown act; Ash in her recent Cannes attire; Liz Hurley's signature Versace 'safety pin' gown; Deepika in a Rohit Bal creation