

Fashion Takes Flight

An excerpt from **Shefalee Vasudev's** book, *Stories We Wear*, details how airport fashion transformed from casual travel to calculated performance

The editor-in-chief of *Voice Of Fashion*, journalist Shefalee Vasudev's *Stories We Wear*, published by Westland Books, is a collection of observed and documented ground reports, lived experience and cultural critique, that explores identity, power, politics, class, gender, grief, beauty and agency through clothing. The book highlights how fashion is not frivolous but a language, armour, memory, performance, rebellion and self-definition. Following is an excerpt from the book about the growth and evolution of the "airport look" and what it represents for glamour and cinema.

Edited excerpt from the book.

Unlike couture, airport fashion is performable. Unlike highly priced streetwear, it offers style cues that feed directly into shopping lists. In no other country is the act of catching a flight so invested with style symbolism—as if stepping into an aircraft is also stepping into a better version of yourself.

As more and more passengers choose—and can afford—air travel, the airport look has become a proxy for class mobility. Everyone who travels can perform as a product of the influencer era. For VIPs and celebrities, it comes lined with privilege: first-class lounges, protective entourages, private security and the top brands wanting to 'dress' them for instant visibility.

Yet, despite the parallel theatres of economy class and VIP lounges for those with high-priced membership and Priority Pass credit cards, there is now a visible fatigue. As well as an aesthetic one.

'Many celebs I've worked with don't even like the concept of airport fashion anymore—especially after twelve-hour flights. But the pressure to "serve looks" has become part of the job. There's no such thing as a day off when you're in the public eye. Especially for rising stars, who can't afford to miss a chance to be spotted.'

That's Maddie Amrutkar, founder and CEO of Glad U Came, a Mumbai-based celebrity management agency. In his anecdotes is an insight into hierarchy—

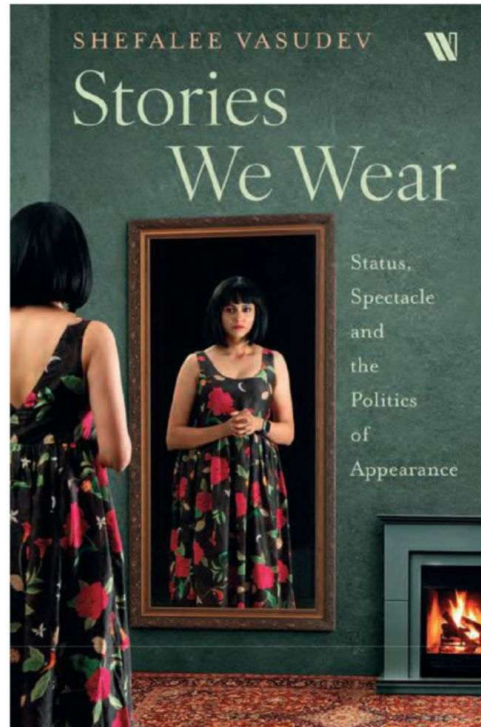
top stars can shrug off airport looks, styled as product placements. But the rising ones can't afford to miss the opportunity of being in the surveillance zone of style.

'Airport terminals,' Maddie says, are the 'unofficial red carpets' for emerging celebrities trying to climb onto the attention carousel. For big-league actors, the same spaces can feel like pressure cookers—stalked by photographers, shadowed by fatigue.

Because what had begun as a sartorial wink to the paparazzi has hardened into obligation for many of his clients.

'I've seen celebrities go from sleep mode to glam mode just before reaching the airport entrance, because someone's texted them that the paps are waiting,' he adds. Never mind the hour—day or night.

'The game shifted after the pandemic,' says Maddie. Some A-listers now demand space and offer only a brisk wave, sometimes grudgingly. Others can't wait to be papped. Since launching Glad U Came, Maddie has



coordinated airport looks for a range of actors—working with stylists, make-up artists and brands eager for visibility. 'Everything is planned down to the last detail—even what goes into the security tray for X-ray,' he says. Accessories that will be taken off and then put back on are staged strategically—feeding the gaze of onlookers hoping to emulate film stars.

'But managing the drama behind those looks isn't easy. You have to read the room, gauge an actor's mood, decide whether to channel candid vibes or high-logo statements and style accordingly.'

Netting influence through the airport look is never a solo act, says Maddie. 'It's a six-person production. Celebrity managers, stylists, publicists—and even drivers or spot boys—tip off photographers with flight schedules and location updates.' Some Mumbai paps have built successful careers on such behind-the-scenes networking.

Bollywood actors and pop stars usually draw the most attention.

Cricketers are more reserved. Yet, their body language—poised, bored or weary—speaks volumes. Actors are a lot more rehearsed. Shah Rukh Khan's practised respect for fans, and for CISF officers as we learnt, mixed with his insouciance, contrasts sharply with Diljit Dosanjh's flamboyance. Dosanjh has been spotted at airports in full Loewe looks, Chanel pearls, Prada boots and diamond chains.

The airport look is now a catalogue—a style genre with its own stars, subplots and signature accessories. Here are a few snapshots from this runway.

In real life, the veteran Rekha—once called the siren—dazzles in gold zari Kanjeevaram saris, mogra gajras and temple jewellery. But her airport look is a shift: ripped jeans, oversized scarves, bandanas and reflector sunglasses. Footwear of choice? Bedazzled Crocs or slip-ons. Plus-sized handbags with loud logos complete the ensemble. A Reddit thread once summed up Rekha's airport looks as giving 'gangster' or 'gangu' energy.

Hrithik Roshan, founder of the athleisure brand HRX, keeps it crisp in sports casuals. Vijay Varma, ever the dandy, travels in lace, leather and sneakers—sometimes adding chains and pendants for flair. Karan Johar, who has been 'performing' style at airports, doesn't seem to tire of playing to the gallery. This year, besides his bags and boots, he has been showing off his weight loss and effortful cool without looking bashful or fatigued.

In May, when he was departing from the Mumbai international airport for the Cannes Film Festival, where *Homebound*, the film he produced, was being shown as part of Un Certain Regard category, he wore a large, neon green Hermes bag, pirouetting and pouting like a model from the 1990s.

But it is the genre of famous newlyweds returning from honeymoons or destination weddings that net the most attention at airports. Their arrivals get pasted on Instagram in frenzied celebration.

Anushka Sharma wore a Jaipur block-printed set, black nail polish, a Gucci

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Shefalee Vasudev's (below) book, *Stories We Wear* (facing page) explores public image through clothing. This page, left to right: Katrina Kaif and Vicky Kaushal, Nick Jonas and Priyanka Chopra Jonas, Ranveer Singh and Deepika Padukone and Anushka Sharma — all spotted at the airport.



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handbag, aviators and, of course, the wedding trinity—mangalsutra, chooda and sindoor. Virat Kohli complemented her in black separates and white sneakers.

Priyanka Chopra—often credited with starting India's airport fashion wave—touched down in a teal embroidered sari and retro cat-eye sunglasses after her extravagant nuptials at Jodhpur's Umaid Bhawan Palace. Nick Jonas held her hand, wearing a camel co-ord set with white sneakers.

Katrina Kaif wore a blush churidar set with embroidery, chooda and an embellished dupatta when she arrived back in Mumbai after her wedding to Vicky Kaushal in Sawai Madhopur, Rajasthan. The groom was in ivory trousers and a tucked-in shirt, his look anchored by camel-toned leather brogues by Sabyasachi.

But it was Deepika Padukone and Ranveer Singh's post-wedding arrival from Italy styled and stitched by couturier Sabyasachi Mukherjee that turned the dial. Ranveer's raw silk churidar—kurta and red brocade bandi mirrored Deepika's ensemble—an ivory churidar set paired with a lavish red Banarasi brocade dupatta. The dupatta, with large woven motifs in gold, sparked a frenzy. For months, red brocade dupattas fluttered through

Indian wedding wardrobes and Instagram posts like flags. 'Deepika bridal' was everywhere. 'Bridal by Sabyasachi' was everywhere too.

In comment sections, fans wonder and openly ask if stars slip into these perfect styled looks at airline lounges or glam up mid-air with hair and make-up squads on standby. Both guesses are correct. When Gen Z actor Khushi Kapoor flew to Jamnagar for Anant Ambani and Radhika Merchant's pre-wedding gala with her boyfriend and actor Vedang Raina, she was clicked holding her dog while he pushed the trolley. 'Best boyfriend' memes took flight immediately.

'It is the stylists who are really tired of airport looks now. It's hard to get them excited about planning yet another variation of sweat-pants, sunglasses and tote bags,' says Maddie.

One such tote—the Dior Book Tote—became a symbol of airport glamour. Since its launch in 2018, Dior's former creative director Maria Grazia Chiuri's creation sold like (luxury) cupcakes. Made from untreated canvas and inspired by Marc Bohan's archival sketches, it was spotted on celebrity arms in almost every departures terminal.

Many stars happily collaborate with brands for airport exposure—some even

scheduling fittings just for the walk from curb to check-in. But every performance needs an intermission. For some, the airport look has gone from thrill to overkill. A few, like Anushka and Virat, now shield their children from airport cameras. Others, like Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, lean into the spectacle. Her daughter Aaradhya often accompanies her, picking up on her mother's self-conscious body language. Husband Abhishek Bachchan is unfailingly polite but aloof. Aishwarya may be trolled for her style (or lack of it), but she continues to wear plus-sized Gucci, Dior and Louis Vuitton bags, holding them well in view of the paps.

Industry gossip—rarely confirmed on record—suggests that Kareena Kapoor and Saif Ali Khan too are now weary of the constant flashbulbs. Their social media fatigue shows: Saif's guarded smiles, Kareena's clipped waves. Selfies at the gate? Not really. Ranbir Kapoor too has grown visibly irritable when papped at airports. Saif and Kareena must partly blame themselves for what began to be called the 'Taimur beat'. As a toddler, they exposed their cherubic son to the paps, indulging in the spectacle. Taimur's face became one of India's most photographed—including with his nannies at airports. There was

media gossip—not entirely untrue—that some reporters had been assigned the 'Taimur beat' by their editors.

At the other end of this performance runway is Urfi Javed—once Oorfi, now Urfi again. She treats the airport like a stage, not a stopover. Her outfits have included cut-out bodysuits, bandage dresses and, in March this year, a safety-pin ensemble accessorised with a see-through 'ice bag'.

Liz Hurley may not envy it—but maybe she'd notice?

As do CISF officers. They are not awed by brands, logos or influencer style. Not anymore, says Sub-Inspector Sonam; the attraction has dwindled. 'How many bags and shoes can you like after all.' Yet, they admit they can spot a stylish person from afar—and understand the codes of celebrity fashion. 'Sometimes when I see paparazzi coverage the following day especially in a newspaper supplement, I realise we had screened those celebs during our duty—I point it out to my family too,' says Tripathi.

But celebrities, for all their flashbulb choreography, are only a sliver of the drama that unfolds at airports. **PHOTO**

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