

In a Manner of Dressing: At the Intersection of Clothing, Colonisation, and Christianity

by Ava Vivian Gonzales

The bare-bellied and silicone-breasted young woman looms large in today's globalised world where Britney is both the penultimate object of desire and a powerful consumer force. The media-savvy Britney sells herself and her lifestyle through a prolific output of music, videos, movie appearances, endorsements, and with a new restaurant, even her choice of cuisine. The multibillion dollar Britney Spears phenomenon leads one to think that perhaps the pronouncements of fashion designers and editors control women's bodies just as the capitalist employer or landlord wields its power over the worker. In drawing the connection between knowledge and power, Foucault's theory of discourse links particular social attitudes and practices to legitimised sets of understandings, or truths. This notion of discursive truth can be used to reveal how clothing and historical religious texts not only construct women as targets of social control but also condone male-inflicted violence done to them.

Clothing and Civilisation

Representations of bare-bosomed native women reinforce the myth of virginal lands ripe for the conquering. Historically, it was for the sake of men's sanities that the parts of a woman's body—especially those that symbolised her power to bear and nourish children—were kept from view. For instance, India's 5,000 year old epic the Mahabharat depicts the Lord Krishna eternally lengthening the diaphanous sari that demurely yet seductively draped Draupadi in order to protect her virtue from captors. Upon Spanish colonisation, the native Filipino or *indio*¹ came to regard the naked female body as evil. The *indios'* refusal to wear clothes was just one of the many reasons that made the Spaniards consider them as inferior. To prevent men from committing sin, native Filipino women were taught to cover their bodies with an intricate layer of under and overgarments. Such a layered manner of Spanish dress became known as the Maria Clara,² after the style the writer Jose Rizal chose to dress his popular heroine in. The silk *corpiños*³ covering the Filipina's breasts under her *baro*, and the delicately embroidered *enaguas*⁴ she wore beneath her *saya*⁵ were the pieces of fabric closest to her skin. These undergarments can be likened to the Japanese silk *Nagajuban*⁶ and cotton *Momen-no-juban* slips young Japanese women wore in addition to the knee-length *Haori* to complement their kimonos. These undergarments beneath the Japanese kimono are held together using either a silk or brocade sash 12 inches wide and 12 feet long called *Obi*.⁷ The *Obi* is wrapped a little higher than the waist to cover

the woman's ribs. It is intricately fastened and kept in place with the aid of girdles—sometimes as many as 15—made from silk and brocade. The sari,⁸ meanwhile, is tucked away beneath two undergarments: first, a waist-to-floor length petticoat tied tightly at the waist by a drawstring and second, a tight fitting blouse that ends just below the bust.

Though seemingly different, through subtle variations in style and materials, the sari, kimono, and Maria Clara all communicate personal and social messages of gender, age, status and aesthetics. Through Maria

Clara's character and manner of dress, Jose Rizal inscribed the colonised male's fascination with the female, just as tales of kimono-clad women were part of Western lore long before the Portuguese landed on the Japanese archipelago in 1543. Likewise, the traditional six-yard sari Indian women have been generously pleating, tucking, and draping around their bodies for centuries exudes a beauty, grace, and sensuality that continues to mystify travellers. According to folktale, the floor length, midriff-baring attire:

...was born on the loom of a fanciful weaver. He dreamt of Woman. The shimmer of her tears. The drape of her tumbling hair. The colours of her many moods. The softness of her touch. All these he wove together. He couldn't stop. He wove for many yards. And when he was done, the story goes, he sat back and smiled and smiled and smiled.

Colonisation and Christianity

In the Philippines, with trade and colonisation came Christianity. Similarly, in Japan, missionaries arrived alongside traders and were successful in converting thousands of Japanese to Christianity. The intrusion of Western religion and culture into traditional Japanese life prompted Japan's ruler to close its doors to the West by 1640, and it became illegal for Japanese to travel to other countries. This isolation further reinforced Orientalist notions about Japan. In India, many converted to Christianity when St. Thomas "the

Doubter” came to the Indian province of Kerala in AD 52, sixteen years before St. Peter stepped in Rome. St. Thomas succeeded in erecting seven churches before he died at the hands of a murderous fanatic. Many believe his tomb to be in St. Thomas Mount in Madras, the capital of the Indian state of Tamilnadu.

As the trade of silk, ivory and spices flourished, Christian doctrine entered the East. The writings of early church fathers like Tertulian gave its new converts a glimpse of why it was necessary for the female form to be hidden from the male gaze—Eve had deceived her husband in a state of nakedness. Tertulian, in the second century, elaborated on how the female’s evil nature can be traced to Eve’s nakedness/deception:

Do you know that each of you is an Eve, the sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age; the guilt must necessarily live too; you are the devil’s gateway; you are the unsealer of that tree; *you are the first deserter of the Divine Law*; you are she who persuaded him when the devil was not valiant enough to attack. (writer’s italics)

By the time Friar Cherubino of Siena’s *Rules of Marriage* was published in the fifteenth century, the practice of beating one’s wife was seen as an act that brought spiritual benefits to both the giver and receiver of such violence:

When you see your wife commit an offense, don’t rush at her with insults and violent blows.... Scold her sharply, bully and terrify her. And if still this doesn’t work... *take up a stick and beat her soundly*, for it is better to punish the body and correct the soul than to damage the soul and spare the body.... Then *readily beat her, not in rage, but out of charity and concern for her soul, so that the beating will redound to your merit and her good.* (writer’s italics)

Some feminist researchers indict the religion of the coloniser for bringing with it the double standard that continues to segregate women into particular occupations, especially in Christian populations. The religion the Europeans brought with them to the East served to accentuate the difference used to define men’s from women’s bodies which inevitably led to a corresponding division of labour, confining women to reproductive work in the home as men conquered the public sphere. The proper conduct of women was based



Prescribed clothing for Asian women and girls may vary in several ways. But the purpose is similar: to cover them from the male gaze.

on the premium Christianity placed on women’s chastity, which in turn, gave birth to social restrictions. Once married, women were assured salvation only if they performed their role as wives and mothers as St. Paul reveals in his First Letter to Timothy:

A woman must learn in silence and be completely submissive. I do not permit woman to act as teacher, or in any way to have authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was created first, Eve afterward; moreover, it was not Adam who was deceived by the woman. It was she who was led astray and fell into sin. *She will be saved through childbearing*, provided she continues in faith and love and holiness... (writer’s italics)

Virgins vs. Vamps

Marriage and the formation of the human family, if some historical accounts are to be believed, evolved from various property relationships. The book of Exodus even lists a wife as one of his neighbour’s properties (before houses, slaves, oxen, and asses) a man is not to covet. Women, as heirs of Eve, “the first deserter of the Divine Law,” are seen as weak by nature. In Christian doctrine, embracing moth-



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Religion is intricately embedded in the fabric that women wear.

erhood is the only salvation of women from Eve's sin, which they inherit on account of their gender. Unlike men who are called to be true to their nature as God's obedient sons, women are tasked with the continual rejection of their weak nature. Christianity defines the prime task of a woman as the safeguarding of her chastity, the prerequisite for marriage and motherhood.

Britney's popularity lies largely in her packaging as "a girl-not-yet-a-woman," the selling of an ambiguous virgin vs. vamp persona created through carefully selected lyrics, music, and dance moves. By baring her belly and flaunting her bosom, the parts historically associated as the source of women's power, Britney has capitalised on centuries-old Christian doctrine to generate a multibillion dollar industry where the object and commodity for sale is herself. ♪

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Footnotes:

¹ The word *indio*, Spanish for Indian, was how Spanish colonisers referred to the brown-skinned inhabitants of the Philippine Islands.

² The Maria Clara is a Filipino dress made from finely woven cotton, hemp, silk, or pineapple fibers. It is composed of a loose, long sleeved upper garment called the *baro* usually covered by a *pañuelo*, or shawl wrapped around the shoulders, and a full skirt called the *saya* that covered the ankles.

³ A silk garment worn to cover the breasts.

⁴ A slip, usually of cotton or silk, worn beneath the *saya*.

⁵ See Note 2

⁶ The *Nagajuban*, *Momen-noban* and *Haori* are silk chemise and robe-like undergarments worn beneath the Japanese kimono.

⁷ The *obi*, part of the Japanese kimono, is a sash made of either brocade or silk tied a litter higher than the waist to cover the woman's ribs and to hold the kimono and all the layers beneath it, in place.

⁸ The *sari* is considered the traditional dress of Indian women. Usually six yards in length, it is made from cotton or silk. The fabric is pleated, tucked, and draped around a waist-to-floor length petticoat and a tight fitting midriff bearing blouse that ends just below the bust.