

Fie on Thee Fie on me

An exploration of the embedded feelings of shame

Submitted by:

Ronika Pipal

Fashion Design 2024

Submitted to:

Prof. Dipl. Des. Nil Atalay

Dipl. Des. Nils von Berg

Introduction

Shame :

Noun

1. A painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior .
2. A regrettable or unfortunate situation or action .

Verb

Make someone feel ashamed.(1)

The bachelor thesis presented here is an exploration of the embedded feelings of shame , it is an attempt at understanding the *Accuser* and the *Accused* and the power dynamics that lay underneath when it comes to instilling shame even when it's self accusatory . The collection aims at The renunciation and rebellion against it as a tool for oppression throughout sociological and sexist regimes . And the humble acceptance of it for an ever evolving conscience and consciousness .

The paper will briefly go over the entire spectrum of shame while focusing on certain key aspects which are translated into clothing in this collection. Defining and elaborating why certain fabric, colour and design choices were made and the underlying nuances behind each of those design decisions. This paper acts as a factual glossary and a key to understanding the cultural and sociological irony the garments try to play with. Personification and exaggeration of the different degrees of shame, starting from the accusation and /or self infliction to the acceptance and making peace with it. Sitting with it vs indulging in it, from the societal infliction to the unconscious incorporation of Shame in parenting. The importance of it in prison reform and the humble acceptance of it in queer identity, these are the focal points this collection and paper tries to explore. Through this collection the aim is to give a physical form to this intangible feeling / emotion and venture into why an emotion that isn't part of the initial biological spectrum and is born out of socio-moral laws has such an immense impact and holds power over us.

The approach taken here is of couture / Demi couture. The concept of *glory and gore go hand in hand*(2) is explored aesthetically. Delving into the theme, shame being the gore here and coming out of it or coming into terms with it being the glorious end notion. This concept will be further explained as we go through the garment pieces and their transition from gore to glory aesthetically and metaphorically.

While the theme is political to an extent it is also personal. Belonging to the global east, there are certain questions that have often been asked. Questions to which there were no acceptable answers. And if answers were available the chutzpah to deliver or retaliate to these questions was missing. This collection is a step towards educating myself and coming in terms with my own feelings of misplaced shame. It is also meant to be a source of empowerment and a moment of realization to my peers and the audience, giving them the option/ opportunity to re-evaluate and re-assess their own feelings of self inflicted or accused incidents of shame.

Inspiration has been taken from socio-cultural norms as well as literature where these socio-cultural norms are challenged or the discomfort/displeasure from the said norms has been expressed. While the experiences that lead to these explorations might be personal the end result is a communitarian feeling of relatability. Discussions with peers and examiners often ended with woeful sighs, recounting experiences that left the same bitter aftertaste of shame that seems to be universal. An important aspect of this discussion and opening up a dialogue is to create space for further conversations when it comes to acceptance of the said socially constructed feelings of shame when accountability is to be held. The end goal here is not to shun or disregard the emotion but to come in terms with it when needed and not banally accept it when it is enforced upon us.

Accepting shame in its entirety; The whole spectrum of it, distancing the externally influenced biases but paying due diligence to the part of it that propels growth when it comes to a conscious that sits comfortably in its own skin. Henceforth is an attempt at molting the misplaced settlements of enforced shame and making space for shame when it comes to accountability and self reflection.

*Are(n't) you ashamed of yourself? Does it sit with you every night? Does it actually belong there? Creeping along your bedside? Is it in the right place? Or is it at its height? Who gave it the power and why don't you take it back.
I think it's about goddamn time.*

FIE ON THEE !

In the introduction of her book *The Shame Machine: Who profits in the new age of humiliation*, author Cathy O'Neil mentions a conversation with curator Peter Whiteley where they talk about shame clowns of the Pueblo nations of Mexico and Arizona(3). Whiteley states that the role of these shame clowns is to reinforce the norms and ethical standards of the community. What we see here is a prime example for the use of shame as a tool for creating or enforcing order. An order which is decided based on what the society, in this context the people of the pueblo nations, view as acceptable. The Hopi ceremony of the pueblo clowns invoke the feelings of shame by calling out what whiteley describes as "transgressive" behaviours. Similarly many different cultures have their own ways of enforcing cultural and societal norms by invoking feelings of shame.

Laj or *Lajja*(G.1) is another such concept where the deep rooted feelings of shame play a huge role in the power dynamics of the sexes in the Indian sub continent. To understand this power imbalance and how shame plays a role in it we need to first understand the weight of the term *Laj*. For the lack of a direct translation if we want to describe the word, it is the amalgamation of honour and modesty intertwined with shame. The peculiar yet ironic thing about the word *Lajja* or *Laj* is that it is only ever used in context of women. If a direct translation is attempted then *Lajja* translates to a woman's shameful modesty and honour that she is expected to uphold in accordance with the Indian culture and its norms. In many rural and even in some urban settings the concept engulfs the lives of women to the point where it is believed that a family's honour and prestige lies in the *Lajja* of the family's daughters. Their words, actions and reactions are carefully scrutinised by society and frowned upon if it does not sit well with the communities sense of a woman with *Laj*. What's ironic here again is that these set rules on how a woman should always uphold her *Laj* are enforced by the male dominated society or a community which is partial to the male sex.

With India's history of being a colony for over a hundred years, some of these expectations from women to always be and act "lady like" can be traced back as the morphing of the fascination with a washed down version of Victorian etiquette's and traditionally orthodox male centric socio-religious biases. One impact of this morphed ideological enforcement on women was the evolution of the sari, though many might debate on calling it an evolution. Traditionally the sari was worn without a blouse covering the bosom (4). Many women in the south of India did not cover their breasts and went bare chested. The sculptures that decorate the Ajanta

and Ellora caves in Maharashtra depict how the sari was worn traditionally in the nineteenth century before the British invasion. While the British version of the blouse was way more modest, the current iterations of the blouse would be considered scandalous in comparison. Altering the traditional female garment by introducing the blouse to the sari can be viewed as a first enforcement of *laj*. And one of the first of many development in the use of shame as a tool for oppression when it comes to the female sex.

TAINTED

To understand why shame has such a hold on the human psyche that it can be used as a tool, we need to first explore when does this emotion starts to rooting itself in. And even though "*Shame is not a basic emotion in the sense of being wired into human biology since infancy.*"(5) The first encounter with the emotion often happens during early childhood. The first emotional responses a child develops at birth are attraction and withdrawal.(6) which later develop into joy, fear, sadness and anger at about six to eight months after birth. At the age of eighteen months the child can already experience self conscious emotions like guilt and shame(7). These feeling of guilt and shame are often learnt or picked up in a behaviour-reaction setting when a child is disciplined by the parent. This first interaction with shame can be impressionable specially as the child psyche develops further, the macro and micro environmental circumstances can influence the child's personality. It is essential here that parents make conscious efforts of not enforcing shame while disciplining the child . Subconscious instillations of shame while parenting often can be the seed to deeper and more critical instances of self inflicted shame during puberty which is quite often even carried into adulthood.

A study conducted by Sera De Rubeis concluded that negative parent-child interactions can lead to aggressive behavioural patterns in children(8). These aggressive behaviours can later be a root to various mental health disorders , anxiety and depression being the most common. In certain cases if these negative parent-child interactions are traumatic, It can even lead to personality disorders(8). Children are extremely perceptive and receptive. Incidents that adults or parents do not consider major can have deeper psychological impacts if carelessness is exercised. The developing brain of a child absorbs even small details which in a behaviour-reaction setting can cause the child to adapt in a way where it picks up certain behaviours subconsciously, like lying to get out of trouble or not sharing distress and anxieties with parents to avoid being questioned. In some cases a child carefully alters its behaviours to please the parental figure based on its previous experience with what's considered acceptable and what is frowned upon.

DIFFIDENCE

Shame and guilt are weirdly intertwined and often confused for each other if the self awareness to differentiate between the nuances is missing. While guilt makes you feel like what you “did” was wrong, essentially pointing the behaviour out and thus invoking a need to make amends if needed. Shame on the other hand is more self conscious that way and a little more engulfing , shame directly puts your sense of identity into question and states my “sense of being is wrong”. It is way more self critical and deals with how one judges its own identity on the moral compass. The moral compass which is usually biased by what the society deems morally right or what the set norm is.

In “*Some things are better left unsaid*” : *The “dignity of queer shame”* Margaret Morrison argues how the shame enveloped ‘queerness’ can be directed towards creative endeavours(9). Here as well shame is used as a tool but the difference is that the shame is self inflicted. It is also not enforced here, instead it is self critical. The source of it is internalised. And because the shame is self inflicted the relationship with it can be altered, shame that often brings feelings of self loathing and self consciousness can transform itself into fuel for active acceptance and betterment of a more compassionate sense of self.

Queer shame is something almost everyone belonging to the LGBTQ+ community has faced once in their lifetime. A lot of it sprouts from internalised sense of heteronormativity that their sense of self seems to be constantly defying. Depending on the culture of origin , the Sense of self feels further attacked by externally enforced instances of shame inflicted by the heteronormative society. It is difficult to uphold dignity when your sense of identity is constantly judged by a rigged moral scale that always tips on the same side. Still Acknowledging the shame and giving it the required space it needs is the first step towards transforming the tool from a weapon to a medium.

SATIATION

The Hopi ceremony with the shame clowns ends with a formal forgiveness given both to the clowns and the shamed tribe members(3). Here the aim for the ceremony is not to publicly shame the tribe members, who according to the societal norms are offenders. But the end goal of the ceremony is redemption. Acknowledgment of the offence leading to accountability and responsibility being taken up. A completely different approach of using shame as a tool to bring in accountability and responsibility and also a frowned upon one is the panopticon prison concept(10). It’s an architectural prison setup where there is a central tower

overseeing all the prison cells which are constructed in a circle surrounding the tower. The inmates are unaware of the fact whether they are being watched or not. This system of a correctional institute uses surveillance as a mode to instil shame and thus forces accountability. This is a much more harsher way of implementing shame and has been rightfully deemed unethical. What we see here is the use of the same emotion to bring about the same result but one method is much more compassionate than the other. As mentioned earlier shame as a tool can very easily be weaponised for oppression but it also holds the potential to act as a catalyst for self reflection. Shame when used as a catalyst can trigger a change in how one perceives their own sense of self and make a shift from passing strict judgements to making informed assessments which can lead to holding accountability for one's actions.

FIE ON ME ?

“Shame is very important. I was always brought up in this traditional way. Where you're supposed to be ashamed of many things including your own body. And shame was considered very powerful. It was a fierce pedagogical tool. It seems like a very weird way to say it, but you're supposed to be ashamed and then learn how to behave. Its all at the level of your body in the world and how others see you. Particularly for girls, you know, that you were supposed to be ashamed of certain things because that was the way you grew up in the core of society(11).”

Here the diasporic author and poet Meena Alexander talks about growing up in a society that is dictated by the concept of *Lajja*(G.1). Having grown up in a conservative household of south India and then moving to Sudan and the USA gave Alexander enough cultural shifts to have a birdseye view on the instilled feelings of shame enforced on her as a girl child. In many of her works Alexander talks about how deep rooted the concept of *Laj* is and how some of her childhood traumas were still carried on in her adult life due to the cultural intertwined-ness of *Laj* with said traumas. When dealing with sensuality and specially when it comes to pleasure the concept of *laj* completely shun's a women's right to sensual pleasure. The *sanskari*(G.2) Indian woman is not even supposed to think about indulging in sinful activities like sensual pleasure forget about embracing it. The norms of *Laj* dictate that a *sanskari* woman is not to indulge in premarital sex and thus has to vow her purity to her future husband. Her only interaction with pleasure is catering to the needs of her husbands pleasure. Consent is insignificant once she is married as it already belongs to the husband the moment they are wed. In fact in some rural regions the elders of the house check for bloodstains on the sheets after the couple

spends their first night together so as to confirm the purity of the bride. Needless to say the honour of the bride's family depends on it.

CAPITULATE

Like any other emotion shame essentially is not good or bad, on the weight scale of emotions it is definitely a heavier one to deal with. And unlike the fleeting-ness of the lighter emotions like joy it sure likes to take its time when it settles in. But while shame takes its sweet time we have a choice when comes to dealing with it. We can either shun the emotion and try to alienate ourselves from it which is practically impossible as the emotion is notorious for being all consuming . Or we can provide it the space it demands from us and sit with it. Acknowledging the presence of it is the first step towards coming in terms with it. Giving it the attention it requires and then assessing and reassessing to make sure weather the shame we are feeling has a rightful place or is it simply a case of misplaced feelings biased by socio-cultural norms. Just like guilt and grief the long lost cousins of shame, the way of overcoming shame is often going/passing through it rather than around it. It is a painful road to walk on but a rewarding one. The reward being the development of a sense of self that is not easily shaken and is more sure of itself and every thing it stands for and believes in. It is defensive when standing up for itself yet apologetic when need be. It takes accountability and responsibility when it finds itself on the wrong side of the road but it is still proud of how far it has come along in the journey. It accepts the fact that the journey is a long one but instead of constantly checking the map for how far the destination is , it embraces the adventures and misadventures that come along with this journey, every now and then indulging in the scenic and not so scenic views. Inventing and reinventing this sense of self with each one being a little less ashamed.

THE CYCLE

The conclusion of this collection and thesis is not derived from the renunciation of shame completely, but by humbly accepting shame in its entire spectrum.

Keeping a check on the inflicted shame coming from external and internal sources while also giving shame its space when accountability is required. The collection hopes to portray this cycle thematically as a journey we all have taken once in our lives and will continue to do so, It is meant to be an opportunity/trigger to reassess the feelings of misplaced shame embedded within us either by the society or instilled in us while being disciplined as kids. a reminder of being compassionate with ourselves when we find ourselves in the middle of the same cycle time and time

again. And relieving our shoulders from the burden of carrying it around for the rest of our lives.

*"I hid the deed:
—would my life end?"*

The grackle called it back again.

*The grackle then
became*

*my life. A swan's neck
curling to ask
what if*

*uncurled
to reach into the reed,*

*and struck the stone
of what I did.*

The grackle called it back again.

The grackle called it back again(12)."

Bibliography :

1. Oxford Languages and Google - English | Oxford Languages. (2024, January 16). <https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>
2. Lorde. "Glory and Gore." *Pure Heroin*.
3. Cathy O'Neil. *The Shame Machine: Who profits in the new age of humiliation*, 2022
4. Minya Chatterjee. HuffPost. URL: https://www.huffpost.com/archive/in/entry/choli-ke-peeche-kya-hai-a-british-hand_in_5c10e3a3e4b085260ba66c42
5. Peter N. Stearns. *Shame a brief history*, 2017.
6. Martha Lally and Suzanne valentine-French. *Lifespan Development: A psychological perspective*, 2019 (OSR: <http://dept.clcillinois.edu/psy/LifespanDevelopment.pdf>)
7. Out of home Toolbox. URL: <https://www.oohctoolbox.org.au/trauma-and-shame>
8. Sera De Rubeis. *Understanding Treatment Effectiveness for Aggressive Youth: The Importance of Regulation in Parent-Child Interactions*, 2009.
9. Margaret Morrison. *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 1, a special issue: QUEER/AFFECT (March 2015), "Some things are better left unsaid": The "Dignity of queer shame".
10. Michel Foucault. *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts, Volume 2, Number 1, Autumn 2008, "Panopticism" from Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.
11. Menna Alexander in an interview by May Joseph, 2009 . URL:<https://merliterary.com/2009/09/22/meena-alexander-writing-childhood-and-the-indian-ocean/>
12. Joshua Weiner. *shame*, 2006.

Look book pictures : Natalia Ruiz Galindo

Editorial pictures : Natalia Ruiz Galindo

Film pictures : Kenzy Hegazy

Glossary

Laj/Lajja : the Hindi word for modesty honour or and shame of a woman

sanskari derived from *sanskar* : culture or manners as deemed appropriate and acceptable by the Hindu society.