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'Dressed' Review: Wear You Want to Be

Meditations on Madonna's jackets, Cary Grant's suits and Van Gogh's paintings of his battered shoes.



Cary Grant in Alfred Hitchcock's 'North by Northwest' (1959).

PHOTO: ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

By Ann Landi

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By Shahidha Bari

Basic, 335 pages, \$30

In the course of reading Shahidha Bari's "Dressed: A Philosophy of Clothes," I found myself thinking about my own wardrobe, past and present. In particular, a Calvin Klein coat I bought while in the throes of a divorce more than two decades ago. This was an elegant black wool winter-weight garment, trimmed in mink at the collar

and cuffs, and at around \$500, beyond what I might normally spend on a coat. But I enjoyed sticking it to my about-to-be ex on his Platinum Card, and the gesture seemed to signal a newfound independence. I didn't wear the coat much—and, yes, felt guilty about that fur—but it was deeply symbolic of a difficult period in my life. It's not particularly new to remark that clothes say much about our sense of style or socioeconomic status, but Ms. Bari's entertaining and wide-ranging overview reminds us of how deeply woven they are into the stuff of literature, movies, art, mythology and even sports. The book is subtitled "a philosophy," but I would argue that it is much more like a sustained meditation, taking us nimbly into the well-provisioned corners of the author's copious mind (she is a London-based journalist and professor of fashion history, dubbed a "New Generation Thinker" by BBC Radio 3 nine years ago).

In the prologue and introduction alone, Ms. Bari segues from the *cheongsams* worn by the lead actress in the Hong Kong film "In the Mood for Love" to van Gogh's paintings of his battered shoes to Madonna's jackets to observations from Marx, Freud, Foucault, Goethe, Barthes, Nietzsche and Susan Sontag. Reader, be warned: This writer has read and seen and looked at a whole lot more than you or I. The book is divided into five chapters devoted to different kinds of garments and accessories, and, as Ms. Bari writes, underlying each section is "a concern for the body—invested with authority as it is for men and subject to surveillance as it is for women." She begins the chapters with a reminiscence about an item of clothing or an accoutrement that was of particular importance to her. In "Dresses," she recalls a black lace evening dress, carefully mended by the author, that belonged to a beloved and now deceased friend. In the last chapter—"Pockets, Purses, and Suitcases"—she remembers a black leather handbag carried by her mother and containing such exotic items as a vial of Arabian attar and "neatly folded betel leaves." This is a nice touch, helping us understand how Ms. Bari's sensibilities could lead to a professional preoccupation with clothes.

Throughout "Dressed" are sharp-eyed observations, suitable for reading aloud, and astute analyses of art high and low. Ms. Bari's position on women's clothing is, for the most part, acerbically feminist: "This [is] the scandal of womenswear. It invites

touch so much more than any other categories of dress, as if the female body were itself intended to be made available to the grasp of others and its clothing only ever a solicitation of the hand that will reach for it.”

On suits, she moves easily from the suavity of Cary Grant, who wears a “single, simple grey suit” throughout the movie “North by Northwest,” to Charlie Chaplin’s tramp suit, cobbled together from the studio wardrobe. “The clothes seemed to imbue me with the spirit of the character,” the actor later wrote. The bespoke tailored suit, as the author wryly observes, serves as the perfect costume for characters as diverse as the serial killer in “American Psycho” to the brilliant and brittle modernist poet T.S. Eliot. But when women adopt a menswear look, the semblance of authority swings in a different direction. Whether she’s Diane Keaton’s character in “Annie Hall” or singer-actress Janelle Monáe, the “suited woman is confident in her right to possess all the command ordinarily claimed by men.”

Some of Ms. Bari’s most entertaining and perceptive deconstructions are in the realm of film, such as the “unhappy identification of women with birds” in Hitchcock’s tale of avian frenzy. In her reading, the director can scarcely conceal a streak of savage misogyny. He takes the heroine’s “outward elegance” as an insult and “abandons her to creatures that relentlessly tear and nip, unraveling the fabric of her femininity.” In her dissection of the screwball comedy “Bringing Up Baby,” starring a young Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn, she sums up the harebrained plot “that spills over with an animal madness” and bristles with cinematic metaphors like a negligée trimmed in marabou.

You may find yourself caviling at certain omissions—how can anyone write a chapter on shoes without a nod to Carrie Bradshaw’s expensive and ongoing obsession in “Sex and the City”?—but this is a turbocharged and delightful romp through more things on heaven and earth than are implied in the dry notion of “a philosophy.”

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