

Theorizing Bell-Bottoms Dominating Aesthetics

Stephen Sheeha

Bell-bottom pants invoke in me a memory of innumerable black and white newspaper photos of women marching behind banners in the student and youth demonstrations that marked the sixties and early seventies. But nostalgia is painfully ironic. Forgetting makes remembering a dangerous and tricky act.

The sixties have made a full comeback in the realm of popular fashion in Lebanon: bell-bottoms, straight-hair, John Lennon glasses, clogs, etc. In the United States, the sixties returned a few years ago with the revival of the Grateful Dead's popularity. Everything was tie-dyed, while reggae and other Black symbols of liberation were appropriated (a new form of colonialism). The sixties' fashion statement in Lebanon, unlike the U.S., is most explicitly expressed by young women.

What is disturbing about this revival, like that of Dead-headism in the States, is that it has returned without any of its explicit

social-political critic. That is to say, bell-bottom pants could initially be seen as a reaction against the dominant aesthetic of the time, as a move towards absurd or silly fashion. "Sixties" style was direct intervention into the dominant political-aesthetic realm. Flaring pant-legs signaled an independent self while a form fit expressed sexual awareness. Today, many Lebanese women will pay top-dollar to signal fashion-awareness and express prowess in fashion consumption. This is an act of objectification, not liberation.

Fashion is not a marginal issue, but a structural one. Aesthetics are a part of discourse. Discourse is social reality as we see and live it. Remember that aesthetics are about *seeing and desiring*. Aesthetics are a means of control, determining our aspirations and limitations. They are spread and reinforced by foreign and local television, films, music, art, politics and architecture. The hybridity of "taste" (dhauq) is as much Lebanese or Arab as it is American or Western.

An *intellectual*, according to feminist theorist, Bell Hooks, is someone who *critically* examines and questions one's position in her specific and general social reality, especially concerning gender, race, and class. Intellectuals involved in the current feminist movement recognize these three categories as essentially interrelated, and realize that women's oppression stems from more than simple chauvinism but from patriarchal global economy and accompanying discourses (aesthetics being a part of it).

It seems that university students, women and men, Lebanese and American, are finding it increasingly difficult to *intellectually* and radically critique social and aesthetic sensibilities. Effective and insightful feminist theories cannot but confront these sensibilities. This current "sixties" aesthetic is corporate and patriarchal. It is not only sixties-style but diversified into all realms of taste and all realms of consumption. These aesthetics are what we desire; i.e. what we want to have, become, and be. Women are an intricate part of this

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aesthetic system as always. Women are objects to be seen with the clothes. Women consume fashion and are consumed by the male gaze.

Though a product of Western haute-couture fashion industry, Bell-bottoms in the sixties and seventies were worn globally as an expression of a newly liberated woman. The bell-bottom wearing youth, whether she was Lebanese, African, South American, or European were involved in progressive movements for the equality and liberation of fellow women, of workers, of homosexuals, and people of color. Bell-bottoms' pants were a banner of liberation as those held by the protesting women in the newspapers recalled by my memory.

The contemporary bell-bottoms have been remembered through a corporate memory; the same memory that these pants protested against. That very feminist protest the political gender critique against male corporate power is left-behind and locked-out; forgotten. The sixties have become for the women's youth an articulation of Madonna's "Express Yourself." Fashion is being seen; the voyeur consumes your self-expression.

When young women are asked "For whom do you dress?" They reply, more often than not, "I dress for myself." On the one hand, this response totally erases the politics of self-expression. On the other hand, it is the objectification of women's sexuality. Surpassing simple consumption, the

Lebanese young woman now identifies herself with the commodity itself (clothes). This self-objectification is patriarchal because it is organized around the male gaze which objectifies and consumes women's bodies, controlling their sexuality.

The dominant aesthetic of fashion as well as that of mass media, politics, or urban planning, must be critically addressed by Lebanese women, especially the youth. Only from this intellectual inquiry, may we start to remember a bell-bottom critique, and re-begin our struggle for liberation.

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