

# Dupatta

by

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Is there any truth to a dupatta or is it only a social construct?

A *dhai gaz ka kapra* is just a formality, but one that encapsulates every South Asian woman's experiences in it. The threads and motifs used to make one, the tana bana, the laces used, the embroidery on it, the painted ones, the silk ones, the lawn ones, the chiffon ones, the georgette ones, each one of them tells a story of the woman who adorns them. They hold within it her thoughts, her emotions, the dried tears are embedded in the palloo. When draped around the shoulders they show the weight of the world on her shoulders. The lightness of the dupatta, the heaviness of a woman's heart is an experience unlike any other. It is womanhood – an entrance into another life that I am still learning about. It is an experience we all see differently, but when one hears; *dupattay ke baghair baahar mat jao*, we all know what that means. So we drape it to hide our breasts or our hair, and we take one step out, because we are women. In India some women perform the same act with their saari's palloo. We do it with a separate cloth, a cloth not entirely a part of an attire, an extra, but one that ties the whole thing together from when we are thirteen to God knows when. It is prized by society, a hindrance to the one who wears it, a concealment of many hopes and dreams and desires. It is a love hate relationship between modesty and freedom, between soaring high and reaching the middle of the Earth, between our fates and desires. It is only an experience, and some say an important one, and some say, not so

important. Our dupattas conceal a thousand secrets, and I would much rather keep those secrets because people judge too harshly.

My mother has an array of chiffon dupattas that go quite well with some of my outfits. Her dupattas are always a more superior fabric, drape better, some with pretty laces on the sides, others with ribbons for an easy hold on the shoulders. There are a lot of blues and blacks and whites which I use from her collection. The others I dare not touch. She goes once in a year, at best, to shop for herself. It's never expensive. She wouldn't dare spend anything on herself unless it is a necessity. Everything has always been for us anyway she says. I know it all too well. They say there is nothing in the world like a woman's sacrifice. I didn't know what a woman could sacrifice until I fell in love. Unlike my mother, I couldn't just give everything up, so I left love instead.

The pretty dupattas are silk, printed, and I dare not touch them with their leafy green grace; another world colored into a *ddhai gaz ka dupatta*. It is a shame my dupattas are nothing like my mother's dupattas, but why would they be? I am not like her either. Even if I want to be. I do not stand in kitchens cooking meals in May, June, July and August. At best I do it at night, with the kitchen windows open, the door ajar; welcoming a different kind of stillness into my life. She prefers disorder, so I learnt to like chaos too.

There are days when I look at her and say, I am not like you, I am not like you, and some days when she says; you are just like me, you are just like me. I stopped

running a long time back. We are both like each other. It was about a few years ago that we stopped keeping track of who was more like whom, or what I borrowed from her, and what she learnt from me; but she kept track of all the dupattas I borrowed. We just coexisted and took things from each other sometimes returning them back, and sometimes holding on to them as keepsakes.

Ammi's dupatta's can mean so much to us; all of us. I remember when my little cousin would hold his mother's dupatta and follow her from room to room. Sometimes her dupatta would be in his mouth, between his teeth as he let himself be dragged from place to place. He never really wanted to let go. My aunt would barely ever tell him to go away. So he would stand next to where she sat, holding on to a piece of cloth hoping it would tie him to her for eternity.

I asked my friend Aimen, what her mother's dupatta meant for her, and she said it was a starting point, a place of learning and like a head start for life. I completely understood what she meant because we wear dupattas like our mothers. We somehow choose similar color palettes, similar shades and the same threads bind them together after a while. A grandmother's shawl is an heirloom, a prized possession but a mother's dupatta is a starting point to everything that girls look up to from a little age, only to find it a huge hindrance and they weave lost opportunities into its edges because they learn too late that sacrificing everything will not get them a medal, any accolade at all, and sometimes, most times in fact, not even a thank you.

It is first used a covering when anyone else is around. That started long before we ever knew our mothers. She was probably still a young girl then. It is a binding document when she wears it on her head and leaves her parents' house to live amongst strangers. It is then used to hide her huge tummy when we are taking over, and chewing down on her bones, her marrow, her flesh and blood to make our own. It is then used as a covering of her breasts when she breastfeeds us. It is then used to fan us when there is no electricity. We use to make forts out of all the cushions we find. It is used as a saari when we are young enough, and try to wear her very large heels only to trip and fall in our useless games of playing dress up. *Who were we impressing anyway?* Her fancy dupattas come out for school festivals and other festivities and we learn the difference between all the fabrics and their uses. It is then used as an everyday item whenever we need to step out of our homes for a small thing, some of us use them for our own long days at university or at work, and so the lifeline of our mother's dupattas are really the lines on the palms of our hands. As long as she is there, her dupattas are there, we might just be safe.

A dupatta is used to ward off flies, hide last minute mistakes like dust on a shelf missed earlier, or a way to wipe children's noses when nothing else is in sight. It is a multipurpose cloth that we use to put down women, but women use for all their purposes – almost, as if, if a dupatta did not exist, neither would she. The two intertwined into a being always dancing, prancing, and ensuring everything gets done.

Just as a dupatta is multipurpose, we ensure women multitask between household chores and work or studies, and still manage to find time to do all the things that make her a woman. Go meet friends but do not go out too much. Go to a spa, but be careful how much money you spend. Smile more, but not too much that someone notices, or worse falls in love with you. The strange thing about the last part is that the more I have seen a girl hide her beauty in a dupatta, the more she has fallen hopelessly in love and falls asleep knowing that love will probably never materialize.

If someone does not have a mother, they can know plenty about her from all the dupattas she leaves behind in the back of the closet. Did she like flowers? Pastels? Black and gold? Was she an “it” girl in her own days at university with an array of chiffon dupattas, or a nerd who only ever cared to drape it to avoid harassment when she was reading a book on a bus? Was she the kind of girl who carefully picked out a dupatta to match every outfit perfectly? (You can know this when you see more than thirty-five dupattas stashed in a *thaila*). Or was she a rebel, her dupattas used as a headband, or used to keep out the sun in really long days, but other times she threw it away to play badminton with another girl twice her size? (This you will learn if the dupattas are disheveled, torn from a side, and mostly a lot of *chunri* in her collection). You can then choose how to honor her as you wish.

I mentioned in the introduction that it is an extra piece of cloth, and not a part of one’s clothes per se, but an important part that brings together a whole outfit

together. Firstly, It is worn over another piece of cloth, and secondly it is an idea of how much of a woman ought to be concealed. The reality is everything must be concealed. No one wants to know a woman really. Our careers are hobbies or necessities. Our salaries are without *barkat*, (something I learnt this week). Our time is not ours. Our time belongs to others; our parents, siblings, in laws, husband and children ought to take the bigger pieces of the pie before we get our own chunk late at night to sit down and pursue anything we truly want. But shhhh, never tell anyone what you really want. No one wants to know.

So wear a lipstick, and talk about its shade at the next event you attend, remember to iron your dupatta properly. It conceals your pride. Do not step on it. You'll trip and fall. Do not march or make yourself known. Use it as an invisibility cloak when things get out of hand. Hand over your love to the next person. No one wants a woman who loves. They are insufferable for they sacrifice far too much, and they hardly need a dupatta. A dupatta is reserved for the girl who loves little, and is shrouded in doubt and insecurities, but moreover, it is her self-respect that we put over on a pedestal and everyone will tell us it sets us a thousand years behind every other culture. Some might say it is our culture and ought to be preserved for a thousand years more.

Either way, one cannot dismiss the importance of a dupatta. Just like we cannot dismiss women of color and their experiences. Maybe we are looking at it all wrong.

The first thing some of us do when we come home is that we take off our dupattas. We use it as a symbol of strength, an armor for chastity (which it is), but maybe, just maybe, if we conjoin all dupattas, we can play a game of tug of war. We can use it for so much else than guarding ourselves. I would like to go to a river and catch a fish in mine. I'd wrap my dupatta around the belly of a browbeaten donkey whose flesh protrudes outwards because it is still a fresh wound. I'd like to wrap mine around my mother to tell her it is all right, and she can breathe, and she need not pace from one room to another in search of lost things, or putting things where they belong and catering to others. But she doesn't listen. Maybe because I wear a dupatta. And if I didn't maybe you all would listen more.

A dupatta is a truth, a testament to everything that makes a girl into a carefully crafted caricature of what is expected of her. It stops her from rebelling and ensures she is a good wife, daughter, mother, and alienates her from others who prefers to not adorn a dupatta daily. Moreover, it ties her to another sisterhood, that some women are not familiar with, but *she* is, a part of another life that would not exist if she took off her dupatta and drifted from river to river in search of new lands. If such a thing happened, I would ask her to use her dupatta as a sail to get away, and later as a parachute to fly.