

THE MAKING OF A KURTA

Rekah Shailaj

In this paper, I have assessed and analysed my persistent engagement with the *kurta*, a traditional Indian garment from my birth culture. Many scholars and authors have described this garment, explaining its cultural significance, form and structure. In her book *Costumes and Textiles of Royal India*, Ritu Kumar includes detailed working drawings of different versions of the kurta, which are a useful source for understanding how the different components of the garment can be arranged.¹ A textual analysis has been utilised here to formulate an understanding of these traditional garments in relation to their historical context, making methods and material applications, before analysing and applying this knowledge within my own design practice. In this report, I concentrate on asking why and how a single item of traditional clothing has informed the direction of my design work.

In a conference paper delivered in Tokyo in 2014, I said:

When I migrated to my adopted country the exposure of people wearing the ethnographic clothing was completely erased from my daily visual context. The shrinking visual presence of the Indian ethnographic clothing made them the 'other' which would be encountered only in selected places such as within the boundaries of my home and while socialising with my Indian friends. I would qualify 'other' as not just the strange 'other' but also that intimate/special 'other'. The involvement with the traditional clothing is deeper than the surface, it is in the composition of my Self, within me. I would not have experienced them in this light had I continued living in India.²

In my design practice, the kurta is the one piece of clothing in which I invest my time again and again, with no clear direction but with compelling cultural engagement. It is a different kind of freedom I experience as a migrant when I utilise the kurta to create my hybrid identity. It is the freedom of representing my lived experiences in their accessible manifestations, which might not be exactly the same as the 'real'. In its new form, the kurta has become a strong, monumental element of my design practice, re-formed by its making process.

THE ACTION OF MAKING

Making is an action-based, hands-on exercise. As the hands are busy with the activity, the mind tries to make sense of it, analyse it and formalise its order. Making should result in "learning that includes hands-on practice, the processing of enhanced seeing and perception, and contextualized understanding, all elements of 'critical making'."³

Making that stems from curiosity about an object or a system will be supported by the physical response, which starts from the purest and simplest form of action and which will create understanding of the object in a sequential manner. For example, the progressive development of a wrap into a shift dress with sleeves – into a kurta with side slits, and so on – shows how functional requirements inform the arrangement of a garment. According to Leslie Hirst, a lecturer in foundation studies at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), "critical making is not something that just happens to people with certain gifts or abilities. Rather, critical making involves absolute focus and an enormous amount of doing that is often hard to qualify while it is being done."⁴

For a deeper understanding of the making process it is essential to ask the question, Why is the act of making so satisfying? One's connection to the act of making helps to facilitate the process of making meanings. As Toby Slade puts it, "To look seriously at art objects of the everyday, such as clothes – their discourse and practices, their meaning-bearing forms and their codes of internal and external interpretation – is an essential, and often neglected, component of any study of modern aesthetic."¹⁵

The kurta is one of several Indian garments that became significant within my practice, and I wanted "to establish new meanings that were placed within an expressive context."¹⁶ Matt Ratto proposes that "with its emphasis on critique and expression rather than technical sophistication and function, critical making has much in common with conceptual art and design practice ... the final prototypes are not intended to be displayed and to speak for themselves. Instead, they are considered a means to an end, and achieve value through the act of shared construction, joint conversation, and reflection."¹⁷ The transformation of a traditional kurta into a new version of kurta has enacted the critical process of making kurta meaningful. It is no longer a static, traditional form of clothing.

WHAT IS A KURTA?

The kurta is a traditional piece of clothing which has limited meaning when placed outside its original cultural context. As a staple item of the Indian wardrobe, it signifies values such as nationalism, masculinity, the utilitarian; its signification is altered outside its traditional cultural parameters. The role of the kurta in creating a cultural identity is displaced once it is removed from its natural location and placed outside its traditional boundaries. Its adoption in a new context leads to its reconstruction within the realms of cultural difference, creating a hybrid fashion identity.

As an Indian, I have experienced the kurta both in its 'pure' form and also within the liminal space of cultural difference. I have translated it into new variations and iterations. As a wearer, my identity is dislocated by the untrained eye, and seeks location. Jennifer Craik proposes that "fashion is a technique of acculturation – a means by which individuals and groups learn to be

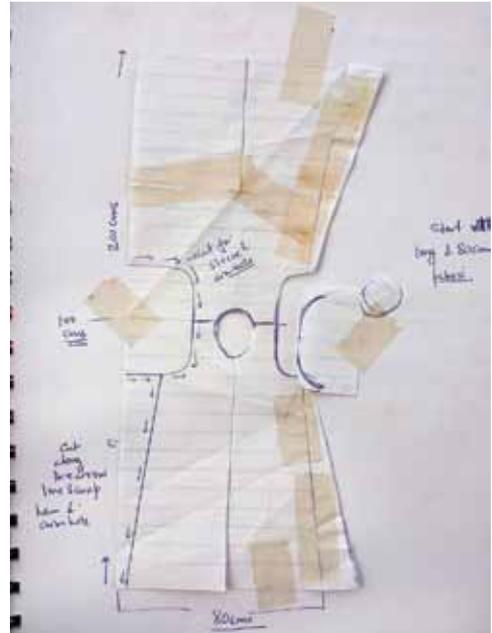


Figure 1. Kurta design with paper modeling.



Figure 2. Plan for paneling.



Figure 3. Kurta design, all-in-one style.



Figure 4. Kurta, aerial view, silk organza.

visually at home with themselves in their culture."¹⁸ In this sense, cultural differences can challenge the phenomenon of fashioning oneself in the comfort of one's own dominant culture. In fact, they actively disrupt this process and latch onto the plurality of fashion identity.

Within my practice, I celebrate this disruption and explore creative responses to fashioning the body through dress. This occurs within the dimension of liminal space, where the kurta is explored and transformed through making meaning and giving the wearer an identity – which is comforting and challenging at the same time.

In its flattest form, the kurta is a two-dimensional image of a form, with the front and back joining at the side seams, thus turning it into a three-dimensional form with space inbetween its tubular structure. This space can be further explored in terms of the garment's volume. As the side seams are moved apart from each other, widening the surface area of front and back, the volume within the structure increases correspondingly.

If we compare it to Western garments, the kurta can be closely related to a shift dress, with probable origins in the basic wrap used in ancient times. Its structure derives from the geometric shapes – rectangle, trapezium and irregular diamond – used in its construction. Although the arrangement of these shapes follows a regular pattern, the variations are achieved by altering the sizes of these elements, as well as the shape of the neck opening and functional pockets. Taking an aerial view of a kurta pattern, it appears as all-in-one shape broken into smaller rectangular panels. Is there a real need to break the structure of a kurta into these panels? Yes, in some cases it is interesting to observe how the width of the panels is dictated by the woven widths of fabric. This almost makes it essential to section the garment into panels in order to make it accessible to the widest possible size range.

Discussing the vestimentary cultures of India, Anamika Pathak characterises the kurta as a garment worn both by men and women. In her brief account of the kurta, Pathak states: "another very important costume depicted in art is the kurta or the Persian shirt. These kurtas have an opening at the neck and slits on the sides. Some of the women's kurtas have slits on the sides and give the impression of a four-pointed hemline. Another style of the kurta was with a crossover flap and side openings"⁹

Ritu Kumar also gives a detailed account of kurtas, describing them as made of straight panels of fabric stitched together at the selvedge to form a tunic with wide sleeves attached at right angles. In the colder regions of northern India, they are worn as an over-garment with *pajama*¹⁰ and *ghaghra*.¹¹ Women's kurtas have evolved in a number of different ways, showing a variety of shapes derived from the components of a basic kurta, ranging from straight and gored panels to gathered panels, right-angled sleeves to curved set-in sleeves, as well as various neck openings such as keyhole shapes, besides the placket openings.

The shape and form of the kurta creates a defined space between the body and the garment which is critical to the phenomenological experience of these garments. As a unisex garment, this phenomenological experience would be expected to vary between the two genders. Analysis of the pockets as a physical feature of the garment is critical in this regard. Pockets are generally more important in menswear than womenswear, as indicated in the top left kurta drawing in Image 1. Here, the in-seam pockets are used mostly to house the wearer's keys and wallet, meaning that the structure is bag-shaped both at the front and back of the garment, purely for functional purposes. The kurta's adoption as the key garment by politicians in India emphasises its masculine appeal and sense of dignity. The use of the kurta as both menswear and womenswear has led me to explore the use of pockets in my designs for womenswear, where they bestow a certain attitude on the wearer, as opposed to merely functional usage.

A PERSONAL STORY: WHY IS THE KURTA IMPORTANT?

The story of the kurta comes alive in the autoethnographic accounts of myself wearing it when I lived in India more than two decades ago. In the Western context, the kurta might be viewed as a straightforward, uncomplicated, underwhelming piece of clothing; however, I believe that it has a special character imbued with nostalgia, a longing for the past. Due to its cultural specificity, its aesthetic appeal is limited to its place of origin. I am interested in exploring the "critical making" of a kurta, and the way that the nostalgia attached to the kurta from the past is projected into the present "third space,"¹² a totally new space. This "third space" is unsettling and unpredictable.

The materials of the kurtas which I create today are not limited to fabrics and trims. They also include intangible materials, such as the lived experiences and memories of wearing one. Has the kurta become a transformative element in my design practice? The kurta has definitely been transformed, as it is now remade from the memory of a garment which has been unmade several times in order to understand the structural arrangement of its components. The need for remaking it is not limited to the constraints of its 'pure,' traditional form, but evokes something that is close to it and yet new and exciting.

The transformed kurta is made in a new liminal space, the hybrid space, the breeding place for creativity, which Homi Bhabha defines as the "third space." Within my design practice, the traditional kurta worn in India has been intercepted by the creative process of hybridity; Bhabha proposes that the "notion of hybridity is precisely about the fact that when a new situation, a new alliance formulates itself, it may demand that you should translate your principles, rethink them, extend them."¹³

For me personally, the meaning of the kurta has been recreated through the medium of memory – memories of getting them custom made from the local tailors with variation in their length, and also of purchasing ready-made kurtas in handspun and woven fabrics (*khadi*) from specialist stores. My knowledge of its structure and form also came from the first-hand experience of observing my mother making them. As the supporting devices required for cutting were not available at home, my mother would often seek our assistance in holding the fabric while she cut the various panels of the garment. While this did not equate to a first-hand experience of making, it was the memories of these moments that made the act of making at a later time in my life compelling and meaningful.



Figure 5. Silk organza kurta in unconventional fabrics.



Figure 6. Kurta with soft inbuilt sleeves.



Figure 7. Long kurta dress in menswear fabrics.



Figure 8. Long kurta with open side slits.



Figure 9. Kurta dress using bias bag technique.



Figure 10. Long kurta dress with short side slits, shirt hems and traditional kurta pockets.

DESIGN WORK AS WE SIFT THROUGH THE DIFFERENT IMAGES OF A KURTA AND ITS REMAKING

According to Jessica Barness and Amy Papaelias, "new modes of inquiry and analysis are evidenced in conceptual interfaces, critical mapping and experimental frameworks. These interfaces, maps and frameworks move beyond clarifying and visualizing information to uncover critical making approaches that ask more questions than they answer."¹⁴ The design solutions within my practice are informed by such critical observation and the spirit of inquiry essential to the making experience.

Kurta is part of my unconsciousness – it surfaces to consciousness every time I engage with the design process. The traditional, original form of the kurta is now absent from my designs and has been replaced by its hybrid form, as shown in the images reproduced here. These unconventional designs could be described as kurta-dress, kurta-shirt, kurta-top, kurta-jacket, rather than pure kurta, jacket, shirt, dress and top. Some designs that are closer to the pure forms of kurta are however made from unconventional materials. The traditional features of the kurta have been tweaked and altered to creative versions that incorporate features such as very long side slits, starting from the underarm area of the body; all-in-one front and back sections with only a single seam; and swapping panels to alter the silhouette of the garment.

The questions that arise within my design work often find answers in the creative spaces, in the liminal spaces, in the hybrid encounter: This is a happy place for me to reside and design.

Rekha Rana Shailaj is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Design, Otago Polytechnic, teaching on the Fashion programme. Rekha graduated with a Diploma in Design (Fashion) from Otago Polytechnic in 1997 and completed a Master of Fine Arts (Design) with distinction in 2011 from the Dunedin School of Art, Otago Polytechnic. As a conceptual designer, Rekha practices design in a multicultural environment, working with subjectivities and identities created through different fashion systems, drawing on both Eastern and Western sensibilities. Ethnographic clothing is an area of special interest, especially from India where she was born and raised.

- 1 R Kumar, *Costumes and Textiles of Royal India* (London: Christie's Books, 1999).
- 2 RR Shailaj, "Ethnographic Clothing: Mapping Personal and Wider Interest from Fashion Perspective," in Proceedings of the 16th Annual Conference for the International Foundation of Fashion Technology Institutes (IFFTI 2014): The Power Of Fashion, Tokyo, Japan, 27-31 January 2014 (Tokyo: Bunka Gakuen University, 2014), 156-64.
- 3 *The Art of Critical Making: Rhode Island School of Design on Creative Practice*, eds R Somerson and ML Hermano (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 19.
- 4 Somerson and Hermano, *The Art of Critical Making*, 32.
- 5 Toby Slade, *Japanese Fashion: A Cultural History* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2009), 1, <http://domainelongchamp.com/books/download/asin=1847882528&type=stream>.
- 6 Shailaj, "Ethnographic Clothing."
- 7 Matt Ratto, "Critical Making: Conceptual and Material Studies in Technology and Social Life," *The Information Society: An International Journal*, 27:4 (2011), 252-60.
- 8 J Craik, *The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion* (London: Routledge, 1993), 10.
- 9 A Pathak, *Indian Costumes* (New Delhi: Roli & Janssen BV, 2008), 30.
- 10 The *pajama* is a trouser-like garment, worn by men and women alike; it varies in girth, length, fit and material.
- 11 The *ghaghara* is a skirt with lots of gathers, worn by women; the flared ghaghara is made of several gored triangular pieces stitched together.
- 12 In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha explains the concept of "third space." He states that "the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom." Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 210, 211.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 216.
- 14 J Barness and A Papaelias, "Critical Making at the Edges," *Visible Language*, 49:3 (special issue, December 2015), 4-11, at 4.