



Fashion As A Literary Text: Exploring Fashion Media Through The Dialogic Lens Of Literature And Language

Sayarani Hazarika, Dr Meera Kumar

Student, Assistant Professor

Department of English,

JAIN deemed to be University, Bangalore, Karnataka, India

Abstract: The fashion industry is something that has always been perceived for its extensive use of lightweight materials, fused with everyday cultural texts, coded specifically with the intent of shaping a systematic portrayal. This research paper aims to solidify the growing position of fashion media with the help of an inherent framework from the 1967 work of Roland Barthes, 'The Fashion System', which highlights that clothes or fabric are symbolic signs that have always been intended to influence aspirations from existing culture, different values, and ideology. With this in mind, we can paint a picture from any runway fashion collection that aims to convey narratives structured in human codes without requiring any explanation. To cut a lifeless fabric of desired texture or fabric and mould it into a signifier that is beyond the monotonous fashion critics and magazines to acquire a higher layer of transcendental meaning beyond their initial sources. By expanding Ronald Barthes' ideology and Mikhail Bakhtin's ideology of dialogism to amplify the rising voices in the fashion world. Just as literary work is never an independent entity but always surrounded by contemporary works of literature, the fashion world also interlinks the dialogue within the language and the image it paints, the body and the garments that surround it, basically shaking the idea of an independent identity and the collective coexistence myth. The runway shows have been a gesture of traditional nobility, alongside the prevailing political mood, and the rising fantasies in culture, which, as a result, produce meaning and paint pictures through the interplay of everyday references.

Index Terms - Fashion world, Dialogism, Semiotics, Barthes, Bakhtin, Friedman

I. INTRODUCTION

Fashion in a contemporary world goes beyond its decorative purpose; it's recognised as a system of signs used to communicate meaning and ideas, much like literature through its meaning. Through the semiotics work of Roland Barthes 'The Fashion System' (1967), we understand fashion operates through the system of signs that generate meaning, where the colours, style and fabric act as signifiers, that produce signified ideas related to gender, class, and ideology.

Building upon Roland Barthes' linguistic framework, the understanding of fashion as a language, and Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of dialogism, to explore the polyphonic voices that shape fashion discourse. Bakhtin argues that all cultural forms of expression are dialogic; they emerge from the other voices of society. In fashion, this dialogic includes the creative vision of designers, the interpretation of an editor, and the participatory responses of an audience. Together, they form a polyphonic structure in fashion media, where they communicate ideas about gender, race, identity, and power. Therefore, fashion becomes a living conversation within society where power and ideology are both expressed and contested.

By analysing Vogue magazine and the work of Vanessa Friedman's fashion criticism, we can see how fashion writing translates clothing into cultural text. Fashion journalism tells stories of identity, taste, and ideology through the mediation of visual and textual forms. In this transformation, garments become a literary text, the runway operates as a narrative space, and criticism evolves into a literary act of interpretation. These meanings are dialogic, developed through the interaction of history, politics, and changing cultural sensibilities. In this way, fashion journalism serves as a bridge between visuals and cultural discourse.

II. Literature Review

Semiotics and the Language of Fashion Clothes themselves are mute objects until interpreted by culture. As Roland Barthes suggests, fashion gains meaning when language and representation intervene through captions, advertisements, and media narratives. The photographed or written clothes become a text that conveys ideas about the cultural system, telling a story of beauty, resistance, identity, and power. Fashion does not speak solely through its material garments but through stories that involve the viewer in cultural dialogue. It speaks because we interpret its meaning through acts of reading and rewriting within society. In the semiotic framework, fashion editorial operates like a linguistic system, where every shade, cut, and texture acts as a signifier within a system of meaning. Semiotics explains how fashion shifts from being something we wear to something that abstracts the space of metaphor and ideology. Modern scholars have adapted Roland Barthes' theory, which was rooted in print media, and it has now extended into the digital world. As discussed in Digital Culture and Semiotics, digital platforms deepen the conversation between visuals and text, making fashion's symbolic vocabulary. Through virtual shows, YouTube, and social media, fashion has created new ways to communicate across a global network, forming a polyphonic conversation between creators and the audience.

Scholars such as Fred Davis have examined fashion as a semiotic system that negotiated identity through intersections of gender, class, and status. In his influential work *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (1994), he reveals how clothing functions as a cultural language that expresses both personal and social identities. Angela McRobbie expands by situating fashion within the structures of cultural production and highlighting how media and creative industries shape collective aspirations and social hierarchies. Her essay "Fashion Culture: Creative Work, Female Individualisation" (2002) exposes how fashion is intertwined with ideology while simultaneously offering spaces for self-expression. These perspectives together assert that fashion's language is never neutral; it is inherently political, embedded within an ideological network that shapes how identity and aspiration are represented and understood in society.

III. Dialogism in Cultural Media

Bakhtin's dialogism holds that meaning is created through relational interaction among voices rather than individual authorship. Multiple discourses intersect inside any work. When applied to fashion media, dialogism demonstrates how the designer's aim interacts with society's perception, customer reaction, and journalistic evaluation. Fashion is never truly autonomous; it is always intertextual and socially sensitive. Anne Hollander claims that clothing visualises cultural fantasy, implying that fashion imagery creates narrative worlds that combine art, desire, and social representation. A Bakhtinian view of fashion media emphasises this diversity. The fashion image is constantly challenged, changed, and reinterpreted through media coverage. Meaning is constantly questioned.

IV. Research Gap

Many scholars have studied fashion and visual culture, but there is limited research that connects semiotic theory with dialogism to understand fashion media as a literary text. The semiotic approach examines fashion as a system of signs, especially those that draw inspiration from Roland Barthes, and in media studies, dialogic approaches integrate various cultural perspectives and interpretations. However, few scholars treated fashion media as literary texts that function within a dialogic network of linguistic and visual meanings. There are still underexamined sections of literature, semiotics and fashion media, studying how fashion critique by Vanessa Friedman and magazines like Vogue narrate, analyse, and develop meaning through language and imagery is indeed essential. This study combines Bakhtin and Barthes to address the gap, demonstrating how fashion media generate and propagate cultural meaning.

V. Research statement

This study explores the way fashion media, including magazines and critical writing, serve as a literary text that is influenced by polyphonic cultural discourse. It asserts that through uniting the written language of criticism and the visual language of garments, fashion media creates stories through signifying and visual structure. The study argues that fashion media should be viewed as a dialogic cultural literature that continually updates ideologies and identities. It explains fashion as a living, narrative text shaped by the intersection of linguistic, visual, and ideological voices.

VI. Research Questions

1. How can fashion images and descriptions work together to create cultural meaning, similar to language?
2. How do diverse voices influence the dialogic understanding of fashion media?

VII. Theoretical framework

Barthes' Semiotics and the Language of Garments

Barthes redefines clothing as a form of ordered communication. Silhouettes, texture, logos, and accessories are all symbolic elements that represent social identity. Fashion publications, such as Vogue, use image and language to relay these signs into cohesive narrative structures. Semiotics explains how clothing emerges as a cultural icon.

A red gown, for example, can convey passion and revolt depending on the setting and frame. When taken under specific lighting conditions or accompanied by descriptive prose, it takes on new meaning and becomes a phrase in fashion language.

Bakhtin's Dialogism and Polyphonic Media

Bakhtin emphasises diversity. Dialogism affirms fashion's place as cultural literature. Its narratives evolve as a result of response, reinterpretation, and contestation.

In the above process, the critic becomes an active participant rather than an observer. Reviews, interviews, and reader reaction serve as annotations to the continuing cultural piece that fashion creates.

Through Semiotics and Dialogism Together, Bakhtin and Barthes give an effective analytical lens. Semiotics explains how meaning is encoded, but dialogism describes how meaning circulates, competes, and changes. They present fashion media as a living text that is constantly published and re-authored in different circumstances.

VIII. Methodology

This study takes a qualitative and interpretive approach, concentrating on the textual and visual analysis of three main sources:

Vogue Magazine is a cultural and visual linguistic archive that documents worldwide fashion storylines.

Vanessa Friedman's fashion criticism in the New York Times, particularly her articles about Gucci Love Parade (2021) and the linked essays.

This study focuses on the feminist-oriented runways of Dior under Maria Grazia Chiuri, serving as the central case study for a dialogic approach that examines the polyphonic voices of designers, audiences, and the surrounding cultural context. The study further engages with digital semiotics, how online platforms such as The New York Times, Vogue.com, and YouTube circulate fashion globally and how they open the platform for reinterpretation. This methodology is interpretive rather than empirical, seeking to uncover meaning through qualitative interpretation over the quantitative trends. The study also involves comparative micro-readings of fashion photographs and critical evaluation, which are treated as parallel texts. This strategy emphasises the interpretive link between visual and linguistic expression, a key feature of fashion's story building.

IX. Analysis

Vogue Magazine as a Polyphonic Text

Vogue transforms fashion into storytelling. Its editorial language often uses metaphor, myth, and cultural commentary. Photography creates visual landscapes where clothing symbolises empowerment, sensuality, rebellion, and nostalgia. Vogue acts as a cultural narrator, shaping ideas of identity and desire while exploring global styles.

Vogue often addresses gender politics and social development. For example, its coverage of body inclusion alters the fashion narrative by embracing different kinds of beauty. Such editorial decisions serve as ideological messaging for the cultural imagination.

The 2020 “Hope Issue” of British Vogue, which featured critical workers as cover models, reframed attractiveness as gratefulness, transforming the publication into a moral and emotional story of resilience. Similarly, Vogue India’s representation of rural artisans and indigenous weavers inspires a national conversation about history and modernity. These instances demonstrate that fashion magazines are not passive observers but rather active narrators of cultural consciousness.

Vanessa Friedman’s Dialogic Fashion Criticism

Vanessa Friedman's work is a prime example of fashion critique as literary interpretation. She interprets cultural symbolism in design and spectacle by analysing clothes as language.

Friedman views Alessandro Michele’s Hollywood-themed runway as a story of nostalgia and genderfluid identity in her analysis of Gucci’s “Love Parade” (2021). Sequins, formal attire, and divine gowns become symbols for longing and metamorphosis in her writing, which reads like a close reading. According to Bakhtin, the critic is a co-author who uses layered discourse to remodel meaning.

Her analysis of collections by Prada or Balenciaga raises moral concerns about representation, labour, and sustainability. Criticism turns into a cultural narrative, placing fashion within ethical and political discussions.

In a 2022 review of Louis Vuitton’s exhibition at the Musee d’Orsay, Friedman defined the collection as “a conversation between eras,” emphasising how the brand’s designs balance history and future. The study resembles literary intertextuality, with each collection referencing and reworking fashion’s own archive.

X. Case Study:

Dior and Feminist Semiotics

Maria Grazia Chiuri’s period at Dior emphasises feminist messaging through the language of fashion. Featuring the statement “We Should All Be Feminists” on runways influenced by women’s intellectual histories, Chiuri incorporated feminist discourse into couture.

Here, the garments serve as a political text.

Runway shows featured feminist, literary-inspired slogans (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie), performances evoking women’s movements, and visual elements such as armour-like corsets. These choices represent a semiotic framework of empowerment. Critics, however, argue that Chiuri’s feminism risks appearing manufactured. Fashion journalism bridges this divide, creating debate over authenticity vs branding.

Friedman, for example, questions whether Dior’s feminist statements translate into structural change inside the business (“Is Feminism Fashionable?”). This exemplifies dialogism at work: the designer's purpose clashes with cultural critique.

XI. Insights

The indications brought by this study are that the fashion media is prone to creating narratives based on cultural linguistics, which implies that the emergence of meaning aligns with harmonising the stage with the designers, reviewers, and the audience. The right media, through their writings, serve as a symbol of power, identity, and different ideologies. The main objective of runway shows and collections is to operate as storytellers. The dialogic structure behind the fashion media is further expanded through digital platforms. One of the biggest assets of fashion narratives is their growing strength, which comes with openness to interpretation and recreation.

XII. Conclusion

Just as with contemporary or cultural literature, fashion media functions to generate and spread countless ideological interpretations through various semiotic and dialogic processes. The semiotics of Barthes explains the ability of lifeless pieces of garments to communicate, along with Bakhtin's dialogism, revealing the variety of involved voices in its interpretation. The storyline from Vogue's editorial and various critical discourses from Vanessa Friedman highlight that fashion is a living, walking text that is influenced by power, memory, imagination, and social changes.

Dior's feminist fashion demonstrates how clothing may become an offensive expression. These narratives are enhanced by digital platforms, which allow for interpretive participation from worldwide audiences. Polyphony is embodied in fashion media, with designers, critics, consumers, and culture itself speaking simultaneously.

Finally, fashion should be viewed as a societal narrative, a constantly revised novel written in fabric, image, and voice. Each collection becomes a chapter in the cultural identity narrative, demonstrating that fashion, like literature, is a language of meaning, emotion, and debate.

REFERENCES

1. Barthes, Roland. *The Fashion System*. Translated by Matthew Ward and Richard Howard, University of California Press, 1990.
2. Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press, 1981.
3. Friedman, Vanessa. "Gucci Love Parade: Hollywood as a Mirror." *The New York Times*, 3 November 2021.
4. Friedman, Vanessa. "Jil Sander's Simone Bellotti Debut." *The New York Times*, 25 September 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/25/style/jil-sander-simone-bellotti-debut.html>.
5. Wintour, Anna. Vogue Magazine. Condé Nast Publications, various issues, 2020–2025.
6. Tindle, Hannah. "Lessons on the Philosophy of Fashion from Roland Barthes." *Another Magazine*. 2018.
7. <https://www.anothermag.com/fashion-beauty/10692/lessons-on-the-philosophy-of-fashion-from-roland-barthes>
8. "Vogue Official Website." <https://www.vogue.com/>
9. Verner, Amy. "Vogue India" *We should still all be feminists*, 26 November 2023,
10. <https://www.vogue.in/content/we-should-still-all-be-feminists-in-paris-a-new-dior-exhibition-celebrates-its-women-artist-collaborators>.
11. Peretz, Henri. "Book Review: *Fashion, Culture and Identity* by Fred Davis." *Symbolic Interaction*, vol.17,no.3, Fall 1994, pp. 337–340.
12. JSTOR,
13. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/si.1994.17.3.337>
14. McRobbie, Angela. "Fashion Culture: Creative Work, Female Individualisation." *Feminist Review*, no. 71, 2002, pp. 52–62, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1396021>
15. Vogue. "See All 26 Editions of Vogue's September Hope Covers as They Land." *Vogue India*, Condé Nast, 1 Sept. 2020, <https://www.vogue.in/fashion/content/see-all-26-editions-of-vogues-september-hope-covers-as-they-land>