

Pregnant question

Why doesn't mainstream media celebrate maternity-wear as much as it does wedding fashion?



Not yet fashion. Photo: Thinkstock

The question came up last month, when I was speaking on fashion and identity in modern India at an event titled India Ki Khoj, organized by the Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar. “While popular media and fashion openly celebrate weddings and wedding couture, why is there a disjuncture when it comes to maternity fashion?” asked Tannistha Samanta, assistant professor of sociology and demography in the humanities and social sciences department. The context, she explained to me, was rooted in India being a “pronatal” society.

Our culture encourages women to reproduce, and we celebrate fertility and motherhood in many traditionally coded ways. Then why doesn't mainstream media—billboards, the fashion ramp, magazine covers, even top commercials—celebrate maternity-wear as much as it does wedding fashion, which commercially outstrips almost every other trend in clothing?

Sociologically, weddings and pregnancies seem extensions of the same belief in a society which places such a high value on the institution of marriage. But the spectacle of weddings has overtaken the idea of marriage. Weddings have become blockbuster events enhancing a range of careers from fashion to make-up, cuisine, catering, wining and dining, event management, and decor, to destination planning, honeymoon and gifting—it is a wildly successful industry rolling in money. Romanticized, packaged and mounted by Bollywood, weddings are a must-do, must-have. And as commercials have proved, the event can be inventive and innovative too. Gold jewellery brand Tanishq, for instance, not only showed a dusky bride last year, it even showed a formerly married one, with her little daughter prancing around the wedding area, only to be scooped up by the (step) father.

On the other hand, marriages as relationships are on a roller coaster—more and more young couples seem to be divorcing. The latter has little correlation with how much was spent on the wedding and the kind of commercial and creative negotiations that went into it—from the bride's encrusted *lehnga* to the revolving stage created by a décor director. One is a hit, the other a hit-or-miss.

Pregnancy takes the fashion argument into a completely different domain. We may be pronatal but we are still superstitious. Pregnancies are usually kept hush-hush till the first trimester is over, even among well-educated families. Even when revealed—like a celebrity showing a baby bump on the red carpet or at an event with fashion's fascinating fabrics and silhouettes—highlighting a woman's changing body still falls under the heading, insensitive exhibitionism. Instead of sexy, which it is, and stylish, which it can be, it is seen as attracting unwanted attention to the baby, thus “unnecessarily” provoking the “evil eye”. Barring **Konkona Sen Sharma**, who showed her baby bump on a cover of *OK!* magazine, Indian celebs don't display their disrobed baby bumps. The same ladies who happily endorse wedding fashion go discreet. **Lara Dutta**, **Aishwarya Rai Bachchan**, **Shilpa Shetty**, did their outings in the later stages of their pregnancies, but fully clothed. We looked curiously at them, but did someone want to copy their fashion? I doubt it.

Maternity-wear is a rage on fashion portals across the world. No less in India. You only have to look up Myntra, Jabong, Flipkart, Ninematernitywear.com, Cherishmaternity.com, Shopperstop.com, Snapdeal.com, Zivame, ebay.in, Morphmaternity.com, even Flipkart.com, to find everything from pregnancy yoga gear to lingerie for mums-to-be or new mums—leggings, dresses, coats, gowns, *kurtis*, and nightwear. Good to wear, good to gift, it's available, accessible, affordable. This implies maternity clothing is profitable as a retail segment.

But unlike the wedding, pregnancy has never trended on the fashion ramp in India. Nor can I remember a maternity line created by a well-known designer. When I asked, one, on condition of anonymity, told me that the “pregnant woman” isn't a customer base to design for. She is not a muse. She is a migrant from one phase of life to another who will soon want to get toned, lose weight and need “proper fashion”. Read slimming fashion. Not fluffy stuff. “But oh yes, if I had to design for a pregnant celebrity walking a red carpet, I would leave everything aside to create one hell of a stunning ensemble,” this designer added.

Pronatal we are. Predictably, pro-celebrity and starry-eyed too. Sigh.