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KHADI AS A CHARACTER: STORYTELLING THROUGH FABRIC IN INDIAN FILMS

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Abstract:

Khadi, the handspun fabric that became an emblem of the Indian independence movement, is a symbol of cultural, political, and social significance. Its presence in Indian cinema, however, goes beyond mere costume design. Khadi functions as a "character" in its own right—speaking to identity, heritage, resistance, and moral values. This paper examines how Khadi is used in Indian films not just as a material object, but as a narrative tool to deepen storytelling, define characters, and evoke cultural symbols. It explores its historical significance, the evolution of its representation in Indian cinema, and its role in contemporary films. Through a multidisciplinary approach, this research highlights the powerful symbolism of Khadi, demonstrating how filmmakers use it to reflect and critique social, political, and historical contexts.

Keywords: *Khadi, Indian Cinema, Costume Design, Narrative Tool, Cultural Symbolism, Indian Textiles, Indian Independence Movement*

Introduction:

Khadi has always been more than just a fabric in India. It carries the weight of history, a connection to Mahatma Gandhi's struggle for independence, and a symbol of self-reliance and resistance against colonialism. The fabric was promoted as an alternative to British-made textiles and became an act of protest. However, Khadi's cultural significance goes far beyond its roots in nationalism and independence; it is an enduring symbol of Indian identity and values.

In Indian cinema, Khadi has long been used to define character, express political ideals, and create strong narrative moments. Often, it symbolizes simplicity, moral purity, and the rural-urban divide, but its role in storytelling has evolved with changing social and political contexts. Filmmakers, costume designers, and narrators use Khadi to reflect various themes: from patriotism to social justice, from historical accuracy to contemporary relevance. This paper explores how Khadi has functioned as a 'character' in Indian films— an active element that shapes narratives, conveys ideological messages, and anchors characters in their socio-political contexts.

Hypothesis:

The hypothesis for this research could be framed as:

- **Primary Hypothesis**: "Khadi, as depicted in Indian cinema, functions as more than just a piece of clothing; it acts as a character in its own right, symbolizing resistance, national identity, and socio-political messages within the narrative."

- **Sub-hypothesis 1**: "The portrayal of Khadi in films, particularly those related to the Indian independence movement, serves as a visual tool to reinforce themes of simplicity, self-reliance, and resistance against colonialism."

- **Sub-hypothesis 2**: "As Indian cinema has evolved, the representation of Khadi has shifted to reflect contemporary issues such as post-independence nationalism, sustainability, and identity, adapting its symbolism accordingly."

Research Methodology:

This research employs a qualitative case study approach to investigate the visual and symbolic representation of Khadi in Indian cinema. Khadi, a hand-spun and hand-woven fabric, holds significant historical and socio-political importance in India, particularly associated with the Indian independence movement and Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of self-reliance and simplicity. This study aims to understand how Indian filmmakers have utilized Khadi as a visual and symbolic element to convey narratives, explore themes, and represent cultural and political ideologies.

1. Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative paradigm, prioritizing in-depth understanding and interpretation of the multifaceted meanings and nuances associated with Khadi in the selected films. The case study method is particularly suitable for this research as it allows for an intensive exploration of specific instances of Khadi's portrayal within the chosen cinematic context.

2. Data Collection

2.1 Film Selection:

A purposive sampling strategy will be employed to select a diverse range of Indian films that prominently feature Khadi. The selection criteria will include:

- Historical Significance: Films set during or after the Indian independence movement, biographical films of key figures associated with Khadi (e.g., Mahatma Gandhi), and films explicitly addressing the significance of Khadi in Indian history and culture.
- Thematic Relevance: Films that explore themes of nationalism, freedom struggle, social justice, cultural identity, simplicity, and self-reliance, where Khadi plays a crucial role in conveying these themes.

- Visual Prominence: Films where Khadi is not merely a background element but is visually significant in terms of character attire, costume design, and symbolic representation.

2.2 Data Collection Methods:

- **Visual Analysis**: Detailed observation and analysis of film scenes where Khadi is prominently featured.
  Examination of:
  1. Clothing styles and designs
  2. Colour palettes and their symbolic connotations
  3. Character attire and its relationship to social status, personality, and ideological leanings
  4. The use of Khadi in specific scenes (e.g., protests, celebrations, moments of personal reflection)
  5. Visual metaphors and symbolism associated with Khadi (e.g., simplicity, purity, resistance)

- **Textual Analysis**: In-depth analysis of film scripts, dialogues, and narrative structures.
  Identification of instances where Khadi is:
  1. Associated with specific characters or themes
  2. Used to convey ideological messages or social commentary
  3. Linked to historical events or socio-political movements

3. Data Analysis

3.1 Semiotic Analysis:

Application of semiotic theory to decode the signs and symbols associated with Khadi within the films.
Analysis of:
1. Denotative and connotative meanings of Khadi
2. Symbolic associations with concepts like nationalism, simplicity, self-reliance, and resistance

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3.2 Narrative Analysis:

Examination of how the portrayal of Khadi contributes to the overall narrative structure and meaning of the films. Analysis of:

1. Khadi's role in character development and relationships
2. The use of Khadi to advance plot points and create dramatic tension
3. The relationship between Khadi and key narrative themes

3.3 Historical and Cultural Contextualization:

Situating the films within their historical and socio-political contexts.

Analysis of how the representation of Khadi reflects:

1. Changing socio-political landscapes
2. Evolving cultural values and ideologies
3. The impact of historical events on the perception and significance of Khadi

4. Expected Outcomes:

This research is expected to yield the following outcomes:

1. A comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted visual and symbolic representations of Khadi in Indian cinema.
2. An analysis of the evolution of Khadi's portrayal in Indian films over time, reflecting changing historical and cultural contexts.
3. Insights into how filmmakers have utilized Khadi to:
   - Convey complex narratives and explore multifaceted themes.
   - Represent diverse cultural and political ideologies.
   - Engage with the historical and socio-political significance of Khadi.
   - A deeper understanding of the role of cinema in shaping public perceptions and understanding of historical and cultural symbols.

Ethical Considerations:

- Respect for intellectual property rights: Proper citation and acknowledgment of all sources.
- Ethical viewing and analysis of film content.
- Objectivity and transparency in research methods and analysis.

1. **Khadi in Early Indian Cinema**

   In the early years of Indian cinema, Khadi was often used in films that dealt with the freedom struggle. The iconic image of Gandhi wearing Khadi was replicated in films portraying India's liberation struggle, from *Gandhi* (1982) by Richard Attenborough to various regional biographical films. Khadi represented the Gandhian ideal of simplicity and non-violence, often worn by characters that symbolized moral integrity, resistance, and the spirit of independence.

   In the films of the 1950s and 1960s, Khadi was often seen as a tool for distinguishing characters who represented the "good" or the "pure" from those who were depicted as corrupt, colonial or Westernized. For instance, in films like *Mother India* (1957), Khadi was integral to the portrayal of the idealized rural woman—strong, moral, and connected to the land. The fabric thus became a direct marker of social values and class distinctions, with the "simple" life of rural India standing in contrast to the fast-paced, materialistic urban world.

3. **Khadi as a Character: Symbolism and Narrative Device**

   Khadi is more than just a costume in Indian cinema; it functions as a narrative device that shapes character arcs and influences viewer perceptions. Here are some of the roles that Khadi plays in Indian films:

   - **Political and Social Symbolism:** In films such as *Lagaan* (2001), Khadi represents resistance and a return to values of self-sufficiency. The British characters are often dressed in Western clothes, symbolizing colonial oppression, while Indian characters clad in Khadi become embodiments of

resistance, unity, and the fight for freedom. The fabric, in this case, stands as a marker of cultural identity and political resistance.

- **Moral and Ethical Values:** Khadi often represents the moral fiber of a character. In films like *Gandhi* (1982), the fabric is integral to defining Gandhi's persona as the apostle of non-violence and self-reliance. Khadi here is not just a garment but a visual cue to the character's ethical standpoint. Similarly, in films where characters embrace simplicity or sacrifice (e.g., *Rang De Basanti* or *Swades*), Khadi becomes a metaphor for a return to Indian roots, simplicity, and purity in contrast to the globalized, industrialized world.

- **Rural Identity and Class Distinctions:** Khadi is often used to signify rural roots and working-class identity. In films like *Peepli Live* (2010), Khadi reflects the agrarian struggle, positioning the characters in opposition to the urban elite, who are often depicted in contemporary or Westernized attire. Khadi's link to rural India makes it an essential part of the narrative in films that deal with rural issues or the urban-rural divide.

4. Khadi as a Recurring Motif in Indian Literature:

- **Khadi in Classical Indian Literature**:

The Bhagavad Gita: While not explicitly mentioning Khadi, the Gita emphasizes the importance of renunciation, contentment, and selfless service. These principles resonate with the philosophy of Khadi, which encourages simple living, self-sufficiency, and supporting local artisans.

Ramayana & Mahabharata: These epics, though ancient, portray ideals like simplicity, duty, and service to others. Characters like Rama and Krishna, despite their royal lineage, often demonstrate a preference for simple living and detachment from material possessions, aligning with the values promoted by the Khadi movement.

- **Khadi in Modern Indian Literature:**

Rabindranath Tagore: In his novels and poems, Tagore often explored themes of social justice and the importance of self-reliance. He advocated for simple living and supported the use of Khadi as a symbol of national pride and resistance against colonial exploitation.

Mahatma Gandhi: Gandhi's writings, including his autobiography "My Experiments with Truth," extensively document his advocacy for Khadi. He used his powerful pen to inspire Indians to embrace Khadi as a tool for social and economic empowerment. His writings often intertwined personal anecdotes with political and social commentary, effectively conveying the significance of Khadi in the Indian freedom struggle.

Mulk Raj Anand: In his novel "Untouchable," Anand depicts the plight of the lower castes in Indian society. He uses the motif of Khadi to symbolize social and economic upliftment, highlighting how embracing Khadi can empower the marginalized sections of society.

- **Khadi in Folk Tales and Oral Traditions**:

Folk Tales: Many Indian folk tales feature characters who embody the values of self-reliance, simplicity, and community spirit. These stories often depict artisans and weavers as respected members of society, highlighting the importance of traditional crafts and skills.

Oral Traditions: In various regions of India, oral traditions like songs, proverbs, and folk songs often celebrate the virtues of hand-spun and hand-woven cloth. These traditions pass down the knowledge and skills related to Khadi production, preserving the cultural heritage associated with this fabric.

These examples demonstrate how Khadi has been a recurring motif in Indian literature, reflecting its deep cultural and historical significance.

4. Khadi in Contemporary Cinema: Changing Significance

While Khadi was once a straightforward symbol of resistance, independence, and rural identity, its role in contemporary cinema has become more nuanced. As India modernized, Khadi started to appear more as a cultural marker, often used in films that explore themes of globalization, heritage, and social justice. For instance, films like *Swades* (2004) and *Lagaan* (2001) incorporate Khadi to comment on the issues of rural development, self-reliance, and the impact of globalization. In *Swades*, the character of Mohan Bhargava (played by Shah Rukh Khan) returns to his roots, wearing Khadi as a symbol of his journey towards rediscovering his connection to his heritage and commitment to community development. In *Lagaan*, the use of Khadi is central to the theme of unity against colonialism, with the villagers rallying around it as a symbol of their self-reliance and resistance.

Similarly, in the 2010s, Khadi has made a return in films like *Dangal* (2016) and *Piku* (2015), where it subtly reflects the values of traditionalism, simplicity, and familial bonding, in contrast to the materialism and fast-paced urban life of contemporary India. The resurgence of Khadi in these films is indicative of a renewed interest in sustainability and conscious living, reflecting a global trend towards ethical consumerism.

The film, *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* (2019), depicting Kangana Ranaut as a fierce warrior queen astride a horse and wielding a sword, provides a compelling example of cinematic representation of female empowerment. A crucial element contributing to the impactful portrayal of Rani Lakshmibai in "Manikarnika" is the strategic utilization of costume design. The khadi angrakha, juxtaposed with leather armor, effectively blurs traditional gender binaries. This sartorial choice not only emphasizes the character's strength and resilience but also challenges conventional notions of femininity associated with delicate attire. Neeta Lulla, the film's costume designer, consciously selected khadi for its inherent strength and symbolic resonance, highlighting the connection between the fabric and the character's unwavering spirit.

5. The Role of Costume Designers and Filmmakers

Costume designers in Indian cinema play a pivotal role in bringing Khadi to life as a character in films. The fabric is often selected not just for its aesthetic qualities, but for its cultural and ideological implications. Khadi's rough texture, natural dyes, and the visual connection to Gandhian ideals make it a powerful tool in conveying a character's alignment with certain values.

Filmmakers who incorporate Khadi into their narratives are making a deliberate choice to embed the fabric with meaning. In *Lagaan*, for instance, the contrast between the villagers' simple Khadi outfits and the British colonizers' more sophisticated European clothing highlights the ideological clash between the oppressed and the oppressors. Similarly, in *Swades*, the use of Khadi underscores the protagonist's return to his roots and his commitment to India's development.

6. Conclusion: Khadi as a Timeless Symbol in Indian Cinema

Khadi's role in Indian cinema is a testament to the enduring power of symbols in storytelling. As a fabric, it connects the past with the present, making it a versatile tool for filmmakers to engage with a range of themes—from nationalism to social justice, from rural identity to sustainability. Khadi transcends its status as a mere material object and functions as a character in its own right, carrying with it the weight of India's historical and cultural legacy.

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In contemporary films, Khadi continues to play a significant role, although its symbolism has evolved. Whether it is used to represent Gandhian ideals, to comment on rural-urban divides, or to highlight issues of sustainability, Khadi remains an essential part of India's cinematic fabric, reinforcing the values of simplicity, self-reliance, and resistance. Through the use of Khadi, filmmakers are not only creating authentic representations of Indian identity but also reflecting on the broader global issues of ethics, sustainability, and social justice.

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