



ECS America

Decoding Nepali Pashmina

What more could hit the market when vendors sell the so-called pashminas for 500 bucks? Stoles priced thousands of rupees that claim to be pashmina but actually aren't. So, in the mist of fake pashminas, where is a buyer supposed to look for the genuine ones? Read through and find out.

TEXT: NIMMA ADHIKARI

Fashion faux pas is dreaded by everyone, mostly the ones who love dressing up. People recognized all over the world for their impeccable dressing style are dragged along as well to the red carpet of the "worst dressed". Every other uber-cool dress or accessory comes with an expiry date. Like Heidi Klum says, "In fashion, one day you're in, the next day you're out." There are a few exceptions though: LBD (Little Black Dress), white shirt and pashmina shall stay forever young.

Rugged jeans have been popular since the time contract workers sported it. White shirts became popular since the time girls started putting on their men's old shirts. And, pashmina got its share of popularity since the time people came to know about its thermal qualities. A bulk of common woolen wear equals to a sleek and slim Pashmina product where warmth is concerned.

Pashmina is recognized the world over for its smooth texture and almost cotton-candy feel. It was one of the highly demanded products in the international market but the mass distribution of cheap imitation of pashmina hit the pashmina industry hard. The Nepal Pashmina Industries Association (NPPIA) has registered a trademark around the world called "Changra Pashmina" in an attempt to differentiate the real Nepali Pashmina from the fake one. Any pashmina industry in Nepal can acquire the Changra Pashmina collective trademark by getting their pashmina sample tested in the Nepal Bureau of Standard and Metrology (NBSM).

One of the standards maintained by the NPPIA for a product to pass as

pashmina is that the diameter of the pashmina fiber should be under 17 microns. Several pashmina industries have voluntarily tested their products for authenticity. Fewa Pashmina, Nepal Pashmina Industry, Bajra Yogini and Everest Knitting and Weaving are some of the first ones to be certified to use the logo proposed by the NPPIA. Anup Shrestha, the General Manager of Nepal Pashmina Industry is optimistic about the use of this trademark in their products by the end of December.

The issuing of this trademark may be one of the best decisions by the NPPIA to overcome the tragic loss faced by pashmina industries. Apart from the logo, which hasn't arrived in the market as yet, there are very few ways for customers to get hold of genuine pashmina. "We get the pashmina yarn from China from our suppliers and we label the pashmina with grades. We determine the grades according to the price we pay for it," says Santosh Pd. Adhikary,

Production Manager at Prasad Pashmina. He explains that there are grades of pashmina like every other material and the higher the grade, the more expensive the product.

Pashmina is a very soft fiber. The woven pashmina doesn't stretch much but the knitted one stretches to some extent. However, inexperienced buyers cannot simply rely on the softness or the level of elasticity of the material alone to determine the authenticity of the product. "The best way to buy a genuine pashmina is to go to a reputed and certified manufacturer," says H. P. Gairhe, Sales Manager at Fewa Pashmina. He adds that if anyone

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is selling a product claiming it to be Pashmina either at a very low cost or a very high cost, the chances are it may not be a genuine pashmina. "Sometimes, middlemen sell low quality pashmina to foreigners claiming it to be a genuine one in order to get commissions," he said.

The market of pashmina is changing and producers are trying to meet the international standards, not only in the terms of quality but in fashion trends as well. Pashmina that was simply used as a status symbol and for warmth a few years ago is now seen as a trend setter. Manufacturers are experimenting with different varieties of pashmina wear like knitted sweaters, hats, gloves, blankets and so on. These wears are styled in order to reach a larger mass of buyers. Though pashmina has been locally manufactured for many centuries, the real

pashmina has rarely made its entrance through a Nepali door.

Gairhe says that of all their customers, only about 20% are Nepalis, the rest are either expats or tourists. One of the many reasons behind the low sales of pashmina among Nepalis is the high cost. Pashmina wool comes from a chyangra that live in high altitudes. Chyangra farming for wool production at the moment is a distant idea in Nepal though the NPPIA has been pitching the idea to the government for quite some time. Also, there is no pashmina wool refining plant in Nepal. Hence, manufacturers pay a fortune to import the chyangra yarn from China which adds up to the price tag of a pashmina product.

A hundred percent pure pashmina is the most expensive. It is very delicate but again is the softest and the warmest. It can last for years if the user is careful while wearing and cleaning it (the user should avoid accessories or jewelries while wearing a pashmina since it may damage the fabric and it should always be dry cleaned for the best results). In that sense, investing in a genuine pashmina seems like a smart move. In addition, pashmina with blends are equally popular which are more durable and easily fits everyone's pockets. Quoting a price range for a pashmina product is very difficult since it comes in different sizes and designs. "Manufacturers here buy a kilo of yarn for Rs. 12,000-15,000 depending on its quality," informs Adhikari. Hence, expecting a heavy discount while buying a pashmina (of course, in a trusted showroom) would be a bit daft. Winter's already here and shops are full with prospective customers. So, what's it going to be this winter: a big fat sweater or a simple pashmina? ■

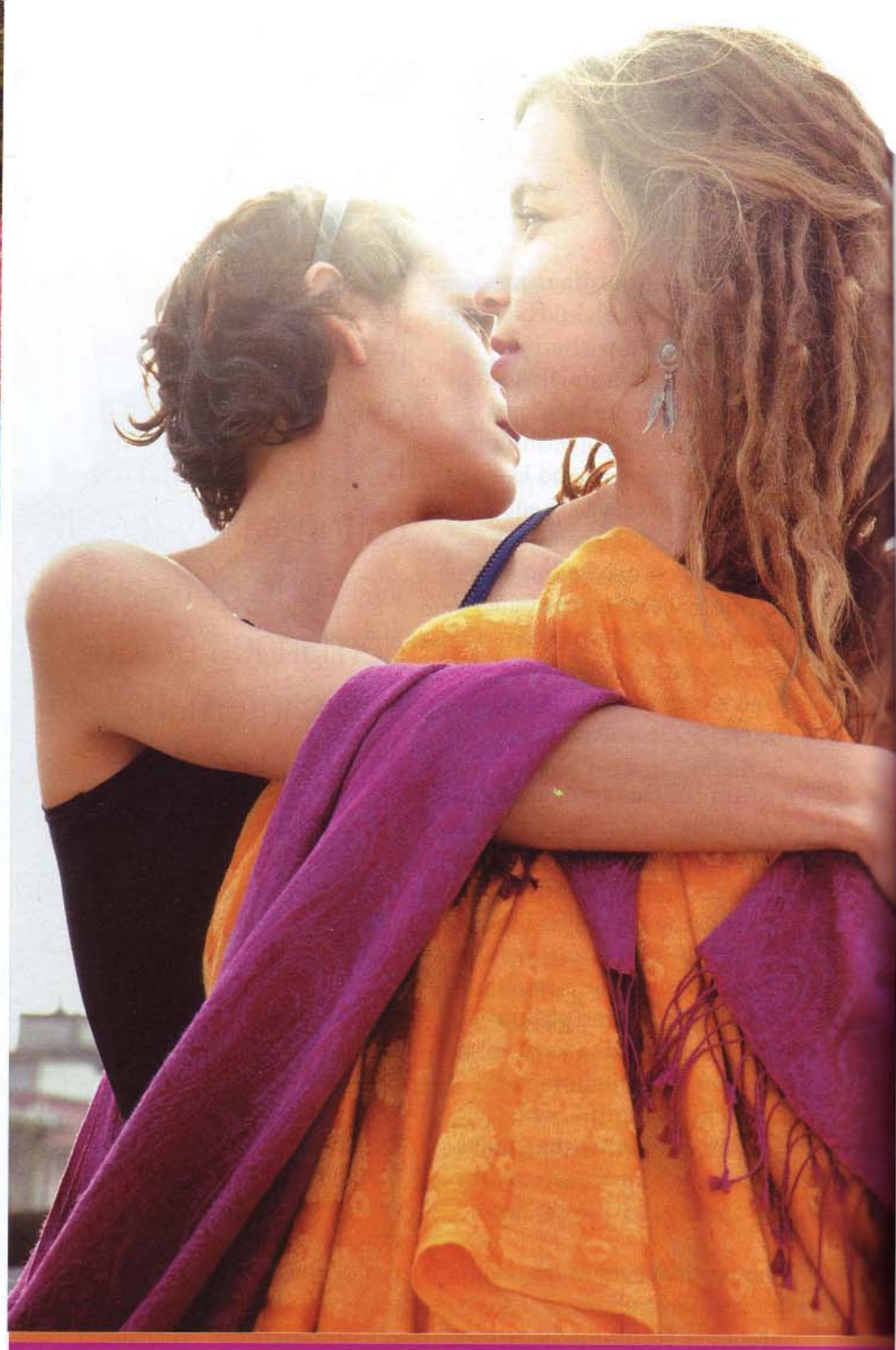


Winter again begins her cold embrace, to haunt us like an unwanted lover. Each year like the last, we wish her out of our lives, replaced by that warm loving time that just left. To protect ourselves from her chilly advances we wrap on our capes of warmth and happiness, our dearest friend, the shawl.

Yet, have you ever stopped and thought about your dear friend, the one who stays close to you when walking along cold alleyways, moving over bitter hills and crossing desolate countryside. However do they make these things? What am I actually wearing?

Claims suggest that our friend, the shawl is more than 4,000 years old, started by the Assyrians of the Middle East (Iraq); one can imagine out of the necessity of surviving cold desert nights and coverage on scorching days. The simple cloth soon became man's most practical friend. You can be sure that in those early times the shawl was made of simple fibers and styles.

In the 1700s the people of Kashmir took the idea of the simple shawl to breathtaking levels of style and practicality. Using wool from the chest of the wild Ibex goat, found on the high hills of the Himalayan region up to 3,500m, painstakingly collected from bushes and rocks, it produced a shawl so warm, yet so fine that it could pass through a finger-ring. Added with the Kashmiri style of printing and the



Our Warmest Friend

Come winter and pashminas are suddenly catapulted to the position of women's best friend.

TEXT: PAT KAUBA

fact that they sat on the fabled trade routes joining the old east and west. The Kashmiri shawl soon became all the rage for style conscious Maharajas of India, as well as English and French royalty and elite.

When one walks through local modern-day shopping bazaars like Ason or Thamel it is easy to be blown away and stupefied by the range of shawls, pashminas and cashmeres on offer. It's hard to tell what's real, good, authentic or even what it all means. For the names it's actually quite simple; they all mean the same. Shawl comes from the Hindi word shal, while the Kashmiri word pashm or pashmina relates to the wool of our wild bearded mountain goat and

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cashmere if you listen to the word is the same as Kashmir.

With the hit of the original Kashmiri shawl it wasn't long until an industry of duplicates arrived on the scene, mostly from England and China; soon the trade of Kashmiri shawls dwindled and so did quality. And, the duplicate industry appears to still be alive and thriving today.

I caught up with Hissi of Sunny Pashmina Industries (Bouddhanath) and Kristin of Pasminalaya (Germany), who together have been producing and exporting Nepali handmade shawls of the highest quality for the last

seven years. They helped unravel the mysteries of our friend, as well as the differences between domestic and export quality.

It turns out that most of the domestic market is made of 50% pashmina with 50% wool and for the export market it is either 70% pashmina with 30% silk, going up to 100% pure pashmina. And, the highest quality shawls are made by hand, using organic dyes and fabrics—meaning no chemicals. Kristin explains that on foreign markets, a Nepali handmade organic shawl can fetch as much as 10,000 Rupees!

Major importers of these fine shawls are America, Australia, The Emirates and Europe. The bulk of today's manufacturing is done in China and India; Nepal's part of the cut is quite small. Yet on the flipside Hissi explains, (due to load-shedding) their shawls are produced by hand with skills, methods and equipment that had long disappeared from other country's factories; making each piece a unique item. This makes the value and worth of Nepali pieces so much more. ■

Pat Kauba is a freelance photographer, writer and storyteller; contact him at patkauba@gmail.com. The images shown are part of a reportage on Pashminalaya and Sunny Pashmina Industry published in Burda Style Magazine (Germany).