



Clothing carries coded language. The keffiyeh, for example, worn by Palestinians and later adopted by Western fashionistas, shifted from political symbol to Instagram aesthetic. But what happens when symbols of resistance become trends?

Even the punk movement in 1970s Britain, with designers like Vivienne Westwood, challenged conformity by deliberately embracing "anti-fashion": safety pins, tartan, bondage trousers. Clothes became weapons.

In her essay "Decolonizing the Runway", activist and writer Leila Ahmed writes:

**"The fashion industry devours symbols like it devours bodies—until neither can speak."**

FASHION-HISTORY

## Case Study 1: Maria Grazia Chiuri & Dior's Feminist Runway

In 2017, Maria Grazia Chiuri, the first female artistic director at Dior, opened her debut collection with a plain white T-shirt:

"We Should All Be Feminists" — a quote borrowed from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.



Critics were divided. Was it feminist empowerment or capitalist appropriation? Sales exploded. But what does it mean when a \$700 T-shirt "represents feminism"?

Sociologist Elizabeth Wessinger warns of the "commodification of empowerment," where corporate feminism sells you identity but rarely challenges real power structures.

Still, Chiuri's consistent use of feminist slogans—"Consent," "Sisterhood is Global," "Patriarchy = Climate Emergency"—shows an effort to use her platform for consciousness-raising. But consciousness without action often rings hollow.



## Case Study 2: Balenciaga and the Aesthetics of Disturbance

Demna, the creative director of Balenciaga, turned the runway into a war zone during the Fall 2022 show in Paris. Models trudged through artificial snow, carrying trash bags made of leather (priced at over \$1,000), referencing refugee crises, climate disasters, and human disposability.

The show was polarizing but intentional. It highlighted how luxury fashion can no longer remain aesthetically beautiful while the world burns.

A Yale study (2021) on climate narratives in visual culture emphasized the impact of discomfort in fashion. When fashion disturbs, people remember—and sometimes they act.

Critics called it "vulgar" and "exploitative." Others called it "genius."

In an interview with Vogue, Demna stated:

"I don't want to entertain anymore. I want to provoke."



FASHION-HISTORY

## Fashion's Role in Protest Movements Today



- Iran 2022: The death of Mahsa Amini sparked a wave of protests. Women publicly removed their hijabs in defiance. Fashion here was not symbolic—it was revolutionary. It was dangerous.
- Hong Kong protests (2019): Protesters wore black clothing, face masks, and goggles—not only for anonymity but as a uniform of collective resistance.
- BLM movement: The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests saw a rise in "statement fashion"—from streetwear brands like Pyer Moss using runways to talk about slavery and systemic racism, to protestors creating their own T-shirts with slogans like "I Can't Breathe" and "Justice for Breonna."

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FASHION-HISTORY



When Fashion Becomes a Tool for Resistance

# Unraveling the Fabric of Protest

By Sofia

# Fashion and Resistance: A Historical Framework

In the age of visual saturation and political instability, fashion has emerged as a sophisticated language of protest—a textile manifesto. Far beyond aesthetic pleasures or seasonal trends, contemporary fashion now negotiates identity, injustice, and resistance. From streetwear infused with political messages to luxury runway statements, fashion is no longer apolitical. It is a mirror to power structures, a battleground for rights, and at times, a form of visual rebellion.

The question is not whether fashion can be political—it already is. The real question is how deeply we are willing to read into its symbols and silences.

Fashion has always been a subversive tool—often quietly, sometimes explosively.

During the French Revolution, the "sans-culottes" (literally "without fancy pants") rejected aristocratic breeches and adopted trousers as a political statement. Similarly, in 20th-century America, the Black Panthers' leather jackets and berets weren't just style choices; they were uniforms of Black pride, resistance, and radical presence.

# Symbolism, Power, and Silence

