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From Mini Skirts to Modesty: How Today's Fashion Trends Reflect a More Conservative Landscape

It's a Thursday night in March in my sleepy, suburban Massachusetts hometown. My best friend and I use this time to aimlessly wander the Target on Boston Post Road, just like we did in high school. A good old blast from the past. We stroll through the sliding doors, and as I B-line toward the section full of useless, \$1 bullshit, she stops in her tracks and laughs, pointing straight ahead at a display of womens' clothes that we haven't seen before.

"Look," she says. "It's the Target tradwife edit."

I laugh at first, glancing up at the cardigans, full-length skirts, and pastels exhibited across from the store's entrance, but it gets me thinking. These modest ruffles, long skirts, pastels, and dainty floral patterns have been popping up everywhere lately — and it feels like more than just an innocent gesture toward springtime.

It's no secret that fashion trends tend to directly reflect political shifts. In the 60s, mini skirts skyrocketed in popularity as a feminist push against the 50s' strict ideals of womanhood. As women gained more powerful positions in the workplace in the 80s, shoulder pads and geometric shapes became a way to illustrate their desire to be taken just as seriously as their male counterparts. The 2000s leaned back into femininity of the 60s — as Paris Hilton famously said: "Skirts should be the size of a belt. Life's short. Take risks."

Even Lady Gaga's famous meat dress in 2010 was meant as political commentary about the U.S. military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, not just a wacky attention-grab. Whether it's obvious or not, fashion always has something to say.

This recent shift, however, feels more like a backslide than a step forward. More specifically, it's an alarming return to hyper-domestic, traditional aesthetics in a time of political leaders advocating for the very same thing.

Many of the fashion trends circulating on social media today quietly reflect the recent increase in conservative politics — as of 2021, according to a Gallup poll, 36% of Americans consider themselves conservative, whereas only 25% consider themselves liberal. The “coastal granddaughter” trend has obvious Americana roots, reflecting the typical styles of classic, wealthy Cape Cod families. Even the rising popularity of workwear — Carhartt jackets, cowboy boots, and head-to-toe denim — romanticizes the hard work, blue-collar, dirt-under-your-fingernails values of today's conservative movement. No snowflakes here.

The “tradwife” trend in particular, short for “traditional wife,” involves a return to old-fashioned lifestyles, with women embracing classic gender roles as homemakers and child-rearers, and rejecting modern feminism. Videos of homestead life may be aesthetically pleasing and a theoretically wonderful way to live — children collecting eggs from the backyard, a vegetable garden, making everything you eat from scratch — but the trend's implications run deeper than they may seem. Tradwifery has deep roots in religious ideals, misogyny, and a distrust of modern media, food ingredients, and medicine. Sounds familiar, right? Almost like the people occupying the White House have roots there too?

Tradwife influencers like Nara Smith are maybe an extreme example, and you may protest that a white ruffled blouse here and there isn't a political statement at all. I'll be the first to admit: it's hard to accept that maybe everything *is* political after all, and that the cute pink sweater hanging before me might make a statement I don't necessarily agree with. Maybe it's just a girlish rite of passage, and not everything needs to be analyzed that deeply — but we can't ignore that we're being given more and more reason to believe that this is just the beginning of an unsettling cultural movement.

Finding a brand catered to young women and girls that doesn't shove pastels, gingham, lace, and florals down your throat — or even just gently suggest them — is a nearly impossible task.

Notably, the UK brand PrettyLittleThing, once known for bright pinks and bodycon dresses, rebranded in March, now marketing a “quiet luxury” look with muted colors and modest cardigans. Cheap clubwear now a thing of the past, PrettyLittleThing has even donned a new slogan: “A Legacy in Progress.” Whatever the brand hoped to accomplish with its recent 180, it’s not done yet.

“I’ve noticed it everywhere on campus, but I’m kind of trained to see those things,” said Syracuse University junior Sophie Davis, a double major in Advertising and Women and Gender Studies. “The patchwork, the peasant blouses, the weirdly tradwife-y, traditionally girly sorority bid day themes... if that’s not a sign we’re going backward, I don’t know what is.”

Trust me: I love sourdough bread and a long white skirt as much as the next girl. I’m not saying I’m morally against wearing florals or gingham or puff-sleeve blouses; I’d be a raging hypocrite if I said I was. But there’s something deeply unsettling about so many young women aspiring to life on a farm, apron shopping at the ripe age of 18.

It’s not like college students are consciously making these choices. It’s the nature of trends and advertising: if it’s shown to us enough, we’ll buy into it. We aren’t supposed to notice that our collections of muted gingham and pastels are increasing, and we certainly aren’t supposed to question why that is, *especially* at 8 p.m. at a Target in the middle of Massachusetts — but a wake-up call is a wake-up call, no matter where it happens.

My best friend and I swore to each other at that moment that, in defiance, we’d only wear hot pink animal print. Consider this your sign to do the same.