Persian and Indian women’s costume- A comparative study

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ABSTRACT
The present day Salwar Kurta, popular as one of the traditional Indian costume, traces back its origin to the Persian influence which was brought to India by the Mughals who followed Islam. Ancient Indian women’s costume consisted of “Antariya”, “Utariya” and “Kayabandh”. These draped garments gradually transformed to “Ghagra” and “Choli” during the early medieval period. Even though the bifurcated and stitched garments were popularly worn during the slave dynasty, these costumes became more predominant with the influence of the Mughals. In this paper the authors make a comparison based on study the reciprocal influence of the Persian and Indian women’s costume. In the pursuit of being modern, the Gulf countries have lost their traditional costumes whereas a similar version of the Arabic costume- the Salwar Kurta has become an integral part of women’s costume in India. Ever since the means of communications improved, there have been influences of different cultures on each other. This exchange of cultures with reference to the Salwar Kurta is an interesting aspect for study which focuses on the connection of these two different worlds.

Key Words: Influence, Persian, Indian, Women’s costume

INTRODUCTION
Clothing is one of the three primary needs of a human being like the other two- food and shelter. The earliest depictions of clothing are found in the prehistoric cave paintings from the Old Stone Age. What started as a basic necessity gradually became an important form of cultural identity. Clothes are not only used to cover the body but also serve as a significant nonverbal communication that establishes the cultural identity including a person’s community or country of origin at any given historical period. The online Oxford dictionary defines the word “Culture is a word for people’s way of life. A culture is passed on to the next generation by learning. Culture can be seen in people’s writings, religion, music, costumes, cooking and what they do”. Ever since the means of communications improved,
there have been influences of different cultures on each other. As cultures came into contact there is a reciprocal infusion of new ideas and much of the cross cultural materials are culturally authenticated resulting in styles that are mixtures (Tortora, 2010). The costume historians have been constantly studying these reciprocal influences and amalgamation of various cultures resulting in changing identities. The present study contributes to documentation of the traditional Persian costumes with emphasis on its influence on the Indian costumes and vice versa. The study would also help the young designers in the Arab world to find inspiration in their traditional costume and rediscover the Salwar Kurta in Arabic perspective to satisfy the current market requirement.

The objectives of the study are to-
- Make an in-depth study of the ancient Indian women’s costume.
- Understand the Persian women’s costume during the medieval period.
- Compare and analyze the reciprocal influence of Persian and Indian women’s costume.

Costumes during the ancient times:

The four major civilizations that prospered near the rivers were - the Nile Valley (Egyptian), the Tigris-Euphrates Plain (Mesopotamian), the Yang-Tse Valley (Chinese) and the Indus Valley of North Western India. The present study focuses on the Persian and the Indian women’s costumes, therefore the ancient civilization of Mesopotamia and Indus Valley civilization are studied in detail to understand the relationship and influence.

The civilization of Mesopotamia flourished around 3500 BC near the banks of Tigris and Euphrates River. The name comes from the location of the civilization, “the land between the rivers”. The greater part of ancient Mesopotamia is now present day Iraq. This region was home for people called the Sumerians, Babylonians and Assyrians. For convenience the history of Mesopotamia is divided into three major periods as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Types of natives</th>
<th>Dress style and description</th>
<th>Associated region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3500-2500 BC</td>
<td>Early Sumerian</td>
<td>The sheep skin kilt (3000 BC)</td>
<td>South Mesopotamia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- There is a very little difference between the men’s and women’s costume</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2500-1000 BC</td>
<td>Later Sumerian and Babylonian</td>
<td>The large shawl or drapery (2000 BC)- The drapery shawls are different for men and women. The style is still seen in the status of gods and goddesses</td>
<td>Middle Mesopotamia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000-600 BC</td>
<td>Assyrian</td>
<td>The tunic with or without an added shawl (1000-700 BC)- A far more advanced and developed costume</td>
<td>Northern Mesopotamia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate</td>
<td>Below 50%</td>
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<td>IV</td>
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</tbody>
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(Houston, 1964)

The two basic garments worn in Mesopotamia- the skirt and the shawl were adorned by the fringe. In the later part of the civilization, the fringe was more elaborate and decorative. The women of early Sumerian period wore only shawls decorated with simple border patterns.
or all over pattern. The women in the later period wore sewn outfits covered with tiers of fringe. By the end of the Sumerian rule, both men and women wore skirts and shawls (Fig. 1).

Evidences available also suggest that there was not much difference in the dress of Babylonians and the Sumerians. The only difference was that the dress became more elaborate during the Era of the Babylonians. During the rule of the Assyrians, the fringed garments were still worn by both men and women. The shawl was wrapped over the shoulders and around the waist to cover from shoulders till ankles held in place by belts. After the Persian invasion, the people in Mesopotamia adopted the Persian trousers as the lower garment. The costume of the new Persian Empire was unusually different from the ancient costumes of the people of Mesopotamia. The Persians wore a fitted coat and trousers as compared to the draped patterned of the ancient style.

The Indus Valley civilization thrived near the Indus River in the Northwestern part of Indian subcontinent around 2300 -1700BC. Evidences show that the city was quite ahead of its times and well organized. The people had trade and commerce with the Persian Gulf. However the knowledge of costume of Mohenjo-Daro people is limited as the figures and the statues are mostly naked. Archeological evidences indicated that draped cloak/shawl was worn by men while women wore short skirts with elaborate headgears and coiffure. The earliest prototype of sari (a modern day Indian costume) was observed on the statue of the Mother Goddess of Mohenjo-Daro (Fig. 2) in the form of small cloth wrapped around the waist and torso covered with jewels (Bhatnagar, 2003).

The Vedic and the Post Vedic period (1700- 600 BC) associated with the Aryans migrating from Iran into India provides literature sources to study the costumes of that era. The Vedas, Upanishads and the epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana were composed during this period. The Vedic Indian men wore three garments ‘nivi’ or loin-cloth sometimes
having a long unwoven fringe, an upper garment ‘vasas’ and an over/outer garment ‘upavasana/adhivasa’ (Moti Chandra, 1973). Garments for women consisted of the ‘candataka’ (under skirt) and the ‘vasas’ (upper garment). However there have been references of sewn garments as well (Pathak, 2008). Elaborate headgear and jewelry had been an important part of both men and women costumes.

The study of costumes of both the civilizations which were flourishing in different parts of the world almost at the same time provide evidence that the people were mostly wearing draped garments. However some form of sewn garments have also been observed and mentioned in the literature. The most important similarity is the elaborate head dress and hair styles for women in both the civilizations. The trade and commerce relations also indicate that there was some kind of influence of culture with reference to the garments worn by people in each region.

Costumes during the Medieval Times:

As mentioned by Blanche Payne, “The costumes of the Persian Empire differ essentially from that of most ancient civilizations. The dress of ancient Egypt, Sumerian, Babylonia and Assyria consisting of skirts, shawls and tunics bears no resemblance to that which is characteristically Persian. In a word, what we see is the contrast between a loose or draped style and that of a costume which consists of a fitted coat and trousers”. After 1100 AD, Ottoman Empire was predominant in the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula and the main religion followed was Islam. In terms of dress, both men and women wore ‘Kaftan’ originally a Persian garment but probably influenced by costume of Mamluk Egypt. The women in the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East wore Kaftan, similar to that of men, but heavily embroidered and made of silk (Ross, 1995). Layering of garments was observed both for men and women to protect from the heat. The Persian influence was quite noticeable after the 12th Century AD. The arrival of Arabs and Islam in Persia brought a drastic change in the dress for women. The women began wearing long, drawstring trousers with tight ankles, with an upper dress that revealed the trousers in varying degrees. Over this attire, the women would wear a loose, ankle-length robe which was open in the front and had sleeves that were tied at the wrist. A large length of cloth resembling a cummerbund would be wrapped around the hips, and folded so that both ends hang from the front of the waist and reach just above the dress’s hem. Some princesses would tuck jeweled daggers on each side of their “cummerbund” as ornaments and for self-defense. Like the men, women also wore a cloak/robe popularly known as ‘Robe of Honor’ as part of their basic public attire.

The women’s and the men’s costume during medieval times remained more or less similar from the Vedic time consisting of three main garments- Antariya- lower garment, Uttariya- upper garment and Kayabandh- sash to keep the Uttariya in place. Till the Mauryan dynasty the garments were draped for both women and men. In addition to these draped garments which were unstitched, there has also been a mention of a cut and sewn garment called the Atka- a hip length or calf length garment like a kurta or tunic worn by both men and women. After the collapse of the Kushan Empire, the Gupta Empire was founded in 4th Century AD which lasted for more than two centuries. The Gupta period is known as the Golden Age or Classical Period in the history. Towards the end of Gupta
Empire, cut and sewn garments were observed, but the royalty still used the draped garments especially for women (Alkazi, 1983). After the collapse of the Gupta period and towards the end of the 9th Century, the Rajputs became an influential force and the caste system was strictly followed. There were laws and social taboos for wearing fabrics and styles among the aristocrats and the common people. New terms like Dupatta, Chadar and Dhoti were introduced, synonymous with Uttariya and Antariya. It was the influence of the Mughals who introduced Islam in Indian subcontinent which brought about the change in the costume of men and women. The miniature paintings of that era clearly depict the layering of garments both for men and women as well as introduction of complex stitched garments and the bifurcated garments.

**Persian influence on Indian Women’s Costume:**

Essentially a medieval garment the Salwar Kurta in its original form was brought into the country by the Muslim rulers. It was a courtly garment from the central Asian invaders, and slowly became the popular garment of the people of the countryside with the spread of Islam. Men and women both wore different forms of what is today known as the Indian Salwar Kurta. With the coming in of Islamic rule from 8th Century AD, Medieval India saw a lot of change in costume and culture. With the establishment of Mughal rule, a blend of Persian and ancient Indian artistic sensibilities can be seen in art, architecture and clothing. With the Persian influence, the majority of stitched garments entered India; the Antariya was replaced by the Pajamas (Lower garment). The Uttariya still remained though various tunics like Kurtas and angrakhas were added (Fig 3).

![Image of Women's Costume during Mughal Era](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-frank/blague-dart-lucknowsense_b_828387.html)

**Fig. 3**: Women’s Costume during Mughal Era

Source: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-frank/blague-dart-lucknowsense_b_828387.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-frank/blague-dart-lucknowsense_b_828387.html)
Present day costume:

However there are many regional differences in the traditional costume of the Middle East (Arabian Peninsula), the main garments are the ‘Dishdasha/Thobe/Kaftan’ an upper garment made from heavily embroidered fabric in bright colors mostly ankle length. Under this ‘Dishdasha/Thobe/Kaftan’ is a lower garment known as ‘Sirwaal/Sarwal’ which is a drawstring trouser generally tighter at the ankle. The ‘Lihaf/Shal’ is a head covering worn over the head. The ‘Shal’ is mostly black in color. Another important aspect of the women’s garments is the veil or ‘burka’ – the face covering. In some parts of Arabia and Middle East, the women cover their faces in public. The veil also differs from region to region. The ‘Abaya’ which seems to have evolved from the ‘Robe of Honor’ of the medieval time is a black over garment worn by all the women in the Middle East. The Abaya apparently superseded the ‘Milaaya’, possibly long ago- a fashion adopted by townswomen from the Turks. The ‘Milaaya’, a sheet, is worn identically. The Abaya is invariably black- a color said to have been introduced or accepted by Islam as the perfect disguise for attractive feminine garments underneath. Townswomen have led the fashion for wearing Abaya instead of Milaaya. Today’s Abaya is usually decorated with embroidery, crystals and fancy lace fabrics (Ross, 1985). Renowned Paris fashion houses have entered the market for Abaya as the most fashionable garment in the Middle East.

The Sari has been and still is the most traditional garment for the Indian women. Today the costume is synonymous with the national costume of the country along with the Salwar Kurta. Salwar Kurta and saree are worn mainly by the women of northern India but is favored all over India by as of now. The Salwar Kurta has become popular among the young generation because it’s comfortable, elegant and most respected apparel. Indian Salwar resemble a Pajama drawn tightly in at the waist with a string and is tailored in such a way that it tapers at the ankles. The ‘Kurta’ is worn over the ‘Salwar’. This is a long shapely outfit, which resembles a long shirt almost till the knee. The most common pattern has sleeves up to the wrists and slits on the sides. The length of the Kurta changes as per the prevalent fashion. Sometimes instead of a ‘Salwar’, women wear a ‘Churidar’. This is a tighter version of the ‘Salwar’ accentuating the knees and ankles. The ‘Salwar Kurta’ is usually worn with the ‘Dupatta’. This is a rectangle cloth made of very thin cotton or synthetic material used to cover the head and the chest.

Reciprocal influence:

The traditional costume in the Middle East is not mostly seen as the young generation in the Arab world has picked up the Western garments- Jeans, skirts and short tops as the everyday wear. The traditional costumes are either worn by the Bedouins or during the henna ceremony. In the pursuit of being modern, the Arab countries have lost their traditional costumes whereas in India these costumes – Salwar Kurta/Kameez has become an integral part of their traditional costume. The costumes which once belonged to them now belong to the Indian subcontinent. These costumes have merely become occasional wear in these countries and the Indian theme wedding events are very popular among the young generation of the Arab world. Bollywood movies and Fashion styles for the latest Salwar Kurta are eagerly awaited and designs are copied for the wedding events. To analyze this reciprocal
influence, a survey was conducted to elucidate the extent of influence of Indian Salwar Kurta in the Arab world. It was observed that almost 64% of the Arabs felt that there is an influence of Indian culture on Arab culture and most of the respondents were in the age group of 20 years to 30 years (Fig. 4). This is probably due to the fact that the young generation is not aware of their traditional garments and is influenced by the media. The traditional garments worn during the festivals and wedding ceremonies are very similar to the Indian Salwar Kurta and are sourced from the Indian Subcontinent. Moreover, there is a great deal of Bollywood influence on the young generation in the Arab world which influences the choice of their garments on the special occasions. The survey also revealed that this thought process was not limited only to the young Arab population. But majority of people from the Indian Subcontinent residing in the Arab world were also of the similar opinion.

Further the results of the survey revealed that majority of the respondents were not aware of the origin of the Salwar Kurta (Fig 5). The respondents who were aware of the origin felt that the origin was Persia. This data corroborates the literature review which states that Salwar Kurta originated from Persia.

The cultural identity of any region can be depicted by Fashion and the garments worn by the natives of that region. There has been a considerable change in the cultural identity of both the Indian Subcontinent and the Middle Eastern countries popularly known as the Arab countries. The famous French and Italian designers look at these areas as inspiration and upcoming markets for their collection. The famous French Couture House – Chanel took inspiration from India showcasing the Pre Fall collection 2012 ‘Paris-Bombay’ or more accurately “the Paris version of the idea of India,” according to Karl Lagerfeld (Menkes, 2011). The collection depicted the Churidar Salwar Kurta style dress and pant combination. The block prints and heavily embellished garments were inspired by the Mughal Era. The most interesting fact is that the designer took inspiration from the Salwar Kurta from India which originated in Persia (Iran). On the other hand, the famous Italian Design House Dolce and Gabbana recently launched their Hijab and Abaya Collection for the Muslim customers in the Middle East. This clearly shows that the origin of the Salwar Kurta is no longer in the Arab world. The Arabic costumes are only perceived as the Hijab and the Abaya by the
designers.

The study leaves a scope for the future upcoming designers of the Middle East to take pride in their traditional garments and try to revive them in more contemporary and fashionable way as daily or casual wear among the young generation. The upcoming designers of the Middle East should take inspiration from their traditional garments and create a new collection as Arab Western garments which respects the idea of modesty as per Islamic laws.

REFERENCES


Online Resources


