



## Woman in Culture and Arts

### The Impact of Westernization on Changes in Women's Identity and Clothing in the Qajar Era

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| Article Info                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | ABSTRACT                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
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| <p><b>Article type:</b><br/>Research Article</p> <p><b>Article history:</b><br/>Received: 11 March<br/>2025Received in revised form:<br/>23 October 2025<br/>Accepted: :14 August 2026<br/>Published online: 2 October<br/>2026</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b><br/><i>Cultural Identity, Qajar<br/>Period, Social Changes,<br/>Westernization, Women's<br/>Clothing.</i></p> | <p><b>Introduction</b><br/>Clothing constitutes a system of signs and symbols that, collectively, form a distinctive framework rooted in national, historical, political, and mythological contexts, thereby embodying the identity of individuals (Matin, 2004: 39). This system possesses a form, an essence, and a function, serving a vital role in facilitating cultural communication within society. Similarly, just as linguistic evolution can modify the ethnic or cultural identity of a nation, alterations in attire can likewise indicate a transformation of identity (Bloukbashi, 2003: 20). Therefore, analyzing the alterations in women's attire during the Qajar era is important not only for understanding external modifications but also for gaining insight into more profound cultural and identity transformations.</p> <p>The fashion of women's attire during the Qajar period and its evolutions have been the focus of numerous scholarly publications and articles. Although certain sources attribute these changes to political, social, economic, and religious influences, the aspect frequently neglected is the transformation of identity among specific segments of society under the impact of Westernization. This research aims to examine the impact of Western cultural exposure on the alterations in Qajar women's attire and to determine the degree to which these changes reflect broader cultural and identity shifts.</p> <p>The purpose of this study is to analyze the effects of Western influences on the cultural and identity transformations reflected in Qajar women's clothing. This research seeks to illustrate how social, political, and cultural factors influenced either the adoption or opposition to clothing modifications during this period. The importance of this study resides in demonstrating that the external transformations in women's clothing were not solely driven by economic or political influences but instead reflected more profound shifts in identity within Iranian society during the Qajar period. By examining these dynamics, we can develop a more comprehensive understanding of the process of identity transformation and the influence of modernity in influencing Iranian lifestyles.</p> <p>The study will initially analyze the social circumstances of the Qajar era, emphasizing the elements that shape culture and identity. It will subsequently examine the impact of these conditions on the evolution of women's fashion and ultimately investigate the phenomenon of Westernization. Examining this subject not only deepens our comprehension of the evolution of historical attire in Iran but also underscores the wider impacts of modernity and identity shifts on Iranian lifestyles. Just as clothing, akin to language, signifies ethnic, social, geographical, occupational, political, and religious affiliations, as well as social and economic status, alterations in attire may reflect the erosion of identity and the diminishment of specific cultural characteristics (Bloukbashi, 2003: 20).</p> <p>The research questions addressed in this article are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How did the processes of identity transformation and the movement toward Westernization develop during the Qajar period, and what influence did Westernization exert on the evolution of women's dress styles?</li> <li>2. What were the societal implications stemming from these alterations in women's fashion during the Qajar era?</li> </ol> <p><b>Research Methodology</b><br/>This study employs a historical and analytical methodology, drawing upon both primary and secondary sources, including historical texts, travelogues, paintings, photographs, and</p> |

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archived newspapers, to examine the evolution of Qajar women's clothing. The research also includes a sociocultural analysis to examine the influence of Western factors and internal social movements in influencing fashion trends.

### **Findings**

#### **Phase 1: Traditional Clothing before Western Influence (Early Qajar Era - Mid Naser al-Din Shah's Reign)**

- Women's clothing remained predominantly consistent with that of the preceding Zand and Safavid periods, characterized by long tunics, loose-fitting trousers, and layered garments.
- The outer garment (chador) and facial coverings were indispensable for women in public settings, representing modesty and social standing.
- Clothing was profoundly embedded in cultural and religious traditions, with minimal external influence due to limited foreign interactions.

#### **Phase 2: Gradual European Influence (Mid Naser al-Din Shah's Reign - Late Qajar Period)**

- Following Naser al-Din Shah's visits to Europe, certain European fashion elements were incorporated, initially within the confines of the royal court.
- Initially, modifications were observed among prominent women, who embraced tailored dresses, corsets, and European-inspired accessories while preserving aspects of traditional Persian clothing.
- The influence of ballet costumes observed in European theaters resulted in the adoption of shorter skirts (Shaliteh) among royal women, representing a notable transformation in the fashion of aristocratic women.
- While the nobility adopted Western designs, the wider population remained predominantly unaffected owing to cultural resistance and limited access to foreign textiles.

#### **Phase 3: Widespread Changes During the Constitutional Revolution (Late Qajar Period - Early Pahlavi Period)**

- The early 20th century experienced heightened advocacy for women's rights, education, and social reform, resulting in a transformation of apparel that reflected evolving societal standards.
- Intellectuals and reformists advocated for European-style attire as an emblem of advancement and modernity.
- Educational institutions and women's periodicals contributed substantially to the development of fashion trends by promoting European-style skirts, blouses, and tailored outerwear.
- Clothing emerged as a focal point of ideological discourse—while some regarded Western-style attire as a symbol of liberation, others perceived it as a diminution of national identity.

### **Conclusion**

The findings suggest that Western influence and increased engagement with Europe exerted a more substantial effect on women's fashion than simply importing foreign fabrics. Schools, the media, and intellectual movements were among the primary factors that facilitated these transformations. However, these transformations were neither consistent nor widely endorsed. Many women, especially beyond the upper echelons of society, adhered to traditional patterns, embodying the wider tension between modernization and cultural preservation.

The evolution of women's fashion was not solely aesthetic but also reflected profound shifts in cultural identity. The changing designs served as a reflection of the wider ideological and social transformations occurring within Qajar society. Although clothing initially evolved within the royal and elite classes, these transformations progressively disseminated throughout society, affecting women's daily experiences, perceptions of modernity, and engagement in public discourse.

The evolution of women's clothing in the Qajar period was not merely a superficial change in fashion but a nuanced manifestation of shifting identities and societal development. Westernization significantly influenced elite fashion; however, the more comprehensive transformation was driven by internal factors such as intellectual discourse, educational reforms, and evolving gender norms. Although some welcomed these changes as

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a progression toward modernity, others opposed them, perceiving them as a threat to cultural traditions. Ultimately, this period signaled the commencement of a sustained metamorphosis in Iranian women's clothing, setting the stage for more profound changes during the early Pahlavi era.

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