



Construction Similarities of Traditional Arabic Costume and the Indian Salwar-Kameez

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The origin of SalwarKameez cannot be exactly isolated in one country. With the emergence of Islam in the Middle East and Arab peninsula, the style of clothing was clearly defined for both men and women. The *Shalwar* (Persian), *Şalvar* (Turkish), *Sirwal* (Arabic) is a form of baggy trousers fastened by a drawstring at the waist. The word 'Kameez' is originally Arabic and is sometimes spelt as Qameez or Qamis. This is used to describe a shirt usually of varied lengths. Therefore it can be easily interpreted that the origin of the garment SalwarKameez is either Persian or Arabic.

It has been recorded and well documented in the history of costumes that the draped garments have been predominant in the Indian subcontinent throughout history. By the end of Gupta period, stitched garments like the *Choli* and *Ghagra* were being used; still the royalty continued wearing the draped garments- *Antariya* and *Uttariya*. The slave dynasty, during the 1100AD, introduced bifurcated garments both for men and women in the Indian subcontinent. Following the Afghan and Mughal invasions, there were significant changes in the costumes for both men and women. The present day SalwarKameez, 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.

Traditional Arabic Costumes

The Middle East (Fig. 1) consists of seventeen countries and Iran (Persia) is one of them. Although Iran is not an Arabic country but its history is linked to that of the Arab world as the Arabs ruled Persia and introduced Islam. Therefore the costumes of Persia were influenced by the Arab world to a great extent, which eventually reflects in the Indian Salwar Kameez. At first glance the Arabic costumes (from Oman & Saudi Arabia) and the Indian Salwar Kameez look very similar in style and construction. "If you want to understand Omani traditional dress; go to India". These were words told to young Julia Alzadjali (Director, Centre for Omani Dress) when she came to Oman after marriage by her mother in law.

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 'Burkha' – the face covering. In some parts of Arabia and Middle East, the women cover their faces in public.



Figure 1: Map showing Arab countries (in green) in the Middle East,
 Source: <http://israel-arab-conflict.tripod.com/maps.html> Photo Courtesy: Author

Traditional Women’s Costume in Sultanate of Oman

The Sultanate of Oman possess a beautiful and extensive history and is considered the “hidden corner of Arabia”. Oman shares its geographical borders with three other Arabic countries – Republic of Yemen, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. Many cultural similarities between these countries are noticeable in terms of food, lifestyle, traditions and costumes. However being closest to the Indian subcontinent, traces of rich Indian textiles are visible in the traditional costumes for women in the country. “It need be said that Oman’s dress identity has been touched by India, particularly in the area of dress for women” (Alzadjali, 2010). This statement stands true as India has always been known for its rich, complex and elaborate textiles and textile crafts. However the garments of the Arab world have been accepted and adapted by the Indian culture and have become synonymous with the Indian traditional costumes for men and in particular for women. SalwarKameez is the best example to the track its route into the Indian culture. There are various regional styles of women’s costume in Oman. The styles of different regions are distinguished on the basis of material, cut, color and embellishments. However, all the regions have three basic elements for a women's costume –

- Dishdasha(a dress)
- Sarwal (a pair of trousers)
- A form of head covering.

Dishdasha(Fig. 4) is a long tunic like garment worn by both men and women in Oman. The construction for both is more or less the same with the difference being in the length and the type of fabric used. The Dishdasha for women is generally mid-calf length, colorful and embellished. It is a straight cut silhouette with three panels each in the front and the back. The armholes are squared to fit the rectangular full length sleeves.



Figure2: Traditional Omani Women's Costume, Source: Alzadjali, J. M. (2010), Photo Courtesy: Author



Figure3:Traditional Saudi Arabia Women's Costumes, Source:-: Paintings by SafeyaBinzagar, SafeyaBinzagar Museum, Jeddah, Photo Courtesy: Author



Figure4:Dishdasha, Source: Alzadjali, J. M. (2010), Photo Courtesy: Author



Figure 5: Sarwal with ankle cuff, Source: Alzadjali, J. M. (2010), Photo Courtesy: Author

Sarwalis is a lower garment worn under the Dishdasha which is narrow at the ankle and tied with a drawstring at the waist. The Sarwal is constructed on a straight grain. There are two different types of Sarwal worn in Oman. The construction for both the types is almost the same with the only difference being in the size of opening for the foot to go in. Fig. 5 shows the type of Sarwal which is loose straight cut trouser with an ankle cuff. Fig.6 shows the type of Sarwal which is quite narrow from hip down till the ankle. Sometimes the opening at the ankle is so narrow that the women have to wear a plastic bag on their foot to pull it up.



Figure 6: Sarwal with narrow ankle. Source: Alzadjali, J. M. (2010), Photo Courtesy: Author



Figure 7: Kaftan. Source: Ross, H. C. (1995), Photo Courtesy: Author



Figure 8: Sirwaal. Source: Ross, H. C. (1995), Photo Courtesy: Author



Figure 9: Traditional Salwar Kameez from Punjab. Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/547046685967007237/?ip=true>, Photo Courtesy: Author

The head covering in traditional costume (Fig. 2) is used to cover hair, head and neck and wrapped tightly around the face. There are many names given for these head coverings depending upon the types, the region and length of the scarf. *Leso*, *Shayla*, *Waqaya*, *Shal*, *Lihaf* and *Kanga* are all the terms used for the head coverings. Traditionally all types of head coverings are rectangular in shape and made with either plain or printed fabric.

Traditional Women's Costume in Saudi Arabia

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the second-largest state in the Arab world after Algeria. Saudi Arabia is bordered by Jordan and Iraq to the north, Kuwait to the northeast, Qatar, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates to the east, Oman to the southeast and Yemen to the south. Saudi Arabian dress strictly follows the principles of Hijab (the Islamic principle of modesty). Women's clothes are often decorated with tribal motifs, coins, sequins, metallic thread, and appliques. In public women are required to wear a black Abaya that covers everything under the neck. The traditional Arabian women's costumes are voluminous, flowing and are richly embroidered with geometric patterns in bold colors. As seen in Sultanate of Oman, there are regional variations in the costume which are clearly visible. The basic garments which form the complete women's costume in the Arabian region are-

- Kaftan/Thawb- long length tunic
- Sirwaal- a pair of trousers
- Head covering/Shaal
- Burka/Nikaab- veil to cover the face
- Abaya- mantle or cloak usually black in color worn in public.

The **Kaftan** is the basis of traditional Arabian costume. The Kaftan, originally Arabian, took the final shape, as seen today, long ago in Turkey. It spread through the Islamic Empire ever since and evolved in various regions. It is an ankle length, long sleeved loose fitted garment without any darts, zippers and collar. The Prophet Muhammed was probably responsible for modifying the component parts of the basic kaftan, such as large sleeves of Asian origin (Ross, 1995). Ever since it has varied widely in shape, fabric and decoration. It is known by various names in classical and colloquial Arabic such as Qamis, Thawb, Jubba, Ghilala and Dishdasha to name a few. The construction of this body shirt or Kaftan (Fig. 7) is very interesting. The original design incorporated the use of panels in the garment to conserve the fabric use. The construction is similar to that of Omani Dishdasha.

However here the gusset was only for decorative purposes rather than functional as the Kaftan is already a loose garment. The gussets are either made from a contrasting color fabric or embroidered fabric. It has a high round neckline with a front slit opening fastened with a loop and button. The regional variations within Saudi Arabia are quite visible in the cut of the Kaftan based on geographic and climatic conditions. The length of the Kaftan and the type of sleeves also vary from region to region. Narrow sleeves are common in western mountain areas of Asir while enormous sleeves are common in hot region of Najd.

The basic construction of the **Sirwaal** is a straight cut with narrow opening at ankle tied at the waist with a drawstring. The Arabian Sirwaal (Fig.8) does not have any panel and waist belt instead it has a rectangular crotch gusset for freedom of movement at the hip area. The lower portion is narrow till the ankles. The Sirwaal is gathered at the waistband, which is threaded with a drawstring known as Dikka in local language. *Sirwaal* is colorful and mostly embroidered or decorated at the ankle edge or below the knee. The embroidery on the *Sirwaal* often matches the embroidery on the Kaftan.

To complete the costume (Fig. 3) a rectangular fabric is used to cover the head. The average size of the **Shaal** is 100 inches by 34 inches. Most of the times the *Shaal* is a light weight fabric usually chiffon or net and matching with the Kaftan and *Sirwaal*. Veiling for women (**Burkha**), where the face is covered leaving just the eyes open is mandatory for Muslims especially in Saudi Arabia (Fig. 3). **Abaya**, an outer garment is worn over Kaftan and *Sirwaal* when the women are in public. Traditionally the *Abayas*(Fig 3) were made of big rectangular pieces of fabric stitched together to cover the body from neck down till the feet.

Indian SalwarKameez

Due to the Persian and Turkish domination in Central Asia; the presence of Salwar Kameez was seen as an expression of Indian traditional costume. Research and historical records have proved that the pattern prevalent today in India are indeed the descendant of Turkish and Persian forms of Salwar Kameez. The Salwar Kameez has become popular among the young generation because it is comfortable, elegant and most respected apparel. The Salwar Kameez worn in India has the following three components

- Kameez/Kurta – a tunic or dress
- Salwar/Shalwar- a pair of trousers
- Dupatta- a rectangular scarf used as a head covering.

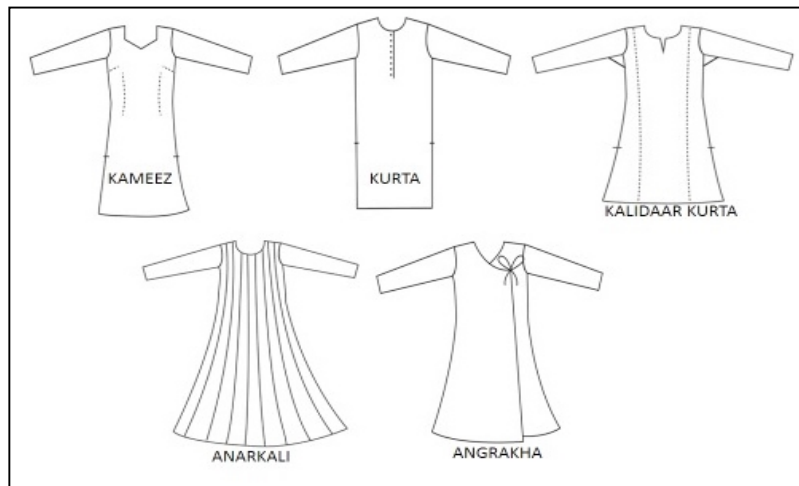


Figure 10: Style Variations of Indian Kameez, Photo Courtesy: Author

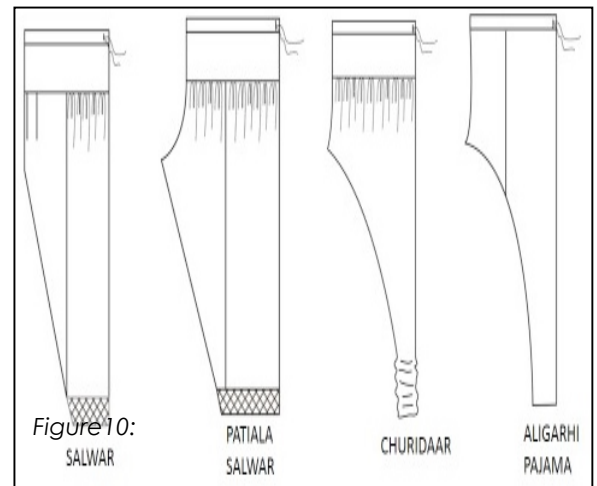


Figure 11: Style Variations of Salwar, Photo Courtesy: Author

Unlike any other Indian dress, SalwarKameez has transformed over time. With its pristine origin hinting at the Mughal courtroom this dress is almost synonymous with the Indian National dress along with the sari. The SalwarKameez has become popular among the young generation because it's comfortable, elegant and most respected apparel. Over the decades the SalwarKameez has been the focus of many designers and has been transformed as per the prevalent fashion trends. The journey was long, yet rich. Consequently, what followed are a series of styles and designs, varied materials and patterns to suit the changing taste of India (Ho, 2013).

Kameez and its variations

The traditional Kameez top is a loose-fitting, knee-length tunic with long sleeves. The tunic is worn by pulling it over the head through a round neckline that has a front slit. The Kameez has seen a lot of style variations over the decades and has been called by various names (Fig.10).

- Kameez
- Kurta
- KalidaarKurta
- Anarkali
- Angrakha

Salwar and its variations

Indian Salwar resemble a Pajama drawn tightly at the waist with a string and is tailored in such a way that it tapers at the ankles. The Indian Salwar has seen a lot more style variations than the Kameez. There are different names for different styles (Fig.11)

- Salwar
- Patiala Salwar
- Churidaar
- AligarhiPajama

Constructional Similarities

Centuries of invasions, conquest and trade links between the subcontinent and the Arab world has contributed to the blending of cultures and traditions not only in clothing but also in food habits and lifestyle. The similarities between the Indian Salwar Kameez and the Arabic Costumes clearly show the amalgamation of cultures.

A closer look at the Dishdasha from Oman and Kaftan from Saudi Arabia reveals similarity in construction with a popular Indian style Kalidar Kurta worn by men and women in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh(Fig.12). A Kalidar Kurta has six panels (three in the front and three at the back). The side panels for both front and back are cut at an angle on one side and straight on the other. It has long and loose sleeves. There is a triangular piece attached between the sleeve and the bodice of the garment called gusset to give extra looseness to the garment. It is not only the construction, but also the embellishment and embroidery details from both the worlds which are very similar. The Dishdasha (Fig 13) is knee length with colorful embroidery on the front and the sleeves. The gusset is also visible in this sample. The sleeves are short length. An interesting aspect to note is the style of the embroidery on this particular Dishdasha. Even though the embroidery is machine embroidery, the pattern and the colors used are similar to the embroidery used in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat, India. It resembles the Kutchi/Sindhi (interlaced) stitch used extensively in the Indian subcontinent especially in Pakistan and Gujarat, India.

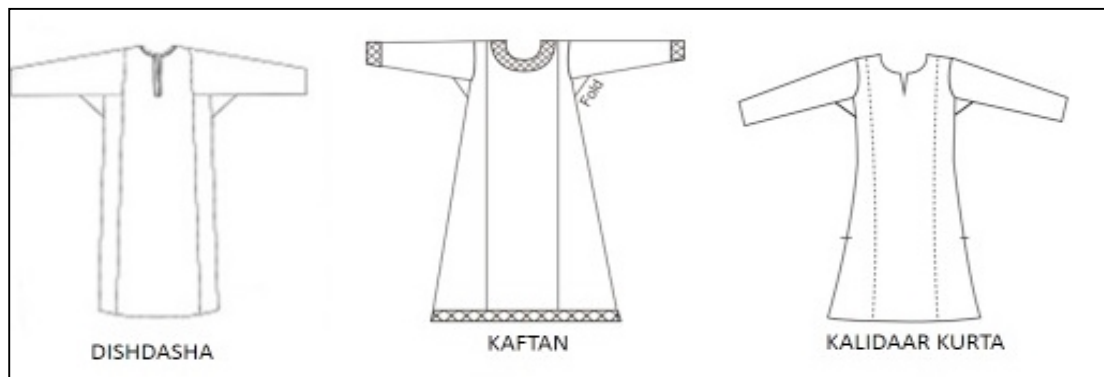


Figure 12: Constructional Similarities between Omani Dishdasha, Arabian Kaftan and Indian Kalidaar Kurta, Photo Courtesy: Author

There are similarities between the Omani Sarwal, the Arabian Sirwaal and Aligarhi Pajama style Salwar from Indian subcontinent (Fig.14). The Omani Sarwal is exactly the same as the Aligarhi Pajama in appearance and construction. Some styles have a wider opening for the foot resembling the Salwar from Indian subcontinent. The Arabian Sirwaal, unlike the Aligarhi Pajama, does not have any panel and waist belt instead it has a rectangular crotch gusset for freedom of movement at the hip area. The lower portion is narrow till the ankles. The embellishment details on the Omani Sarwal and Arabian Sirwaal have similarities with the Indian embroidery techniques. Fig 15 depicts the similarities in the embroidery techniques. The appearance of this sample of Omani Sarwal is very similar to the Indian Salwar but it is neither paneled nor has an ankle cuff (*Poncha*). The *Sarwalis* heavily embroidered from knee to the ankle. The embroidery used is exactly similar to the traditional hand embroidery of Saurashtra region of Gujarat, India.



Figure 13: Dishdasha (Muscat region) with Embroidery details ,Source: Julia Alzadjali (COD) collection, Photo Courtesy: Author

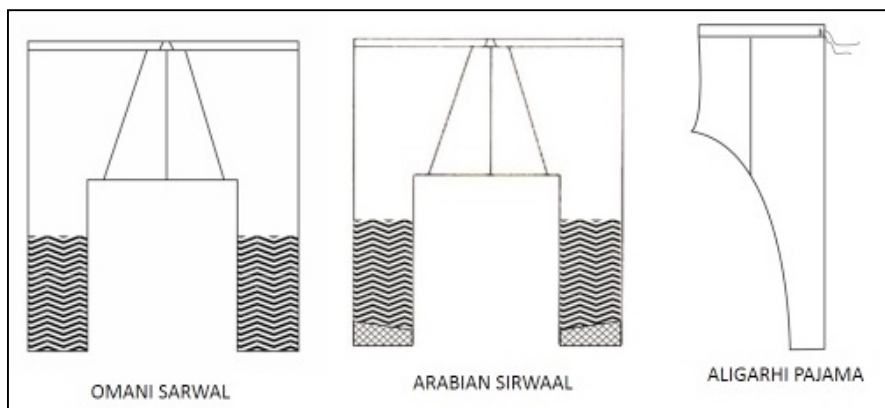


Figure 14: Constructional Similarities between Omani Sarwal, Arabian Sirwaal and Indian Aligarhi Pajama, Photo Courtesy: Author

Fig. 16 shows the head covering from Muscat region of Oman. This sample of head covering is exactly the same as the Dupatta available in India. The color, fabric and embellishments used are exactly the same. The fabric is fully covered with the Gota (metallic ribbon) and sequins forming a geometric pattern. This type of Dupatta is used by Hindu brides in north Indian states of Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. Since Muscat is the capital city of Oman, it can be interpreted that this sample has been imported from India.

The constructional details of Salwar/Sirwal and Kameez /Dishdasha/Kaftan/Thobe have clearly revealed the similarity in construction. 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 with respect to women's costume. After extensive study and analysis, it can be easily inferred that the traditional dress of Persian (Iranian) and Turks travelled to the subcontinent during the medieval period. This easily got amalgamated into the culture of Indian subcontinent and with transformation over time, a unique style was created. The popularity of *Salwar Kameez* has lead the leading designers in the subcontinent to experiment and innovate with various silhouettes keeping the basic element of comfort and modesty along with latest style and trend.



Figure 15: Embroidery details on Omani Sarwal and Arabian Sirwaal, Source: Julia Alzadjali (COD) collection, Source: Al Tayebat Museum, Jeddah ,Photo Courtesy: Author



Figure 16: Head covering from Muscat Region, Source: Julia Alzadjali (COD) collection, Photo Courtesy: Author

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