

**Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Postdoctoral Fellowship in Iranian Studies for 2023-2024**  
***Cover Letter***

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Dear members of the search committee,

I am writing to apply for the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Postdoctoral Fellowship in Iranian Studies for 2023-2024. My main research areas are Middle Eastern fashions and diasporic and postcolonial studies with a focus on modernization as a key element in Iranian fashion's history and its contemporary debates, as well as Iranian fashion's relationship to local and transnational events. Currently, I work as senior scientist and archivist at the University of Applied Arts, Vienna.

This year, I earned my doctoral degree with a specialization in Fashion Studies from the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, which awarded my work its main dissertation prize for 2023. The project I will propose is revising and completing my dissertation to be published by an academic publisher. I have already submitted book proposals to a few European and American publishers with interest in design, visual culture, fashion and dress, and Middle Eastern cultures, with an aim toward publication of the monograph by early 2026. I consider myself a good fit for your fellowship due to my expertise in fashion studies and skills in working with historical sources and material from the period 1940s-1980s in Iran.

My dissertation, "Oil Fashion and Modernization: A History of Fashion and Dress in Iran, 1941-1979," examines the Mohammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi era, focusing on development of Iranian fashion and urban dress cultures impacted by the modernizing agenda of Iranian political, economic, and creative actors. Each chapter discusses in tandem aspects of the Pahlavi modernization and fashion development, each featuring a different approach to fashion definition and theory. Regarding methodology, it benefits from comprehensive data collection and analysis, mainly from fashion and ethnographic studies, including oral histories, qualitative interviews, magazine analysis (e.g. *Zan-e Rouz* and *Ettelaat-e Banovan*), visual culture analysis, and social media observations. In addition, the Iranian Studies literature informs my work, specifically its empirical-analytical and interpretative methods of approaching historical sources. As a first treatment of Pahlavi fashion, this dissertation introduces local histories and concepts of Iranian fashion and dress, demonstrating a methodological model for interdisciplinary study of Global South fashions, in particular Near Eastern cultures.

In addition to my disciplinary expertise, I have a good knowledge of the higher education environment, its work, and collaboration cultures. During my doctoral studies, I was an adjunct lecturer (for BA and MA majors) at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, the University of Applied Arts Vienna, the Art University Linz, and the University of the Arts in Bremen. Besides pedagogical skills, this journey familiarized me with other aspects of university life, such as advising and mentorship initiatives, institute meetings and curricula commissions, organizing seminars and symposia, and office administration. I have also discovered a wide range of insights for promoting diversity and innovation in research and teaching by exchanging ideas with academic peers I met at international conferences and interdisciplinary events. These experiences made me a researcher for whom independent, high-quality research aligns with collaboration, professional and ethical considerations, and institutional commitment.

I believe that this fellowship could have a long-term impact on my professional and personal development. Participating in your fellowship in the Department for Near Eastern Studies will widen my intellectual and methodological approaches to modern Iran's history through intellectual exchange with experts and peers in Iranian studies. Furthermore, this is an excellent opportunity to start a dialogue between two fields to which I am intellectually connected—fashion studies and Iranian studies. During my doctoral studies, I was fascinated by the references to fashion themes in the works of Iranian scholars like Afasaneh Najmabadi, Michael C. Amin, and Faegheh Shirazi, though taken as a whole, fashion seems to be a deserted subject area for Iranian academia. The realization of my book project, in the framework of the Omidyar fellowship, will help develop the potential of Iranian studies literature and its unique sources toward a framework of global fashion discourse, from which Iranian scholars are often absent. Finally, the novelty of my project, in empowering Iranian women's voices through fashion history, will hopefully benefit this fellowship program in expanding its thematic and emancipatory trajectories of diversity within Iranian studies and beyond.

I greatly appreciate your time for considering my application. Attached to my application are a monograph synopsis and my CV. You should receive letters of recommendation from my PhD advisors Professor Elke Gaugele and Professor Gabriele Mentges in the near future. Of course, I will be happy to provide you with more references or further information upon request.

Yours sincerely,



Nargess Khodabakhshi, Vienna, 9/15/2023

## Monograph Synopsis

### **Oil Fashion and Modernization: History of Fashion and Dress in Iran, 1941-1979**

History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [Jetztzeit]. ... The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a by-gone mode of dress. Fashion has a nose for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is the tiger's leap into the past. Such a leap, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands.

Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* Vol.4, 1938-1940

Fashion histories are political. For the 1979 Iranian revolutionaries, fashion embodied the West's Trojan horse threatening their dream of reconstructing Iran's political system based on religious teachings, Marxist solidarity, and a constitutionalist vision. To emphasize their anti-fashion positions, they voted for inhibiting dress practices as well as representations and theoretical debates about fashion, while arguing for the Islamization of dress, including mandatory veiling. Whether due to censorship or ideological preferences, Iranian and international academics gradually lost interest in discussing the professional, educational, cultural and economic developments of fashion in pre-revolutionary Iran. Aiming at this gap, the proposed monograph historicizes fashion in Iran, exploring the impacts of modernization and the oil-based economy on fashion development during Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's reign (1941-1979). It argues that in this period, called "Oil-Fashion and Modernization," the modernization agenda, pushed by the state's policies and increasing oil revenues, contributed to comprehensive economic, social and cultural changes that boosted fashion development in Iran.

The first chapter explores narratives of dress conversion, fashion creation, and clothing culture, arguing that fashion practitioners, researchers, and consumers all simultaneously impacted the local fashion system's evolution. The second chapter elaborates on discussions of the Pahlavis that suggested militaristic, revivalist, and partly controversial approaches to "national fashion and dress," often targeting women's fashion. The next chapter discusses fashion actors' deployment of historical and visual references by relating local fashion's creation, mediation, and promotion with its 1960s-1970s international contexts. The last chapter interrogates how Iranian digital communities with different gender and generational interests remember pre-revolutionary fashion, reflecting on

historical, cultural, and ideological discussions of gendered fashion and modern bodies.

After almost half a century, *Oil Fashion and Modernization* offers a historiography of Pahlavi fashion and dress, aiming toward the project of decolonizing fashion by bringing in perspectives from the Iranian diaspora. Its significance, for both specialist and general readerships, relates to the entangling narratives of dress, fashion, and body control (1940s-1970s) with concepts of Iranian modernity, religious patriarchy, and ideological elitism from the late 19th century onward. With an intricate design, like a Persian carpet, *Oil Fashion and Modernization* represents the nature of relations between dress, culture, economy, and politics. As a metapicture, it presents a continuity of the history of Pahlavi modernization, 1960-1970 fashion development, 1980s anti-fashion movements, internet users' fashion nostalgia since the 2000s, and current *Woman-Life-Freedom* movement in Iran.

### Future Research Agenda

In addition to my book, I am currently working on *An Iranian Fashion Archive*, which emerged from my dissertation journey to find reliable fashion sources. As an ongoing, two-fold project, the *Fashion Archive* is a multimedia collection of primary and secondary sources of fashion-related material focusing on the 1940s-1980s in Iran. With a practical approach, it aims to structure the convoluted material pool of my dissertation into an accessible format, which eases searching and working with data for my future projects. The existing body of those materials includes interview recordings, 500 pages of interview transcripts, vintage magazines and books, digitized magazines, photos I took personally as well as photos, from my interview albums, internet photos, social media content, and pairs of collected objects and accessories. The following steps are planned:

- Choose a digital archive platform e.g., DSpace or Omeka that accommodates multimedia and set up needed technical infrastructure
- Create comprehensive metadata records for each item to enhance searchability and discoverability.
- Add content to the archive, categorize items into collections, and maintain a consistent organizational structure.
- Clarify legal and ethical issues in order to make parts of this archive accessible to other researchers or the public- a similar existing project with collective objectives is The Fashion and Race Database.

Next, the *Fashion Archive* will contribute to a theoretical awareness about the significance of archiving

for Iranian fashion studies that I marginally discussed in my dissertation. With this study, I will elaborate on the reasons for lack of fashion archives, its results, and the status of the existing physical and digital Iranian archives for studying fashion and dress. This study discusses the Iranian archives with examples from the elite families' private collections, the Pahlavi ethnographic museums, the 1960s-1970s royal collections, the revivalism of Iranian textiles, and fashion exhibitions. Arguing for archives fundamental to the development of fashion, this examination proposes clarifying the current situation, collaborative fashion exhibitions, and interdisciplinary curatorships and digital archiving as possible strategies to overcome the current limitations on archives in Iranian fashion studies.

Another early-stage project I am working on is *The Material Culture of Iranian Childhood*. My interest in this subject matter has emerged through my current archival work, and teaching activities on design, material culture, and childhood studies. This study examines how childhood, childcare, and material culture evolved through three periods of political and economic changes in contemporary Iran. Inspired by the existing works on *Archeology of Childhood* (i.e. Paula S. Fass, 2013; Jane Eva Baxter, 2022; Jamal J. Elias, 2018), it explores Iranian childhood concepts in the epochs of **Modernization, Industrialization, and Consumerism (the 1960s-1970s), Islamization, Self-sufficiency, and Reform (1980s-1990s), and Sanctions, Militarism and The Web 2.0 Revolution (2000s-2020)**. This study benefits from object histories, qualitative interviews, oral histories, diasporic autobiographies (i.e. Hamid Dabashi, 2023), magazines and visual culture, and social media analysis. I also plan to conduct a 6-12 month field research in Iran, and among immigrant Iranians with different ethnic, ideological and economic affiliations. Besides conference papers and articles, this research can be disseminated through an exhibition, project website or a new publication, depending on the funds or collaboration possibilities in the future.