

Exploring Iranian Identity: A Contrastive Analysis of Western Literary Perspectives versus Iranian Art of Dance*

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Abstract. The concept of identity is currently one of the most frequently examined in cultural studies. Identity refers to the identification of an individual with a certain unit based on signs that he/she consciously or subconsciously accepts as his/her own. There are two main currents in identity research: primordialism (essentialist approach) and instrumentalism (constructivist approach). In today's individualized society, there is a shift in emphasis from primordiality, i.e. from that side of identity that is given, permanent, inherited, fixed, to instrumentality, i.e. to such a basis of identity that a person chooses, creates, or selects. The research focuses on Iranian identity and its reflection in Western literature and the Iranian art of dance. Iran has an exceptional position in its region and influences global events with its policy. The question is what allowed the Persians to remain Persians for more than two and a half millennia. Persian identity is expressed mainly in spiritual power, poetry, and religion. The Persians gave the world poetry, miniatures, and carpets. From the point of view of production prosperity, all useless things. But that is how they express themselves. They gave the world what did not serve to make life easier but to make it more beautiful (Kapuściński, 2016, p. 153). The empirical part of the research is divided into two parts. In the first part of the research, the authors focus on expressing Iranian identity in their traditional and modern dance. The Persian "classic" is characterized by an expressive movement of the upper part of the body, delicate movements of the shoulders and palms, and eloquent facial expressions. The dance is very poetic and often depicts scenes from Persian poems. The second part of the research focuses on examining how Iranian identity is reflected in Western literature. The study of Iranian identity is based on Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), who is a representative of Iranian anglophone immigrants, as well as on an unintentional tetralogy of novels by Betty Mahmoudy,

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father, the author of *Lost without my Daughter* (2013). The culture of a nation is expressed in the identity of its inhabitants, and literature and the art of dance contribute to its understanding.

Keywords: Identity, Iran / Persia, Literature, the Art of Dance.

Iraniečių tapatybės tyrinėjimas: gretinamoji Vakarų literatūros perspektyvų ir iraniečių šokio meno analizė

Santrauka. Tapatybės samprata šiuo metu yra viena dažniausiai nagrinėjamų sąvokų kultūros studijose. Tapatybė reiškia asmens tapatinimą su tam tikru vienetu, remiantis ženklais, kuriuos jis / ji sąmoningai ar pasąmoningai priima kaip savo. Tapatybės tyrimuose yra dvi pagrindinės srovės: primordializmas (esencialistinis požiūris) ir instrumentalizmas (konstruktivistinis požiūris). Šiuolaikinėje individualizuotoje visuomenėje pereinama nuo primordializmo, t. y. nuo tos tapatybės pusės, kuri yra duota, nuolatinė, paveldima, fiksuota, prie instrumentiškumo, t. y. į tokį tapatybės pagrindą, kurį žmogus pasirenka, kuria arba atsirenka. Tyrime nagrinėjama iraniečių tapatybė ir jos atspindžiai Vakarų literatūroje bei iraniečių šokio mene. Iranas užima išskirtinę padėtį savo regione ir savo politika daro įtaką pasauliniams įvykiams. Kyla klausimas, kas leido persams išlikti persais daugiau nei du su puse tūkstantmečio. Persų tapatybė daugiausia išreiškiama dvasine stiprybe, poezija ir religija. Persai dovanuoja pasauliui poeziją, miniatiūras ir kilimus. Gamybos klestėjimo požiūriu visus nenaudingus dalykus. Bet tai yra tai, kuo jie save išreiškia. Jie davė pasauliui tai, kas padėjo ne palengvinti gyvenimą, o padaryti jį gražesnį (Kapuściński, 2016). Empirinė tyrimo dalis susideda iš dviejų dalių. Pirmoje tyrimo dalyje autoriai daugiausia dėmesio skiria iraniečių tapatybės išraiškai jų tradiciniame ir šiuolaikiniame šokyje. Persikajai „klasikai“ būdingas išraiškingas viršutinės kūno dalies judesys, subtilūs pečių ir delnų judesiai, iškalbinga veido išraiška. Šokis yra labai poetiškas ir dažnai vaizduoja scenas iš persų eilėraščių. Antroje tyrimo dalyje nagrinėjama, kaip iraniečių tapatybė atsispindi Vakarų literatūroje. Iraniečių tapatybės tyrimas paremtas Irano anglofonų imigrantų atstovo Azaro Nafisi kūriniais „Skaitanti Lolita Teherane“ (2003), taip pat romanų tetralogija: Betty Mahmoody „Tik su dukra“ (1987) ir „Dėl meilės vaikui“ (1992), šios autorės dukters Mahtob knyga „Mano vardas yra Mahtob“ (2013) ir Moody, buvusio Mahmoody vyro bei Mahtob tėvo, knyga „Pasiklydęs be savo dukters“ (2013). Tautos kultūra išreiškiama jos gyventojų identitetu, o literatūra ir šokio menas prisideda prie jos sampratos.

Pagrindinės sąvokos: tapatybė, Iranas / Persija, literatūra, šokio menas.

Introduction

What allowed the Persians to remain Persians for more than two and a half millennia? Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuściński also asked himself this question. He provides an answer to it in his book *Shahinshah* (2016), in which he describes important historical events that influenced the formation of contemporary Iranian identity. Kapuściński sees Persian identity mainly in spiritual power, poetry, and religion. The Persians gave the world poetry, miniatures, and carpets. From the point of view of production prosperity, all useless things. But that is where they express themselves. They gave the world what did not serve to make life easier, but to make it more beautiful (Kapuściński, 2016, p. 153). Currently, the perception of Persian art and beauty has been overshadowed by historical events, particularly those of the 1970s and 1980s. These events have left a lasting impression in people's minds. Additionally, there are tense relations between Iran and the USA, which is reflected in the way they refer to each other. Iranian politicians have used the term “The Great Satan” to criticize the US, a term first coined by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979, highlighting the US support for corruption worldwide. Conversely, the American term

“Axis of Evil” has been used to describe countries such as Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, which, according to former US President George W. Bush, were seen as supporters of terrorism (Bárdy, 2013). Iran is a fortress that rarely misses the world’s headlines. It is a key player in the Middle East, its repressive regime is associated with terror and bloodshed, and tense relations with the United States do not contribute to world peace. “The Iranians are testing the limits of American tolerance” because “anything anti-American will make them happy” (HNonline, 2022; The Conversation online, 2020) and the Iranian nuclear program is questionable mainly because of its secrecy.

Additionally, Iran’s strategic control over the Strait of Hormuz, its sole maritime passage, further impacts its regional and global significance. The narrow width of the Strait of Hormuz, measuring just 34 kilometers at its narrowest point, has played a role in preventing Iran from emerging as a major maritime power. However, this geographical feature also provides Iran with the ability to threaten to block the strait at any time. Considering that one-fifth of the world’s oil supplies are transported there, this blockade would be felt by the entire world. British journalist Tim Marshall states that while it would hurt Iran and possibly trigger a war, “it is a card that Iran can play, and the regime has invested heavily in making it its ace” (Marshall, 2021, p. 55). Despite the fact that Iran belongs to the countries with the largest reserves of oil (fourth place in the global ranking) and natural gas (the second largest reserves in the world), it is a relatively poor country. Lack of water is one of several factors behind Iran’s economic backwardness. International sanctions make access to modern technology difficult, and the flow of foreign experts willing to work in Iran is limited, as there are only a few countries interested in doing business with Iran.

The presented research focuses on two main historical periods, which are the reign of the last Shah and the theocratic regime led by Khomeini. These rulers played pivotal roles in shaping Iranian identity and exerting influence on both domestic and international levels. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah, tried to modernize the country. His father, Reza Khan, who ruled with an “iron hand”, created an impressive army and banned the wearing of burkas. By his order, since 1934, Persia has been called Iran. Moreover, the Pahlavi dynasty managed to improve Iranian culture, including dance and literature, which reflect national identity (Afary, 2024).

During and after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iranian identity underwent a profound transformation, marked by a shift in attitudes towards Persian cultural heritage. Initially, the revolution sought to synthesize Iranian identity with Islamic values, emphasizing Shia Islam as central to national identity. This led to a rejection of many aspects of pre-revolutionary culture, which were often associated with Western influence and the secular Pahlavi regime. Consequently, traditional Persian arts, literature, and practices were suppressed or reinterpreted through an Islamic lens. Over time, however, there has been a revival of interest in Persian heritage, as many Iranians began to reclaim elements of their cultural identity that had been sidelined (Asadian, 2023). This complex interplay between Islamic and Persian identities continues to shape contemporary Iranian society, reflecting both a struggle for self-definition and a desire to honour a rich cultural legacy.

Theoretical background to Iranian identity

The term identity is currently one of the most frequently used words in cultural discussions. Identity refers to the identification of an individual with a certain whole on the basis of characters that he/she consciously or subconsciously accepts as his/her own (Slatinská and Pecníková, 2017, p. 16). Identity research is broadly divided into two main schools of thought: primordialism, which adopts an essentialist approach, and instrumentalism, which embraces a constructivist perspective. In the context of modern, individualized societies, there has been a notable shift in emphasis from the primordialist view, which considers identity as innate, permanent, and inherited, towards the instrumentalist approach. The latter perspective posits that individuals actively choose, create, or select the basis of their identity, reflecting the dynamic and malleable nature of identity formation in contemporary social contexts. The research presented here delves into the intricate relationship between Iranian identity and its expressions in literature and dance. Iran holds a unique position within its region, significantly impacting global affairs through its policies. Central to understanding Iranian identity is the role of religion, which serves as a crucial factor in shaping cultural narratives and artistic expressions. Islam is a monotheistic, Abrahamic religion, founded in the 7th century by the prophet Muhammad. In Islam, everything is subject to God's will, in private and social life. Basically, Islam does not recognize the separation of religion from the state or the holy from the profane.

The division of Islam into Sunni and Shi'ite dates back to 632 AD when the prophet Muhammad died, which led to a succession dispute. Sunnis make up 85 % of the total number of Muslims in the world. Their designation comes from the word "al-Sunna", meaning tradition (Al-Sbenaty, 2015, p. 33). After Muhammad's death, they argued that the prophet's successor should be chosen according to Arab tribal traditions. Sunnis identify themselves as orthodox adherents of Islam, emphasizing the broader principles and teachings of the faith. On the other hand, Shi'ite Islam derives its name from "Shi'at Ali" meaning the party or followers of Ali. Ali, the nephew of Muhammad, and his sons Hassan and Hussein were denied the opportunity to lead Islam, despite their bloodline connection and rightful claim. Shi'ites reject the power of the caliphs and also cannot tolerate any secular power. Iran represents a unique country where society believes and follows the religious leaders – imams. The first imam was Ali, the second and third were his sons. All twelve imams died a violent death. Shi'ites believe that the last imam, Muhammad, did not perish but disappeared into a cave. He is the Hidden Imam, the Expected One, who will appear at the appropriate time. For the Shi'ites, the words of the mullahs, the clerics, are the purest truth. The imam is the object of a cult and is thus glorified, while the monarch is at most tolerated. For Iranians, religion is part of their daily life and forms an integral part of their identity.

Religious identity often encompasses a comprehensive way of life. Embracing Islam means being part of an Islamic civilization where Sharia guides notions of appropriateness, morality, and what is considered right or wrong. A sacred Islamic law system Sharia serves as the foundation for the religious, cultural, social, and particularly political aspects

of Muslims' lives. Its key sources are the Qur'an and the Sunnah, that is, a collection of Muhammad's sayings and deeds. Muslims strongly identify with their religion, merging their identity with their faith. An individual's religious identity should involve understanding how to practice their beliefs, honouring their religious community, and respecting other faiths (Pondelíková, 2022, p. 25). However, disagreements often arise when it comes to respecting other religions. Islam, in particular, has faced criticism in this regard and has been labelled as an intolerant religion. Relying on the opinions imposed by the media, politicians, and activists is insufficient.

Islam is more than just a religious belief; it encompasses an entire civilization with its distinctive legal and political framework. The central idea of the Islamic belief system is an uncompromising monotheism called *tawhid* (Partridge, 2006, p. 372), the uniqueness of God. The basic paradigm of Islam is a firm order in the life of a Muslim. A true Muslim must keep the five pillars of faith, namely the profession of faith, the prayer, the prescribed almsgiving, fasting in the month of Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca.

To truly grasp Islam, it is essential to acquire knowledge and understanding of its principles. In the Western world, Western laws prevail, while some Muslim countries, such as Iran, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia adhere to Sharia. From an Orientalist perspective, these two civilizational units (Huntington, 2007) are founded on distinct traditions and values (Said, 2003), making the imposition of a foreign legal system unjustifiable. However, this does not imply that the East and West should not practice tolerance and mutual respect towards one another. The recognition of diverse legal and cultural systems should encourage a commitment to dialogue and understanding, allowing for a more peaceful global society. When it comes to the arts, particularly dance, Islamic teachings often reflect a cautious stance. Many scholars argue that dance can be permissible under specific conditions, particularly when it does not lead to illicit behaviour or violate the principles of modesty. For instance, Jaafarite Shi'ite *marjas* have issued fatwas stating that while women may dance among themselves, it is generally prohibited for them to dance in front of men who are not their *mahrams* (close relatives) due to concerns about *fitnah* (temptation) and the potential for moral decay. Dr. Su'ad Salih (2024), a professor of Islamic jurisprudence, notes that dancing can be acceptable when it occurs in private settings, such as between a husband and wife, where it serves to strengthen their relationship.

Research methodology for the study of Iranian identity in Western literature and Iranian dance

In our investigation, we applied qualitative research principles. Qualitative research gathers and analyses non-numerical data to create a comprehensive picture of studied phenomena. This kind of research allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of the phenomenon being examined, as it allows for a more comprehensive and holistic view of the subject as presented in Gough (2020). To enhance the credibility and validity of the findings, we used multiple sources of data, methods, or perspectives. The methodology we used in investigations on the reflection of

Iranian identity in literature and the art of dance varied depending on the specific research question, objectives, and data collection techniques. However, we particularly used the following research methods:

- **Close reading and textual analysis** involved a detailed and careful analysis of the literary texts. We closely examined the language, imagery, symbols, and narrative structure used by authors to represent Iranian identity. This method helped to identify key themes, characterizations, and the underlying messages conveyed in the literature.
- **Historical contextualization** was crucial in analyzing literature. We explored the social, political, and cultural events that shaped the literary works and influenced their portrayal of Iranian identity. Historical contextualization provided insights into how writers responded to the prevailing circumstances of their time.
- **Content analysis** involved systematically coding and categorizing the content of literary texts to identify patterns and trends related to Iranian identity. This method was particularly useful for large-scale studies involving a significant number of texts.
- **Performance analysis** involved the analysis of dance performances to identify themes, patterns, and meanings. Performance analysis involved the use of video recordings, written documentation, and expert analysis to identify and interpret cultural and artistic elements of the dance.
- Finally, we adopted **interdisciplinary approaches**, drawing insights from fields like cultural studies, postcolonial studies, sociology, or anthropology to enrich the analysis of Iranian identity in literature and the art of dance.

Triangulation, which involves confirming findings through different sources or methods, ensured that interpretations were well-founded and not solely reliant on a single source.

The first part of the research focuses on the expression of Iranian identity in traditional and modern dance. Persian traditional dances are distinguished by their expressive upper body movements, graceful shoulder and hand gestures, and emotive facial expressions. These dances often possess a poetic quality, vividly portraying scenes from classic Persian literature. In recent years, the landscape of dance in Iran has undergone a significant transformation with the emergence of contemporary and modern styles. These new forms have drawn inspiration from various influences, including Western dance traditions and popular culture. Young Iranians, in particular, have enthusiastically adopted these contemporary styles as a means to connect with the global community while simultaneously honouring and preserving their rich cultural heritage.

The second part of the research focuses on examining how Iranian identity is reflected in Western literature. The study is based on Iranian-American author Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) as well as on an unintentional tetralogy of novels by three authors, Betty Mahmoody, whose *Not without my Daughter* (1987), is noted as the most popular book about Iran published in the U.S. (Milani, 2008), along with her follow-up *For the Love of a Child* (1992); her daughter Mahtob, the author of the novel *My Name is Mahtob* (2013); and Moody, Mahmoody's ex-husband and Mahtob's father, the author

of *Lost without my Daughter* (2013). The culture of a nation is expressed in the identity of its inhabitants, and literature and the art of dance contribute to its understanding.

As qualitative research follows an inductive approach, meaning that theories and concepts emerge from the data rather than being predetermined, the authors raised one research question and formulated one hypothesis:

Research question 1: *How do Western literary perspectives and the Iranian art of dance reflect Iranian identity?*

Hypothesis (H1): *While the Persian dance reflects the era and portrays the Iranian identity in a real image, Western literary works try to demonize the Iranian culture and its identity.*

This study employs a multifaceted qualitative research methodology to investigate the reflection of Iranian identity in both Western literature and the art of dance. Through close reading, historical contextualization, content analysis, and performance analysis, we explored how Iranian identity is portrayed in diverse mediums, from literary texts to traditional and modern dance performances. By incorporating interdisciplinary approaches and ensuring the credibility of findings through triangulation, we were able to obtain a nuanced understanding of this complex subject. The research aims to shed light on how both dance and literature serve as powerful vehicles for cultural expression, providing insights into the evolving perceptions of Iranian identity across time and space.

A Comparative analysis of Western literary perspectives on the Iranian identity versus the Iranian art of dance

Within the realm of Iranian studies, music and dance remain mostly outside the purview of larger social and political discussions of the region (Lucas, 2006). Based on the study and analysis of literary sources (Ameri, 2006; Badiei, 2020; Daryaei, 2012; Gholami, 2016; Shay, 1999; 2023), we searched for historical connections and understanding of the development of dance art and its perception in society.

The art of dance has long been an integral part of Iranian culture, reflecting the country's rich history, diverse traditions, and complex identity. Through the centuries, dance has served as a means of expression, storytelling, and celebration, allowing Iranians to connect with their roots and showcase their unique cultural heritage. Today, Iranian dance continues to evolve and adapt, reflecting the changing realities of modern society and the ongoing search for identity in a globalized world. Iranian identity is a complex and multifaceted concept that has been shaped by centuries of history, culture, and religion. One of the ways in which Iranian identity is expressed is through the art of dance. Dance has played an important role in Iranian culture for thousands of years, and it continues to be an important part of the country's cultural heritage. The history of dance in Iran can be traced back to ancient times, with evidence of dance performances dating back to the Achaemenid Empire (550-330 BCE). Over the centuries, dance has evolved and taken on

different forms, influenced by various cultural and religious traditions, including Zoroastrianism, Islam, and Sufism. The development of Iranian dance art has a rich and complex history, deeply intertwined with cultural, religious, and societal factors. To understand its evolution and perception in society, particularly from a gender perspective, we need to delve into different historical periods.

Iranian identity through the lens of dance across historical periods

(1) Pre-Islamic Era

Before the advent of Islam in the 7th century, ancient Persia had a vibrant tradition of dance as a form of artistic expression, entertainment, and religious rituals. Various sculptures, paintings, and historical records indicate that dance played a significant role in Persian courtly life and religious ceremonies. Regarding gender perception, dance was not segregated by gender in ancient Persia. Men and women participated in dance performances, and it was not considered taboo for women to dance in public settings. Dance was a prominent feature in the Persian royal court, often performed during banquets and celebrations, showcasing artistic talent and social cohesion (Berli, 2023). Unlike many contemporary societies, ancient Persia did not strictly segregate dance by gender, allowing both men and women to participate freely in performances (Prakoso et al., 2024). This inclusivity indicates a broader cultural acceptance of gender roles, where women could engage in public life without the constraints seen in later Islamic periods. While the pre-Islamic era showcased a more egalitarian approach to gender in the arts, the subsequent arrival of Islam introduced more rigid gender roles, altering the landscape of cultural expressions, including dance.

(2) Islamic Golden Age

With the spread of Islam in the 7th century, attitudes towards dance underwent a transformation. While Islamic teachings did not explicitly ban dance, interpretations of the religion in different regions led to varying degrees of acceptance or disapproval of dance as an art form. Generally, conservative Islamic societies frowned upon public dance performances, especially if they involved men and women dancing together. During the Islamic era, gender segregation became more prevalent, and this also affected dance practices. The Islamic Golden Age, spanning from the 8th to the 14th century, was a period of significant cultural and intellectual flourishing. However, conservative Islamic societies during this era increasingly frowned upon public dance performances, particularly those involving mixed-gender participation. This shift was closely tied to the growing emphasis on gender segregation within Islamic culture. The rise of conservative interpretations of Islam led to stricter gender roles, which discouraged public displays of mixed-gender interactions, including dance (Fadel and Al-Hendy, 2024). While the Islamic Golden Age was marked by advancements in various fields, the arts, particularly dance, faced restrictions as societal norms evolved towards greater conservatism (Nurtanti and Wulandari, 2023). The peak of the Abbasid dynasty saw a flourishing of culture and science, yet this was also the time when gender segregation became more pronounced, influencing artistic expressions

like dance. The decline of the Abbasid dynasty and the rise of more conservative factions contributed to the suppression of mixed-gender performances, reflecting broader societal changes (Nurtanti and Wulandari, 2023). Despite these restrictions, the Islamic Golden Age remains a testament to a time when cultural expressions were vibrant and diverse, albeit increasingly constrained by evolving social norms.

(3) Safavid Dynasty (16th–18th centuries)

The Safavid period is considered a golden age for Iranian dance and the arts. Rulers like Shah Abbas I were patrons of the arts and dance and experienced a revival in the courts and public gatherings. Dance became more structured, and specific dance forms and styles were developed. Gender roles were still heavily enforced, and women's participation in public dance remained limited. Women's dance performances were often segregated and performed for a female audience, and male dancers were mostly preferred in the public sphere. To provide an overview of the types of dances in this era would require extensive study. Therefore, we will mention only the characteristic dances as mentioned in historical sources. Jean Chardin, a French traveller described Courtly Dances (*Raqs-e Darbari*) performed in royal courts. They often reflected the grandeur of the Safavid dynasty, included intricate movements, and were accompanied by music, showcasing the artistic sophistication of the time (Chardin, 1927). Local communities performed Folk Dances. They were engaged in traditional dances that celebrated agricultural cycles and festivals, fostering a sense of identity and continuity within Iranian culture (Daniel and Mahdi, 2006). Certain dances were performed during religious ceremonies (Religious Dances), particularly in Shiite contexts, emphasizing the spiritual dimensions of dance in Safavid society (Stewart, 1996). Floor (2008) explores the role of entertainers and *motrebs*, providing insight into their performances and the societal contexts of dance in the Safavid era. *Raqs-e Motrebi* (Entertainers' Dance) was a lively and rhythmic dance performed by professional entertainers (*motrebs*), often at private gatherings and public festivities. These dances were sensual and energetic, with a focus on improvisation and rhythmic coordination. While the Safavid period is often celebrated for its artistic achievements, it is essential to recognize that women's roles in dance were complex and sometimes constrained by the socio-political dynamics of the time. Thus, while it was a golden age, it also had limitations. The Safavid era's artistic achievements were not without challenges, as the interplay of cultural expression and political dynamics often influenced the evolution of dance forms. Nonetheless, this period remains a pivotal chapter in the history of Iranian arts.

(4) Qajar Dynasty (18th–20th centuries)

During the Qajar era, traditional dance forms continued to be practised in rural areas, but there was a decline in courtly support for the arts. The conservative nature of society persisted, and women's participation in public dance remained restricted. The Qajar Dynasty (1789–1925) was a pivotal period in Iran's cultural history, marked by significant transformations in dance and performance. Dance during this era reflected broader social and political changes, intertwining with gender dynamics and cultural identity. Dance served as a medium for expressing national identity and cultural pride amidst Western

influences and modernization efforts (Najmabadi, 2005). According to McElrone (2005), traditional forms of dance, such as the Ghazal, were often performed at royal courts, symbolizing both power and cultural heritage. The Qajar period saw a complex interplay between gender and performance; women began to emerge in public spaces, challenging traditional norms. Dance was sometimes a site of resistance against patriarchal structures, allowing women to assert their presence in a male-dominated society (Najmabadi, 2005). The establishment of the Qajar dynasty under Aqa Mohammad Khan set the stage for cultural expressions, including dance, as a reflection of political power and social order (Kamrava, 1992). While dance flourished, it also faced restrictions, particularly as the dynasty progressed and Westernization intensified, leading to a nuanced legacy of cultural expression that continues to influence Iranian identity today.

(5) Modern Era (20th century onwards)

In the 20th century, particularly after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, dance faced significant challenges due to the stricter interpretation of Islamic principles. Mohammadi (2007) provides a detailed analysis of imposed restrictions on artistic expression and public performances of dance. More authors reflected on the situation after the revolution, e.g. Zarifi (2012) examines the underground dance scene that developed in Iran after 1979. Zarifi discusses how dance became a means of cultural survival for Iranians, particularly women, who sought to preserve traditional Persian dance forms while adapting to the restrictive cultural environment. Dance was considered by some conservative groups to be against Islamic values, and this further limited its development and perception in society.

a) Pahlavi Era (1925–1979)

During the Pahlavi era, especially under Reza Shah (1925–1941) and later his son Mohammad Reza Shah (1941–1979), efforts were made to modernize Iran and promote Western influence. Dance was encouraged, and ballet, in particular, gained popularity. As mentioned in Tazmini (2021), the government aimed to create a more secular and cosmopolitan society by adopting elements of Western culture. This had an impact on the performing arts, including dance. Reza Shah's wife, Queen Soraya Esfandiari Bakhtiari, was particularly interested in ballet and actively promoted it. She established the Iranian National Ballet Company in 1948, which brought Western dance styles and techniques to Iran. Iranian ballet dancers trained both in Iran and abroad, and ballet performances became a regular part of the cultural scene in Tehran. De Mille (2001) describes reflections on the global spread of ballet and its influence on Iranian dancers, particularly women, in the 20th century. In addition to ballet, folk dances from different regions of Iran were also performed and promoted. Folkloric dances, such as the Kurdish dance “Halparke” and the Persian dance “Khordadian”, were often showcased in cultural events and festivals. The Pahlavi government's encouragement of dance and cultural expression, particularly those influenced by Western styles, was met with mixed reactions. Some conservative religious groups and clerics expressed concerns about the perceived influence of Western culture and the potential erosion of traditional values. However, traditional Iranian dances still faced some societal resistance due to their perceived association with the pre-Islamic past. Gender segregation remained an important aspect of public performances (Shay, 2008).

b) Islamic Revolution and Post-Revolutionary Period

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini brought significant changes to Iranian society, including its approach to dance and cultural expression. The revolution aimed to establish an Islamic republic based on the principles of Shia Islam. Under Ayatollah Khomeini's rule, the government implemented strict regulations on social behaviour and cultural activities. Dance, particularly in public spaces, was heavily restricted. The newly formed Islamic Republic considered certain forms of dance as inappropriate or immoral. The government discouraged Western-influenced dance styles and focused more on religious and traditional forms of expression. Traditional Persian dances, which have a long history in Iranian culture, were promoted and performed within the framework of Islamic principles. These dances included the classical Persian dance forms like "Persian Court Dance" (Pishdaramad) and "Persian Classical Dance" (Raks-e Jame'i), which were rooted in the rich cultural heritage of Iran. The new Islamic Republic imposed strict laws on public performances, particularly concerning women. Female dance performances in public spaces were banned, and women were forbidden from performing for mixed-gender audiences. Many dancers went into exile, and dance was forced underground, with performances often taking place in private homes or in exile communities. Shay (2002) explores how women's dance was suppressed after the revolution and how female performers navigated these restrictions by moving their performances into private or international spaces. Despite the restrictions, an underground dance scene emerged in Iran, where women practised and performed in private gatherings. In exile, many Iranian dancers, such as Mariam Gaibova and Sima Bina, continued to perform and teach Persian dance, helping to preserve the tradition internationally. Farhi (1990) examines the challenges and resilience of Iranian women dancers after the revolution, particularly in exile communities, where they continued to express their cultural identity through dance.

c) Contemporary Era

In recent years, there have been efforts to revive and preserve traditional Iranian dance forms, as well as to create new contemporary dance styles that comply with Islamic principles and cultural sensitivities. However, gender roles and perceptions in Iranian society continue to impact dance art. Women's participation in public performances may still face restrictions, and traditional gender norms are prevalent. An important feature of Iranian dance is its connection with poetry and literature. Persian poetry, with its rich imagery, metaphors, and symbolism, had a great influence on Iranian dance, providing dancers with plenty of sources of inspiration and creative expression. Many Iranian dances are based on poems and stories with movements and gestures that reflect the themes and emotions of the poetry. Iranian dance also reflects the religious and spiritual traditions of the country. For example, Sufi dance, also known as whirling dervish dance, is a form of mystical dance that originates in Iran and is associated with the Sufi tradition of Islam. The dance involves spinning in circles, with dancers often wearing long white robes and hats, symbolizing their journey to spiritual enlightenment. Nowadays, in the Iranian diaspora, especially in Europe and North America, contemporary dance forms emerged, blending Persian classical styles with modern and experimental techniques. Female dancers in exile

often used dance as a form of political and cultural expression, addressing themes such as identity, freedom, and memory. Karami (2013) discusses how Iranian women in exile use dance to explore themes of identity, freedom, and cultural heritage in the post-revolutionary context. One of the most notable changes has been the emergence of contemporary and modern dance styles that draw on a wide range of influences, including Western dance and popular culture. These new styles have been adopted by younger generations of Iranians who see them as a way to connect with the global community while preserving their cultural heritage. Contemporary dance has also emerged as an important form of artistic expression in Iran. It draws from a number of influences, including Western dance forms and experimental choreography, while also incorporating traditional Iranian elements. However, the development of Iranian dance was not without controversy. Some traditionalists criticized the new styles, seeing them as a deflection from the country's cultural roots and a threat to traditional values. Others see the evolution of Iranian dance as a positive development that reflects the country's continued cultural and artistic vitality. Dance is one of the art forms that remains alive despite political and social pressures (Shaditalab, 2005). In recent years, especially with the rise of social media, Iranian women have used dance as a form of protest against restrictions. Videos of women dancing in public spaces and posting them online have become a form of resistance to the conservative laws that prohibit such acts. This form of dance is often spontaneous, reflecting a desire for personal and social freedom. Naficy (2016) explores the impact of media and globalization on Iranian culture, highlighting how women use social media platforms to challenge restrictions on dance and other forms of public expression.

The reflection of Iranian identity in the works of Western writers

Understanding human beings and the communities they inhabit depends on identity. It serves as a crucial factor in comprehending the complex process of societal transformation encompassing economic, political, and social dimensions. Over time, Iranian society has undergone diverse shifts, transitioning from a "Westernized" state to a theocratic one, which has significantly shaped the national Iranian identity. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi became the Shah of Iran in September 1941 and ruled until the Iranian Revolution in 1979. He implemented a series of modernization and Westernization policies known as the White Revolution. During his reign, Iran experienced significant economic growth, but also increased social inequality, and political repression. Shah believed that when he owned oil, he would build another America in a single generation (Kapuściński, 2016, p. 41). But he did not. He allowed young people to study abroad, thus eliminating the presence of intelligentsia in the country. He wanted to build a "great civilization" without his own intelligence. Big money allowed the Shah to create a new social class, the so-called "oil bourgeoisie". According to Kapuściński (2016), these people led a Western way of life, but ordinary Iranians saw the Shah's construction of a "great civilization" as a great injustice and theft.

Shah's great ambitions and desire to show his strength and superiority made him an authoritarian leader. Kapuściński states that these features are typically Iranian. One Iranian will not give way to another, each of them is convinced of their own superiority, they want to be the first and most important, and want to promote exclusively themselves (Ibid., p. 44). They intrigue and maneuver to take the first place. Mahmoody also draws attention to these qualities and confirms that they "actually enjoy intrigue" (Mahmoody, 1989, p. 218), "find every possible way to complicate life" (Ibid., p. 120) and cannot be trusted because there is a "vast difference between Iranian words and Iranian deeds" (Ibid., p. 350). She also writes about superiority and inferiority, which is also reflected in the family. Historically, gender roles have often been structured in a way that positions women in a subordinate position to men, influenced by religious beliefs and legal frameworks. When she became Moody's wife, she also became his "property" and he could do whatever he wanted with her. At the same time, she was obliged to do everything he told her. Superiority and oriental, pride-emphasized grandeur form the basic elements of Iranian identity (Entman and Rojecki, 2000; Kapuściński, 2016, Ahmady; 2023).

Shah's "great civilization" was an attempt to impose a Western way of life on a society tied to completely different traditions and values. Iranians have an extraordinary ability to preserve their independence, culture, language, individuality, and spiritual strength. And that is why they were able to overthrow the Shah. The despot may have left, but no dictatorship ended with his departure. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini took power. The fight with the Shah was led by Khomeini and the mullahs, but above all by the intelligentsia: "When we all helped create this madhouse together, we never imagined that we would have an Islamic Republic like this" (Nafisi, 2011, p. 115–116).

The regime in the country has changed and with it the rules in society. Women suddenly had to walk veiled. Nafisi states that "the unveiling of women mandated by Reza Shah in 1936 had been a controversial symbol of modernization, a powerful sign of the reduction of the clergy's power. It was important for the ruling clerics to reassert that power" (Nafisi, 2011, p. 126). Life in Iran under the rule of the mullahs was anti-American and anti-Western. Iran has found itself captured by the myth of America. "America had become both the land of Satan and Paradise Lost" (Ibid, p. 120). Reading American books such as *The Great Gatsby* or *Lolita* was strictly forbidden because they were considered "morally harmful" (Ibid., p. 122). While Shah's reign was marked by a close alliance with the United States and the West, which led to economic and military support for Iran, Khomeini's governing is associated with shouting "Marg bar Amrika!" – "Death to America!" This expression is associated with the burning of the American flag, or as Betty and Mahtob Mahmoody also mention by stepping on it. In addition, in the film *Argo* (2012), which captures the American hostage drama during the Iranian Revolution, a crowd shouting these words is visible. Only Moody denies that something like this happened: "Of course, this never happened" (Mahmoody, 2013, p. 127). During the Khomeini regime, students were not allowed to think freely. They were told what to think, and nothing else was tolerated (Mahmoody, 2014, p. 56). Betty Mahmoody wonders "why so many Iranians are meek followers of authority" [...] "blindly obeying those of superior status" [...] and "A

school system such as this could create an entire nation that would obey, unquestionably, even to death, an ayatollah who served as the intelligence and conscience of the land. If it could do all that, I wonder, what would it do to one small five-year-old girl?" (Mahmoody, 1989, p. 147). The mullahs exerted a significant influence on the societal values in Iran. They implemented strict measures such as the prohibition of alcohol consumption, limitations on displays of affection between genders, restrictions on ballet and dancing, and the prohibition of women singing "because a woman's voice, like her hair, was sexually provocative and should be kept hidden" (Nafisi, 2011, p. 122). Nafisi states that their life was ruled by a "strange absurdity". One student who returned from the United States had her nails cut to the point of bleeding, another student was summoned to the disciplinary committee because her eyelashes were too long, or they accused the girls of eating apples too seductively (Ibid., p. 72). Mahmoody recalls seeing many photographs from pre-revolutionary Iran of women with modern hairstyles and short skirts. She watched in amazement how this country changed after Ayatollah Khomeini came to power (Mahmoody, 1992, p. 15–16). Women had the obligation to be appropriately covered, because "veiling is a woman's protection" (Nafisi, 2011, p. 38). A Man's face without a beard and moustache was considered to imitate the West. Men who wore a tie were considered "U.S. lackeys" (Ibid., p. 38). Moody, who after the revolution was ordered to wear a beard and forbidden to wear a suit, also writes about these rules, which he refused. Subsequently, he was dismissed from his job, but thanks to his family's social status, he was accepted back. Nafisi also rebelled against the regime claiming, "when there is nothing left, you fight the regime with lipstick, for example" (Válková, 2017). She mentions that in Western countries she sometimes forgets her makeup, but that would not happen to her in Iran.

Iranian identity is significantly shaped by its adherence to the Shi'ite form of Islam, its preference for theocratic rule in society, and the cohesion of a nation capable of standing up to its sovereignty (Ferrara, 2024; Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016). The culture of a nation is expressed in the identity of its inhabitants, and art, literature, and dance contribute to its understanding.

Conclusion

During the Pahlavi era ("Westernized" Iran) and the time of Ayatollah Khomeini's theocratic regime in Iran, there were significant differences in the approach to dance and cultural expression. While there have been some developments and changes over the years, dance and artistic expression in Iran are still affected by conservative social norms and government policies, therefore gender perception and restrictions on dance today are reflected in various restrictions. Gender segregation remains a prominent aspect of public life in Iran, including in the arts and cultural activities (Meftahi, 2016a; 2016b). This means that dance performances, like other public events, are often gender-segregated, with separate areas or times for men and women. Women continue to face more significant restrictions on their participation in dance and artistic performances. Public dance performances involving women are limited and must adhere to strict Islamic guidelines, often requiring

conservative dress and avoiding any perceived “sensual” or “provocative” movements. Despite the restrictions, a small underground and private dance scene continues to exist in Iran. This scene operates discreetly to avoid potential repercussions from the authorities. It often involves contemporary dance styles and provides a space for artists to express themselves more freely. The Iranian government maintains strict censorship over artistic expression, including dance. Performances must align with Islamic principles and avoid content that could be deemed contrary to the regime’s values. This censorship can limit artistic creativity and self-expression. Traditional Iranian dance forms are still performed during cultural and religious events, such as Nowruz (the Persian New Year) celebrations and weddings. These performances often occur in more private settings and adhere to gender-segregated norms. Societal norms and perceptions of gender roles in Iran influence the public’s acceptance and appreciation of dance art. As mentioned in Zavarei (2022), conservative views on modesty and gender segregation can impact how dance is perceived, with some segments of the population viewing it as inappropriate or incompatible with Islamic values. The Iranian government does provide some support for traditional arts and cultural heritage, including dance. Official events and festivals may feature traditional dance performances, often with a focus on promoting Iranian identity and heritage. It is essential to recognize that the situation in Iran is not monolithic, and perspectives on dance and gender roles can vary among different segments of society. While conservative views persist, there are also progressive and artistic communities advocating for more liberal interpretations of cultural expression and gender roles.

It is important to note that Iran is a diverse country, and various dance forms and styles exist within different regions and ethnic groups. Therefore, the impact of political changes on dance varied across the country and among different communities. The art of dance has played a significant role in shaping and reflecting the complex and diverse identity of Iran throughout its history. From its traditional regional dances to its more modern and contemporary styles, Iranian dance has provided a means of creative expression, storytelling, and celebration, allowing Iranians to connect with their roots and express their unique cultural heritage. Today, Iranian dance continues to evolve, reflecting the changing realities of modern society and the ongoing search for identity in a globalized world. From classical Persian dance to regional folk dances and contemporary dance, Iranian dance reflects the country’s cultural heritage, artistic sophistication, and love of beauty.

The dances serve as vivid reflections of their respective eras, customs, and traditions. In contrast, Betty Mahmoody adopts the role of an omniscient observer, interpreting Iranian culture through an Orientalist lens, which is a Western perspective that often distorts and demonizes the culture. This approach supports our hypothesis **(H1)** regarding the intricate dynamics of cultural representation and identity. The novel *Not without my Daughter* tells the true story of an Iranian extremist who forced his wife and daughter to live in Iran. The author’s experience with her life in Iran is influenced by her involuntary stay there. She evaluates everyone and everything through the prism of Orientalism: “Many of the couples in this room were cousins married to cousins. The result seemed apparent in some of the children.” (Mahmoody, 1989, p. 28). The households were chaotic, non-hygienic with

“the saggy mattresses, musty blankets, and prickly pillows” (Ibid., p. 29). Leftovers were lying on the ground “inviting the cockroaches to breakfast” (Ibid., p. 33). Moreover, no one spoke English. No one paid any attention to Mahtob and her. During that time, the media was anti-Iranian and anti-Muslim oriented. As expressed by Miles (1996) there could not have been a better time to publish a story about an Iranian extremist forcing his wife and daughter to live in Iran, at a time when the media was full of anti-Iranian, anti-Muslim propaganda and the emergence of new Muslim communities in the United States grew stronger and otherness was ubiquitous. Once Moody was disappointed with his homeland and in anger stated that: “The only thing that could ever straighten out this screwed-up country is an atomic bomb! Wipe it off the map and start over” (Ibid., p. 340). The book not only demonized Iranian society, culture, and religion but also idealized the American way of life through the huge contrasts between Mahmoody’s and Moody’s descriptions. The balance between these two is provided by Mahtob. The story of one person, although real, may be biased, but more importantly, it can have a devastating effect on the perception of identity. Mugerle (2013) described Mahmoody’s story as anything but objective. Since this is a story retold only from the author’s perspective, the critic considers this story to be misleading. Both the novel and its film adaptation missed a unique opportunity to foster an understanding of a different culture, its identity and soften the fear of otherness. While Iranian identity is a complex and multifaceted concept, the art of dance and literature can provide a powerful and expressive medium through which this identity can be explored and celebrated.

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