

TEHRAN JOURNAL

# Designer's Rainbow Brightens Iranian Women's Look



Abbas Kossari for The New York Times

Simin Ghodstinat, left, helped one of her customers try on one of her original designs in the showroom in her home in Tehran.

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TEHRAN — For many of the chic and well-to-do here in the capital of [Iran](#), a country where women are required by law to conceal the shapes of their bodies, Simin Ghodstinat's designs provide a sort of middle way. Her clothes are elegant, luxurious and expensive — all while staying well within the religious authorities' strictly enforced boundaries of propriety.

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Ms. Ghodstinat's outfits are long and enveloping. They are usually made of several pieces of hand-woven and hand-dyed Indian fabrics, all in lively colors and based on traditional Persian,

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Kurdish, Afghan or Indian designs. And they have become something of a phenomenon among Tehran's small minority of wealthy women.

"They are so comfortable and convenient for Iran," said Mojdeh Abedi, a 36-year-old lawyer in the city. "I can wear them outside, I can wear them in the evening and even overseas."

Another regular customer, Vida Ansari, 73, who said she often shopped at Armani stores or American brand-name stores, said she received compliments overseas for the things she bought from Ms. Ghodstinat. "People ask me even in New York and Washington where I have

bought my clothes when I wear them," Mrs. Ansari said.

Women's clothing has been a battlefield since the Islamic revolution in 1979, when the religious authorities in the government first required women to wear long, loose coats and cover their hair. A police corps was created to enforce the new moral codes. Dark, drab colors were made mandatory. And the religious police have regularly cracked down on women who defy the strictures that govern appearance.

The latest crackdown started this summer with the arrest of hundreds of women. But it seems to have had little effect. Although there are women who wear the head-to-toe chador on the street, there are still many who wear short coats or small head scarves that show some of their hair.

The police department announced last month that it would arrest women who wore long boots over their pants or hats instead of head scarves. But many women defy the rules, especially the one about long boots. If a woman refuses to wear the head scarf, she can be jailed for 10 days to two months, according to the country's Islamic Penal Code.

After the election of a reformist president, [Mohammad Khatami](#), in 1997, limits on color became less strict for a time, and fashion shows were permitted. Critics said the dark colors had caused depression among women and children. Gradually, the authorities allowed schoolchildren to wear colorful head scarves and coats instead of dark colors.

"The existence of such designers shows that society is developing, and that includes

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fashion and clothing as well," said Shabnam Rahmati, a reporter who has covered fashion for the daily Shargh, which was shut down by the government. "They emerged under the presidency of Mr. Khatami when more freedom was granted on other levels, too."

Ms. Ghodstinat's clothes, however, leave no room for criticism by the moral police.

"These clothes give a queenish posture because they are long, have a lot of textile and are traditional," she said at her home in northern Tehran. She uses part of her large living room to exhibit the outfits, and she also sells them in a boutique in Dubai.

Ms. Ghodstinat, 57, said her designs were the result of her own "process of growth." After living in Europe and America between the ages of 13 and 34, she returned to Iran.

"I was Westernized, but I was never comfortable — it did not feel right," she said. "Most designers constantly say how they want to make women look sexy. I don't want women to be viewed as objects."

While adhering to the religious guidelines, her clothes differ from those shown at several government-endorsed fashion shows staged recently to encourage women to wear black head-to-toe chadors or dark, shapeless coats.

Ms. Ghodstinat studied theater in graduate school and worked as a professor of art for two years when she returned to Iran in the 1980s. She traced her interest in fashion to a visit she made to India eight years ago.

"If you are in love with color and textile, you fall in love with these Indian fabrics and get inspired to do something with them," she said. "The colors in the clothes remind me of the colors onstage."

Ms. Ghodstinat's clothing line is called Tradition, because, she said, she copies classical Middle Eastern and South Asian designs and updates them. Her Afghan-style skirts are ankle-length, unlike the traditional Afghan skirts that sweep the floor. And her Kurdish-style dresses have long sleeves that can be wrapped around the waist like a belt.

Her popular coats, based on the coats men wore in Iran during the Qajar period 100 years ago, have bell-shaped sleeves, are pinned at the waist and come in short lengths to wear over a longer skirt, or in longer lengths.

Some of her clothes are made in Iran and some in India. She uses Indian cotton and silk and, in a departure from the standards of Iran's Islamic dress code, vibrant colors.

Her unusual color combinations, like bright green with brown, or pink and a touch of silver, have attracted women who are tired of wearing the traditional dark, restrained

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palette.

"This is the first time I am buying a colorful coat instead of a black one," said Soheila Shokri, 45, who bought a yellow coat with black and brown prints.

Despite their high cost, Ms. Ghodstinat's outfits keep selling — around 500 a year, she said. Prices range from \$200 to \$900. Her winter coats start at \$400, while an ordinary one can be found at a market for about \$40.

Each coat takes almost 20 feet of fabric. She combines at least five different prints for each coat, and the coats are reversible.

"In the past, people were more careful when they designed clothes — they weren't thinking of commercial designs," said Ms. Ghodstinat, who also said that the Islamic Republic's rules on women's clothing had no influence on her clothes.

"I believe you don't have to be covered head to toe to look decent," she said, adding that there was another factor far more important than having clothes that merely cover up a woman's body.

"These clothes give a kind of body language which is very dignified," she said.

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