

The Wearable Homeland: Kurdish Dress, Diaspora and Memory

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Abstract

This dissertation explores how Kurdish women in the Canadian diaspora engage with traditional dress as a site of memory, identity, and belonging. While historically worn in daily life, Kurdish dress is now largely reserved for special events and celebrations in the diaspora, where it acts as a visible marker of cultural continuity. Drawing on fashion and diaspora studies, the research situates Kurdish dress within frameworks of identity as both 'being' and 'becoming' (Hall, 1990), home as lived locality (Brah, 1996), hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), and postmemory (Hirsch, 2008).

Using a qualitative, multi-method approach, the study combines oral history interviews with three Kurdish women, wardrobe studies, photo-elicitation, and autoethnography. These methods reveal how garments and jewellery function as embodied archives, carrying intergenerational stories of migration, resilience, and nostalgia.

The findings show that Kurdish dress operates as a wearable homeland, allowing women to negotiate identity, preserve memory, and sustain cultural belonging across displacement. This study contributes to the limited scholarship on Kurdish dress by documenting an under-researched diaspora and by highlighting women's central role as cultural custodians. It also underscores the value of documenting dress not only as a response to war and erasure, but as an ongoing archive of beauty, heritage, and lived experience.

Keywords: Kurdish dress; diaspora; memory; identity; hybridity; autoethnography; wardrobe studies; nostalgia

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Introduction

In diasporic communities, everyday practices such as dress become powerful repositories of cultural identity and memory. For Kurdish women living outside of their homeland, traditional clothing serves as a wearable homeland, a tangible link to origin and heritage amid displacement. Embroidered fabrics, vibrant colours, and heirloom jewelry carry not only aesthetic value but also stories of migration, resilience, and nostalgia. Yet, despite its significance, Kurdish dress has received limited scholarly attention. This dissertation addresses that gap by exploring how Kurdish women in the diaspora, particularly in Canada, engage with traditional dress as a form of cultural memory and belonging.

Situated within fashion and diaspora studies, the research builds on Stuart Hall's emphasis on identity as both 'being' and 'becoming' (1990), and Avtar Brah's distinction between home as origin and as lived locality (1996). These frameworks illuminate how a stateless people such as the Kurds sustain collective imagination across borders. Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the Third Space (1994) further highlights how cultural identities are continually negotiated in diasporic settings, while Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory (2008) provides a lens for understanding how memories of displacement are transmitted across generations. Within fashion theory, Joanne Entwistle's view of dress as a situated bodily practice (2000) demonstrates how clothing operates as a lived, embodied practice, and Sophie Woodward (2007) highlights the wardrobe as a site where memory and identity are anchored. Together, these frameworks provide the theoretical foundation for examining how Kurdish women

engage with dress as a wearable homeland in the diaspora. These perspectives frame Kurdish dress not only as a material practice but also as a cultural archive through which identity, memory, and belonging are continually reimagined in the diaspora.

This research focuses on Kurdish women in Toronto, a community largely overlooked in existing scholarship. Toronto's multicultural context provides a distinct backdrop, where Kurdish dress is mobilised in festivals, weddings, and personal memory. Studying this community not only expands academic knowledge but also preserves voices and practices often absent from official archives.

The central aim is to investigate how Kurdish women use dress as a form of cultural memory and belonging in the diaspora. Specifically, it asks: How do Kurdish women in the Canadian diaspora engage with traditional dress to preserve memory, negotiate identity, and sustain cultural belonging across displacement?

To address this, I conducted qualitative research combining oral history interviews, wardrobe studies, photo-elicitation, and autoethnography. Three Kurdish women in Toronto have been interviewed about their experiences with traditional dress, with wardrobe sessions providing material prompts for storytelling, and the sharing of personal photographs that resonate with them. These images, alongside garments, deepened the discussion and situated dress within wider narratives of memory and belonging. Photo-elicitation with family members further generated intergenerational dialogue. My own reflections as a Kurdish woman in the diaspora are woven into the study, acknowledging both my insider and outsider position. This methodological blend allows for rich, layered data where garments and narratives act as intertwined archives.

Reflexivity is central; my shared background fosters trust and dialogue but also requires vigilance against over-familiarity and assumption.

This study makes an original contribution by documenting the experiences of Kurdish-Canadian women, an under-researched diaspora, and situating their clothing practices within broader debates in fashion and diaspora studies. It demonstrates how women act as cultural custodians, transmitting memory through dress, and how garments function as portable homelands. Methodologically, it offers an approach that combines ethnography with autoethnography and material culture, contributing to discussions of insider research and embodied archives.

Following this introduction, the Literature Review surveys the relevant scholarship and theoretical foundations, situating Kurdish dress within debates on diaspora, identity, and memory. Chapter One, *Fragmented Homeland: What led to the Kurdish Diaspora?* provides the historical and political context, outlining how Kurdish displacement, repression, and cultural expression shaped the ground for diasporic life. Chapter Two, *Negotiating Kurdish Identity in Exile*, examines how Kurdish identity is articulated and reconfigured across different contexts, drawing on oral histories and ethnographic narratives. Chapter Three, *Carrying Kurdistan: Dress and Memory in the Diaspora*, turns to the material and embodied dimensions of belonging, analysing how garments and jewellery act as archives of memory and cultural continuity. The Conclusion synthesises these insights, revisiting the research aims, acknowledging limitations, and suggesting future directions.

By mobilising theory, then turning to narrative, and finally discussing lived practice, this dissertation highlights how Kurdish dresses are not merely garments

but cultural archives. They preserve stories, express identity, and materialise a homeland that can be carried on the body when it cannot be inhabited. In exploring these dynamics, *The Wearable Homeland: Kurdish Dress, Diaspora and Memory* shows how a displaced community remembers and reimagines itself, one stitch at a time.

Literature Review

Traditional dress plays a critical role in shaping identity within diasporic communities, where clothing functions both as a marker of belonging and as a means of negotiating life between cultures. For Kurdish women, traditional dress embodies cultural heritage, memory and resilience, serving as one of the most tangible connections to cultural roots across displacement. Despite this significance, scholarship on Kurdish dress remains scarce, a gap shaped by political suppression and the absence of institutional archives (Bozarslan, Gunes and Yadirgi, 2021). Instead, Kurdish communities rely on family networks, storytelling and community events to preserve dress traditions in the diaspora, practices that echo broader patterns seen across other diasporic communities (Woodham et al., 2017; Pereira-Ares, 2017).

This chapter reviews the theoretical and scholarly foundations for understanding Kurdish dress in the diaspora, drawing on the diaspora and cultural identity theory (Brah, 1996; Hall, 1990; Friedman, 1994; Bhabha, 1994), fashion and embodiment (Crane, 2000; Pereira-Ares, 2017; Entwistle, 2000), and memory studies (Hirsch, 2008; Woodham et al., 2017; Jenns, 2015). Together, these frameworks situate Kurdish women's dress as a nexus of identity, memory and belonging. The review proceeds in four sections: it first outlines key concepts of diaspora and identity, then turns to the Kurdish diaspora and its political context, before examining dress as a cultural practice in migration, and finally considering storytelling, memory and the family archive.

Key Concepts of Fashion and Diaspora

Diaspora studies offer key frameworks for understanding how clothing mediates identity and belonging across contexts of displacements. Avtar Brah's (1996) theorisation of diaspora is particularly valuable to this research, as she distinguishes between 'home' as a lived locality and 'home' as a mythic site of origin in her book, *Cartographies of Diaspora*. She argues that diasporic space is shaped by the tension between these poles. She states, 'On the one hand, "home" is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of "origin". On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of locality, its sounds and smells' (Brah, 1996, p.192). This duality is vital to how Kurdish women in the diaspora relate to dress, as both a nostalgic gesture toward an imagined homeland, and as a practice rooted in contemporary, localised experiences of community and identity. Brah further conceptualises home as 'a discourse of locality, the place where feelings of rootedness ensue from the mundane and the unexpected of daily practice... a place with which we remain intimate even in moments of intense alienation from it' (Brah, 1996, p.4). These ideas help frame the wardrobe as a site where material objects, clothes, accessories, and fabrics mediate feelings of both belonging and estrangement.

Building on Brah's duality of home, Stuart Hall (1990) introduces a dual definition of cultural identity. The first sees identity as a collective 'oneness', based on a shared history and ancestry. The second views identity as 'a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being."' It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something

which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture' (Hall, 1990, p.225). For Hall, identity is never fixed but is continuously reconstituted through memory, narrative, and cultural practice. He writes that cultural identities 'undergo constant transformation' and are 'subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power' (Hall, 1990, p.225). This definition illuminates how Kurdish dress embodies both continuities, through shared cultural practices of Kurdish identity, and transformation, as garments are adapted within new diasporic settings.

While Brah and Hall emphasise the cultural and affective dimensions of diaspora, Jonathan Friedman (1994) situates identity within global systemic processes. He argues that identities are continually reconstituted within shifting transnational fields of culture and power. For Kurdish women's dress, this perspective reminds us that practices of belonging, and self-representation are not only shaped in relation to homeland and hostland, but also within wider global hierarchies that position Kurds as a stateless minority. Although this study focuses on the intimate and community-based dimensions of traditional dress, Friedman's framework highlights the broader structural conditions that frame these practices.

Moving forward from systemic perspectives to embodied ones, Noemí Pereira-Ares (2017), highlights how fashion and dress function as communicative cultural practices. She argues, 'dress, and in particular, women's dress is thus revealed to be a potent signifier when it comes to negotiating between cultures. It is made to stand for the cultural values of a given group and to take on itself the mythologies whereby each culture constructs the other' (2017, p.65). Women's bodies and clothing often become the sites where cultural boundaries are policed, with dress simultaneously expressing

identity and reinforcing expectations and norms. For Kurdish women, wearing traditional garments at weddings, Kurdish festivals, or political protests is not merely aesthetic but a way of enacting belonging and resisting cultural erasure. In this sense, women's sartorial practices operate as a form of cultural labour, carrying memory and heritage across displacement. As Pereira-Ares further observes, 'dress might be capable of determining pronouncements of belonging and not belonging, inclusion and exclusion' (2017, p.xvi). Focusing on Kurdish women is therefore central to this research, as their dress practices illuminate how diasporic identity is continually shaped through gendered, embodied acts of remembrance, adaptation, and resistance.

These theorists underscore that diaspora is at once affective, structural and embodied. This combination is crucial for this research, which centres Kurdish women and their dress practices as a lens into how identity, memory and belonging are continually negotiated under conditions of political repression and displacement. They also provide a foundation for examining the Kurdish case, where histories of marginalisation and forced migration have shaped the conditions in which dress practices are sustained, adapted and reimagined.

Kurdish Diaspora and Identity

The relevance of these theoretical perspectives is understood in clarity when the political and historical landscape of the Kurdish cause are further examined. Kurdish communities have historically faced political repression, cultural denial and forced displacement (Bozarslan, Gunes and Yadirgi, 2021). These circumstances have shaped

how identity is preserved and expressed, including through dress. Clothing has long been both a site of suppression and a means of cultural survival, making this political backdrop essential to understanding how Kurdish dress has been preserved, adapted and reimagined in the diaspora.

One of the consequences of historical oppression against the Kurds has been the limited formal documentation and institutionalisation of Kurdish cultural forms, including dress. The *Cambridge History of the Kurds* (Bozarslan, Gunes and Yadirgi, 2021) highlights that several chapters address the Kurdish experience in the diaspora, where communities outside the Middle East are positioned as crucial to Kurdish nationalism, memory and cultural preservation. Yet, this scholarship has largely centred on Europe, leaving other diasporic contexts underexplored. In particular, research on Kurdish communities in Canada remains sparse, despite their growing role in sustaining cultural practices.

Frantz Fanon underscores how colonial regimes attack cultural identity through the suppression of language, observing that to speak is to ‘assume a culture, support the weight of a civilisation’ (1986, p.17). For Kurdish culture, bans on the Kurdish language has made the practice and transmission of culture increasingly difficult, with implications not only for speech but also for dress. In the absence of institutional archives, these practices have been preserved, instead, through oral traditions, memory and family networks. While some references to Kurdish clothing exist, they are scattered and often embedded within broader ethnographic or political studies. During the course of my own research, I found only one MA thesis from the 1980s (Fleming, 1981) that includes limited observations on Kurdish dress within a wider ethnographic study of

Kurdish society, underscoring both the scarcity of dedicated studies and the marginalisation of Kurdish dress within academic and institutional contexts.

These dynamics resonate with wider scholarship on Kurdish diasporic life, which has predominantly centred on communities in Europe. Zeynep Kaya (2020) demonstrates how the imagined map of Greater Kurdistan has become a central symbol of Kurdish nationalism, sustained both in the region and in the diaspora, where it often takes on heightened significance. Barzoo Eliassi (2021) examines the Kurdish diaspora in Sweden, showing how Kurds negotiate belonging and marginalisation within the frameworks of European multiculturalism. Ipek Demir (2017) analyses the Kurdish diaspora in Europe, introducing the concept of ‘foreignisation’ to describe how diasporic groups are racialised and marginalised in the Global North despite being socially and politically embedded within it. Collectively, these studies highlight the vibrancy and political salience of the Kurdish diaspora communities in Europe but leave other contexts underexplored. By contrast, research on Kurdish communities in Canada remains sparse, despite their growing role in sustaining cultural practices through community celebrations and dress.

This study therefore focuses on the Canadian Kurdish diaspora, where clothing practices illuminate how identity is preserved and reimagined in a smaller, underexamined community. Kaya (2020, p.1) notes that the map of Greater Kurdistan is embedded in Kurdish consciousness, ‘both within the region and, perhaps even more strongly, in the diaspora’. This insight is critical to understanding the Canadian Kurdish context, where dress, like the map, operates as a way of symbolically reimagining Kurdistan in exile. Such performances highlight how cultural memory is sustained

through ritual and embodiment rather than through formal archives or institutional recognition.

The diaspora, however, is not only about preservation but also about negotiating power relations. Demir (2017, p.61) emphasises that diasporic groups are both outsiders and insiders to Northern spaces, uniquely positioned to engage with the Global North and to challenge their host countries' role in their own predicament. This can be applied to the Kurdish diaspora in Canada, who illustrate this dual positioning as newcomers often marginalised, yet simultaneously reshaping Canada's multicultural field by asserting their identity through dress.

This double positioning can also be applied in Levitt and Glick Schiller's concept of 'simultaneity', which offers another lens for analysing these practices. They define this term as 'living lives that incorporate daily activities, routines, and institutions located both in a destination country and transnationally' (2004, p.1003). For Kurdish women in Canada, dress practices embody this simultaneity; layering a traditional Kurdish vest over a Western dress, for instance, affirms cultural heritage while also engaging with Canadian fashion norms.

The Kurdish diaspora's experiences in Canada are shaped by forced displacement, political suppression and cultural resilience. Yet scholars have theorised diaspora broadly through concepts of homeland, power and simultaneity, research on Kurdish Canadian communities remains scarce. This absence underscores the contribution of this study, which situates Kurdish women's dress practices within these wider debates on diaspora and identity. The following section therefore turns to

scholarship in fashion and cultural studies to show how dress has been theorised more broadly as a practice of resistance, embodiment and belonging.

Dress as Cultural Practice in the Diaspora

Scholars across fashion theory and cultural studies emphasise the ways in which dress is central to identity construction. Crane (2000) argues that clothing choices serve as a field in which social boundaries are negotiated, with marginalised groups often using fashion to resist exclusion and articulate alternative identities. Through dress, individuals not only assert continuity with their social or cultural background but also disrupt mainstream narratives that seek to homogenise difference. Fashion thus becomes an arena of both self-expression and cultural resistance.

If Crane demonstrates how clothing mediates resistance and adaptation, Bhabha (1994) provides the theoretical language to conceptualise these negotiations as forms of hybridity unfolding in what he terms the 'Third Space'. In this in-between zone, cultural expression is neither wholly traditional nor entirely assimilated but negotiated through hybrid forms. Mahmud (2024) applies this framework in her study of Kurdish women in the UK diaspora, showing how material objects mediate the negotiation of in-between identities, a conceptual approach that can also be extended to dress practices in diaspora. Her work demonstrates the relevance of hybridity for Kurdish communities but also exposes a gap: there is little scholarship on how such negotiations unfold within the Canadian Kurdish diaspora. By situating hybridity within Canadian contexts, this

research contributes to extending Bhabha's framework and testing its applicability beyond the more commonly studied European settings.

While Bhabha's theories illuminate how diasporic communities negotiate cultural identity, Entwistle (2000) shifts the focus to the body itself, introducing the concept of 'dress as situated bodily practice' (p.38). For her, clothing is not merely an external object but part of the way the body is lived and experienced in social contexts. She stresses that in all known human cultures, the body is subject to adornment, whether through clothing, tattooing, or other forms of modification, highlighting how dress is central to the construction of identity (Entwistle, 2000, pp.38-40). From this perspective, diasporic dress practices can be understood not simply as visual symbols but as acts of remembering, belonging, and negotiating identity within multicultural and often exclusionary environments. For Kurdish women, traditional garments communicate ethnic identity while also carrying emotional weight as part of memory, ritual, and affective belonging.

This embodied perspective underscores the role of women as cultural bearers, developed further by Noemí Pereira-Ares. She argues that 'dress, and in particular, women's dress is thus revealed to be a potent signifier when it comes to negotiating between cultures' (2017, p.65). Clothing frequently becomes the site where cultural boundaries are policed, marking both belonging and exclusion. In her comparative analysis of South Asian diaspora communities, Pereira-Ares shows how women's sartorial practices operate as cultural labour, carrying memory and resisting erasure. This insight can also be applied to the Kurdish diaspora, where wearing traditional dress

at community events, or political protests is an embodied practice through which belonging is enacted and Kurdishness is made visible.

Building on Pereira-Ares's focus on women's sartorial practices, Loscialpo (2019) examines the intersections of fashion, immigration and national identity in the context of Brexit and rising nationalism. She shows how fashion frequently draws on national tropes such as 'Britishness' or 'Made in Italy', while simultaneously revealing their instability and constructed nature. Importantly, she positions fashion as a political field in which belonging and exclusion are negotiated, highlighting its capacity to unsettle static notions of nationhood. While her discussion is rooted in the British context, her insights are valuable for this research, as they illuminate how Kurdish women's dress in diaspora similarly resists erasure and challenges dominant narratives of tradition and national belonging.

Viewed collectively, these perspectives position dress in the diaspora as a practice of resistance, hybridity, embodiment and cultural labour. They demonstrate how clothing enables marginalised groups to negotiate identity and politics, while at the same time unsettling dominant national narratives. This discussion leads to the next section, which turns to scholarship on storytelling, memory and the family archive, to examine how garments also function as repositories of intergenerational memory and affective belonging.

Storytelling, Memory, and the Family Archive

Marianne Hirsch's (2008) theory of postmemory provides a foundation for understanding how trauma and displacement are transmitted across generations in the absence of direct experience. She defines postmemory as the way later generations "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors' (Hirsch, 2008, p.107) who came before them, rather than through direct memory. Although developed in relation to the Holocaust, this concept has been widely applied to other histories of violence and exile. In Kurdish contexts, second-generation women often grow up surrounded by narratives of homeland, war and flight, transmitted through storytelling, photographs and material objects such as clothing.

Where Hirsch emphasises intergenerational transmission through narrative, Woodham et al. (2017) focus on the material dimension of what they term the family archive. They describe these archives as collections of documents, photographs and possessions that 'reveal insights into past generations, and preserve family stories' (Woodham et al., 2017, p.203). This framing positions the archive as both material and discursive, a site where memory is not only stored but actively produced and reconfigured over time. They also stress that ownership and curation of the archive are gendered practices: 'objects have played an important part in the construction of genealogies by women' (Woodham et al., 2017, p.208, citing Evans, 2012). This insight reinforces women's role as cultural custodians. Within Kurdish families in the diaspora,

the preservation of garments, photographs and textiles underscores how women sustain memory and heritage through embodied and curatorial labour.

While family archives remain vital sites of preservation, institutional recognition of Kurdish cultural expression continues to be limited. Kurdish cultural forms have historically been fragmented and marginalised within academic and institutional discourses (Bozarslan, Gunes and Yadirgi, 2021). This absence was also evident in my own research. When referring to museum collections and archives such as those of the Victoria and Albert Museum, I found only a small number of Kurdish rugs and photographs, but little evidence of Kurdish dress within fashion or textile archives. These gaps underscore the imbalance between community-based preservation and institutional neglect, highlighting how Kurdish dress traditions have been sustained primarily through familial and domestic practices rather than through formal archives.

Extending this discussion of archives and memory into the realm of fashion studies, Heike Jenns (2015) argues that clothing itself operates as a temporal and affective medium. She notes that ‘clothing and fashion can be understood as constitutive components of personal and cultural memory’ (p.21). Memory, like fashion, is fragmentary and performative, and garments function as mnemonic devices that hold the emotional and historical weight of displacement and continuity. Her analysis of vintage fashion shows how clothing enables engagement with the past through both commodification and nostalgia. For Kurdish women in the diaspora, preserving or re-wearing traditional garments similarly allows embodied encounters with heritage: the

act of wearing becomes a way of accessing and performing memory rather than replicating the past precisely.

Daniel Miller (2010) advances this view through his theory of objects as extensions of the self. He argues that ‘objects are important, not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, but quite the opposite’ (2010, p.50), emphasising their affective and biographical dimensions. In the context of displacement, garments take on precisely this role; they carry sentimental weight, embody heritage, and act as living links between individuals, families and histories of displacement.

Svetlana Boym (2001) adds further nuance by distinguishing between ‘restorative nostalgia’, which seeks to recreate a lost home, and ‘reflective nostalgia’, which lingers in longing and uncertainty. For many in the diaspora, attachments to dress often take this reflective form; garments do not signal a desire to return but instead serve as affective links to a past carried into the present. For Kurdish women, the preservation or wearing of traditional dress becomes a performative act of remembrance that honours heritage while acknowledging rupture and loss.

Placed together, these works frame the family archive as a living repository of memory, identity and cultural heritage. They also provide methodological grounding for this research, which employs wardrobe interviews, oral histories and participant storytelling to examine how Kurdish women engage with inherited clothing and construct narratives of belonging through dress.

This review has outlined how theories of diaspora, embodiment and memory illuminate the cultural and political work of Kurdish women's dress in displacement. While Brah, Hall and Bhabha frame displacement, becoming and hybridity, studies by Pereira-Ares, Entwistle and Loscialpo position dress as embodied, gendered and a political practice. Memory scholars including Hirsch, Woodham, Jenns, Miller and Boym show how garments operate as living archives that carry trauma, heritage and belonging. Yet, significant gaps persist, scholarship on Kurdish dress remains sparse, Canadian diasporic contexts are underexplored, and institutional archives largely overlook Kurdish material culture. Accordingly, this study asks: how do Kurdish women in the Canadian diaspora use dress to preserve memory, negotiate identity and sustain cultural belonging across displacement? To answer this question, the next chapter sets out a qualitative, community-based methodology that enables the analysis of garments and narratives as intertwined, living archives.

Research Design and Methodologies

The aim of this research was to investigate the ways in which Kurdish women in the Canadian diaspora engaged with Kurdish dress, all the while considering how processes of migration, displacement, and identity formation shaped its meanings and practices. In particular, my research explored how nostalgia, memory, and intergenerational dynamics, alongside broader social contexts, influence the wearing, adaptation, and perception of Kurdish dress, positioning it as a significant site of memory, cultural transmission, and identity negotiation.

Objectives

- Investigate the role of Kurdish dress in identity expression and negotiation amongst Kurdish women in the diaspora.
- Analyse how Kurdish dress has been preserved, adapted, or reinterpreted in diasporic contexts.
- Explore the impact of migration and memory on the meanings and functions of Kurdish dress in the diaspora.
- Situate Kurdish women's clothing practices within the political and social conditions of displacement and diaspora.

My Positionality

My personal memories, family archives, and embodied experiences of Kurdish dress informed both the questions I asked and the interpretations I made. Following

Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2010), I drew on autoethnography to ‘systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience’. As a Kurdish woman raised in the diaspora, I brought an insider perspective to this research. I was born in Baghdad, Iraq and lived in-between Canada and Jordan until I was five years old, when my family resided in Amman, Jordan in 2002 for the following decade. The reason my family remained in Jordan was in hopes that the geopolitical situation in Iraq would improve, but it never did. In 2012, my family returned to Toronto, Canada, when I was fifteen years old, and I remained there until I moved to London, UK in the autumn of 2024 to pursue my master’s degree.

My background meant I was already familiar with the cultural significance of the Kurdish dress, its symbolic value within families, and its role in community gatherings. I also carried embodied memories of wearing Kurdish garments at events such as Kurdish celebrations and weddings, which shaped the way I approached the fieldwork. My movement between the Middle East and North America, and the impact of this also means my experience with Kurdish dress is through multiple diasporic lenses. This transnational trajectory shaped how I understood questions of memory, identity, and cultural transmission, situating my research within both personal collective narratives of displacement, and belonging.

These reflections were woven into the key ideas I explored throughout this dissertation. Hall’s (1990) second definition of cultural identity, as a position constantly in process, shaped through history, culture, and power, provided a useful framework for understanding how my own shifting geographies shaped my relation to Kurdish dress. In addition, Bhabha’s (1994) notion of hybridity and the Third Space was central,

offering a way to think about how cultural identity emerged in-between contexts, where practices and meanings were continually rearticulated. Finally, Hirsch's (2008) concept of postmemory resonated with my position as a second-generation diasporic subject, inheriting memories and attachments I did not directly live through, often transmitted through family narratives and photographs.

This insider position also shaped my access to participants. Being part of the diaspora community in Toronto allowed me to draw on family and community networks when recruiting women for interviews and wardrobe studies. Shared cultural references and experiences often created trust and mutual understanding in these interactions.

Research Design

This research was grounded in a qualitative, multi-method approach rooted in ethnographic, autoethnographic, and material culture methods. These frameworks allowed me to explore how Kurdish women in the Canadian diaspora engaged with traditional dress as a site of memory, identity, and cultural transmission. This approach aligned with feminist and interpretivist frameworks that centred lived experience, storytelling, and material culture as valid forms of knowledge.

A central focus of this study was on women. Kurdish women have historically been positioned as the primary bearers and transmitters of cultural memory, particularly through dress. As Pereira-Ares (2017, p.36) argues, women have traditionally been construed as the guarantors of collective continuity in the diaspora, often expected to embody and perform culture through their clothing. In the context of the diaspora, women's dress has become especially charged, mediating between

tradition and assimilation, memory and transformation. By centering women's narratives and clothing practices, this study aligned with feminist approaches that foreground women's cultural labour and resist their marginalisation in Kurdish historiography.

I approached participants' narratives as situated accounts, shaped by displacement, nostalgia, and identity work. Ethnography, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p.3) define it, is the study of people in naturally occurring settings through methods that capture their social meanings and ordinary activities. It includes interpreting 'the meanings, functions, and consequences of human actions and institutional practices, and how these are implicated in local, and perhaps also wider, contexts' (p.3). From this perspective, participants' accounts were not treated simply as factual statements, but as expressions formed within memory, cultural context, and diasporic experience.

Autoethnography further underpinned the study. As Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2010) describe, it involves 'systematically analysing personal experience in order to understand cultural experience' (p.1). My personal memories, family archives, and embodied experiences of Kurdish dress informed both the questions I asked and the interpretations I made. This framework enabled me to situate my own experiences of diaspora alongside those of other Kurdish women, highlighting how personal and collective memory intersect through dress.

Finally, the research engaged with memory studies to frame how clothing, photographs, and personal archives function as carriers of cultural meaning. Hirsch's (2008, p.103) concept of postmemory was particularly important for this, alongside

Rose's (2016, p.304) work on visual methods provided tools for analysing family photographs, wardrobes, and images as sites of cultural memory.

Autoethnography

The first step into my primary research began with reflecting on my own personal memories. This started by first reflecting on what Kurdish dress meant to me, as well as how its meaning changed with age and across the different countries I lived in. Personal family albums helped spark my memory, from my first experience with Kurdish dress, to trips to Kurdistan, and how I engaged with it in public settings, such as weddings and Kurdish celebrations. Regularly journaling since I was eleven years old, I also examined personal entries that mentioned my experience with identity, expressing how I felt at the time, and how that shifted with age. These reflections not only provided a foundation for my interviews but also allowed me to remain attentive to similarities and differences between my own experiences and those of participants.

Ethnography and Narrative Methods

Given the long history of marginalisation, forced displacement, and suppression of Kurdish culture across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, much of the material heritage of Kurdish communities, including dress, has been lost or remains undocumented. As Kurdish archivist Sheikmous notes, 'Kurdish scholars have lamented the loss of a sizeable portion of Kurdish manuscripts and documents, particularly in the twentieth century under repressive conditions' (Ghaderi and Sheikmous, 2024). Kurdish materials often had to be hidden or were destroyed, with 'stories of loss and destruction

of Kurdish collections and archives prevalent in Kurdish historiographical and biographical accounts' (Ghaderi and Sheikhmous, 2024). In the absence of state archives, cultural memory has largely been sustained through personal archives, oral transmission, and community-held items (Ghaderi and Sheikhmous, 2024). My study therefore focused on the transmission of knowledge through family narratives, oral histories, and the preservation of material culture within the home and diaspora communities.

Fieldwork took place in Toronto, Canada, during July and August 2025. I conducted three semi-structured interviews with Kurdish women aged between 30 and 60, accessed through family and community networks. Interviews were carried out in participants' homes, both to create a comfortable and familiar environment. I selected participants based on their personal history in the diaspora, their age, and their relationship to their Kurdish identity and dress. Each of my participants shared a nuanced lived experience, one was second-generation, while another grew up in the Kurdish region before moving abroad. However, they all had one thing in common; they enjoyed wearing Kurdish dress. I wanted to focus on the stories of Kurdish women in the diaspora that have different belongings and routes, to showcase the nuances of their lived experiences and how that shaped the way they interacted with Kurdish dress and identity.

I also carried out two photo-elicitation interviews with my mother and sister, using selected family photographs to explore how each remembered and interpreted moments I was either present for or absent from. These visual materials helped open up intergenerational reflections on memory, nostalgia, and the meanings attached to

Kurdish dress, as it can ‘encourages talk that is more emotional, [and] more affective’ (Rose, 2023, p.315).

In addition, I employed participant observation at a Kurdish-Polish wedding in Toronto in July 2025, where dress was performed as a visible and symbolic marker of cultural belonging. As Sarah Pink argues, ethnography ‘should account not only for the observable, recordable realities that may be translated into written notes and texts, but also for objects, visual images, the immaterial and the sensory nature of human experience and knowledge’ (Pink, 2007, p.22). This event captured generational patterns of dress, embodied practices such as dance, and the negotiation of Kurdish traditions.

Wardrobe Studies

Wardrobe studies were a key element of this research, providing a way to engage directly with the material culture of Kurdish dress. Following Woodward (2007) and Slater and Kealy-Morris (2023), I approached the wardrobe as a living archive, where garments, accessories, and heirlooms operate as carriers of personal and cultural memory. This method was particularly suited to a diasporic context, where institutional archives of Kurdish dress are scarce and much of the heritage is preserved through family collections.

During two of my interviews, participants shared garments, jewellery, and other items from their wardrobes. These included heirloom pieces passed down from relatives, garments made or purchased in Kurdistan, and items adapted or acquired in

Canada. Participants were encouraged to select pieces that resonated with their identities or family histories, which were then discussed in detail and photographed.

Alongside garments, participants also shared family photographs and albums. These were treated as part of the wardrobe study, functioning as visual archives that carried memories of migration, celebration, and belonging. Participants selected images that sparked reflections on Kurdish dress, with photographs, especially those depicting traditional garments, operating as visual narratives that reinforced the power of dress across generations.

Wardrobe studies created opportunities for tactile and visual engagement with clothing and photographs, enabling participants to recall narratives that might not have surfaced in conversation alone. As Woodward (2007) argues, clothing acquires meaning not only through its design but through its materiality, repeated wear, and emotional associations. In this study, handling garments and revisiting images often prompted reflections on migration, family ties, and cultural continuity.

This approach highlighted how Kurdish dress in the diaspora functions simultaneously as a cultural archive, a site of personal memory, and an ongoing practice of adaptation. Gloria Wekker defines the cultural archive as ‘the unacknowledged reservoir of knowledge and affects based on four hundred years of Dutch imperial rule... located in many things, in the way we think, do things, and look at the world... a repository of memory in the heads and hearts of people in the metropole’ (2016, p.19). While Wekker’s formulation emerges from the Dutch colonial context, I draw on her broader sense of the cultural archive as an embodied and affective repository of memory to understand how Kurdish dress operates in the diaspora. By situating the wardrobe

within participants' everyday domestic spaces, the method revealed how traditional dress is preserved, displayed, and reinterpreted across generations. This was particularly valuable for addressing the objectives of the study, tracing intergenerational continuities and examining how diasporic adaptation reshaped its cultural and social functions.

Ethical Considerations and Biases

Ethical considerations were central to this research. All participants were given informed consent forms, with clear explanations of anonymity and withdrawal rights. Given the sensitive nature of topics such as migration, loss, and trauma, care was taken to ensure participants felt comfortable and supported, with consistent check-ins before and after the interviews.

Following Hammersley and Atkinson's emphasis on reflexivity, that research is part of the world it studies (2007, pp.15-16), I acknowledged that my own position as a Kurdish woman and researcher shaped the production of these narratives, meaning, the accounts cannot be separated from the relational and interpretive process of fieldwork itself. My shared background with participants fostered trust and dialogue, giving me access and insights that might otherwise have remained closed. At the same time, this insider status carried limitations: my proximity risked shaping interpretation, particularly when interviewing family members and acquaintances, where assumptions and shared references could blur critical distance.

My personal investment in the subject also influenced interpretation, particularly with family members. To address this, I engaged in reflexivity, situating interpretations

within their cultural and emotional contexts while remaining open to divergent narratives. Cross-checking data through interviews, wardrobe studies, photo-elicitation, and participant observation added nuance and mitigated risks of over-subjectivity.

Another limitation is that all participants were drawn from my social circle in Toronto and were originally from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The findings therefore reflect the experiences of a particular Kurdish community, rather than the full diversity of the Kurdish diasporic experiences. This focus is both a strength, allowing for depth and trust, as well as a bias, as it narrows the scope of representation.

Finally, this research aligned with the view that ethnography entails both discovery and construction, and that ethical responsibility is involved in recognising the limits of what can be known and represented. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p.236) argue, ‘a reflexive ethnography implies a commitment to the value of understanding human social life; even while recognising the limits to such understanding and to what it can achieve in the world’. This ethos guided my ethical stance in balancing the production of knowledge with care for participants’ dignity, safety, and emotional well-being.

This chapter outlined the approach used to examine how Kurdish women in the Canadian diaspora engage with dress as a site of memory, identity, and cultural transmission. Combining autoethnography, ethnography, wardrobe studies, and visual methods allowed the study to capture both personal and collective dimensions of dress, while reflexive practice ensured attention to positionality and ethical responsibility. These methods provided the foundation for the analysis that follows, tracing how Kurdish dress is preserved, adapted, and reinterpreted across generations.

Chapter One: Fragmented Homeland: What Led to the Kurdish Diaspora?

How Kurds Missed the Literal Mark

To understand the significance of Kurdish dress in the diaspora, it is necessary to begin with the history and politics of the Kurdish people. The fragmented homeland, a nation divided across four states after the Treaty of Lausanne, provides the background against which Kurdish cultural expression, including dress, has been shaped (Bozarslan, Gunes and Yadirgi, 2021). This fragmentation has produced not only political struggles for recognition but also cultural ruptures, where practices such as language, literature, and clothing have been suppressed or erased. As Hall (1990) reminds us, cultural identity is always both 'being' and 'becoming'; Kurdish dress must therefore be read within histories of displacement and denial. In this way, political fragmentation is presented as the lived condition that shaped how Kurdish clothing emerged as both a target of repression and a site of resistance.

Over thirty million Kurds live across Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, making them the world's largest stateless ethnic minority without their own independent state. (Gunter, 2013, p.159). This region is what Kurds identify as their homeland, where their ancestors have lived on for thousands of years, and they call it Kurdistan. Throughout this chapter I use Kurdish regional terms for the four parts of Kurdistan: Bakur (North, in Turkey), Rojava (West, in Syria), Rojhalat (East, in Iran), and Bashur (South, in Iraq). These names reflect the Kurdish reclaiming of geography, creating a sense of belonging rather than state-centric borders that aim to divide them.

As Benedict Anderson (1983, p.6) explains, nations are ‘imagined communities’, sustained through shared symbols rather than face-to-face contact. Eliassi (2021, p.49) extends this to Kurds, describing them as a ‘transnational imagined community’ whose belonging is expressed through language, oral traditions, and dress. For Kurds, dispersed across four states and denied a sovereign homeland, such symbols become crucial in maintaining this shared sense of identity.

Kurds are ethnically distinct from Arabs, Persians and Turks, and their desire for cultural autonomy and their own independent state has been ongoing since the borders of the Middle East were created following the end of World War I (Gunter, 2013, p.160). After the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, it was up to the Allied Powers to split the Middle East, primarily drawn by Britain and France, and ‘would be partitioned into zones of influence and control among Britain, France, Russia, Italy and Greece’ (Amini, 2025).

In the initial plan, the Treaty of Sèvres, included an outline of the possibility of an autonomous Kurdistan region, to eventually become an independent state. However, following Britain and France’s 1923 Lausanne Conference and the desire to appease Turkey, this plan was revoked, shattering Kurdish hopes of self-rule. The Treaty of Sèvres, which was superseded by the Treaty of Lausanne, partitioned the Kurdish region to be divided within newly formed countries, Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq (Amini, 2025).



Figure 1.1 Locator map of Kurdistan (2024)

This political erasure translated into cultural suppression, as Kurdish identity became fragmented across four states, and forms of expression such as language, literature, and dress were either absorbed into state nationalism or actively repressed. The betrayal of Lausanne thus not only denied the possibility of a Kurdish state but also set in motion a century-long struggle for cultural survival in which dress would become both a marker of difference and a site for resistance. To see how this played out on the ground, it is useful to begin with Bakur, northern Kurdistan in Turkey, where state repression systematically targeted Kurdish identity.

Bakur: Kurds in Turkey

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the first president of Turkey, sought to create a secular state that highlighted Turkish identity, which resulted in three major Kurdish revolts. While some Kurds were not opposed to the government, the Turkish state made systematic attempts to erase any expression of Kurdish nationhood. This extended to language, clothing, and even names, all of which were targeted for abolition (Gunter, 2013, pp.162-163). The 1982 Constitution entrenched such restrictions, limiting the public use of Kurdish and criminalising advocacy of Kurdish rights under Article 312 of the Penal Code, which banned speech deemed to ‘provoke hatred or animosity between groups of different race, religion, region, or social class’ (Gunter, 2013, pp.162-163).

Although some of these provisions have since been amended, Kurdish cultural expression continues to be restricted and frequently treated as a threat to state unity. Kurdish singer Nûdem Durak was sentenced to 19 years in prison in 2015, for singing a Kurdish folk song, which the Turkish government alleged charges of ‘promoting propaganda’ (Medya News, 2025). One can argue that these ongoing restrictions amount to what Toivanen (2014, p.68) terms ‘linguistic and cultural genocide’, with even Kurdish prohibited from being taught in schools. As Fanon (1967, p.38) reminds us, ‘to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture’. In this sense, the Turkish state’s limitations on the Kurdish language should be understood not simply as a political prohibition but as an assault on cultural identity itself, ultimately challenging the ability of Kurds to express who they are in society.



Figure 1.2 Kurdish singer Nûdem Durak in traditional dress (2023)

The consequences of these restrictions extend beyond Turkey's borders. In the 1960s, significant numbers of Kurds migrated to Europe as guest workers, and another large wave followed following the military coups of 1971 and 1980, when Kurds were kidnapped, abused, and abducted amid clashes between Kurdish groups and the Turkish state (Baser, Emanuelsson & Toivanen, 2015, p.4). As Brah (1996) notes, 'the concept of diaspora [is] an interpretive frame for analysing the economic, political and cultural modalities of historically specific forms of migrancy' (p.15). For the Kurds of Bakur, exile became both an economic and political strategy, with dress, language, and cultural performance carried across borders as forms of continuity, embodying Kurdishness even when the state sought to erase it. Yet these struggles were not limited to Turkey; across the border in Syria, Kurds encountered a different but equally systematic form of exclusion.

Rojava: Kurds in Syria

In Syria, the Ba'athist project of Arabisation sought to erase Kurds by changing the ethnic composition of the Kurds to Arabs, through a project known as the 'Arab Belt'. Some of the outcomes included revoking 120,000 Kurds of their Syrian citizenships (McDowall, 2021, p.469), as well as the deportation of 140,000 Kurds to be replaced by Arab settlers (McDowall, 2021, p.475).

Since the Arab Spring, however, much has changed. Restrictions on the Kurdish language have been lifted by former President Bashar al-Asad, in an attempt to appease the Kurds, constituting Syria's largest ethnic minority. The Kurdish region in Syria, Rojava, has since established an entity they identify as a democratic autonomy that rejects capitalism, and is radically feminist, having gained control following the expulsion of ISIS over the region (Demir, 2017, pp.64-65).

Importantly, it had been the Kurds who bore the primary responsibility of defending their lands from ISIS. Despite widespread scepticism, they ultimately emerged as the decisive force in defeating the group (Barkey, 2025). As Demir (2017, p.55) argues, diasporic and marginalised groups often enact a process of 'foreignisation', unsettling dominant narratives and expectations. The Kurdish defence of Rojava against ISIS exemplified this; widely doubted by the international community, Kurds emerged as the decisive force, reconfiguring not only local realities but also global perceptions of their political agency.

Nevertheless, the instability of the post-Arab Spring era led to large-scale displacement. Many Kurds fled to neighbouring states and Europe, creating new diasporic formations (Adamson, Dag & Craven, 2024). In these contexts, cultural practices such as language and dress travelled with them, but also adapted under the pressures of migration, reflecting Hall's (1990) point that identity is continually reshaped. Shifting focus to Iran, repression took a different trajectory, especially after the Islamic Revolution.

Rojhalat: Kurds in Iran

In Rojhalat, the post-1979 Islamic Republic intensified political repression, fracturing Kurdish movements and silencing cultural life (McDowall, 2021). Kurdish politicians and activists were assassinated both inside Iran and abroad, with Iranian agents targeting exiled figures in Germany, Austria, and other countries (Baser et al., 2015, citing Berruti et al., 2002). Such assassinations and massacres fractured Kurdish political organisations, but they also disrupted everyday cultural life, silencing formal expressions of identity.

The Kurds in this region continue to struggle as a minority 'between hostility and compromise with limited tolerance towards expression' against the Iranian state policies (Baser et al., 2015, citing Natali, 2005, p.210). Scholars have also suggested that this particular diasporic community is less visible and transnationally mobile as opposed to other regions like Bakur and Bashur. (Baser et al., 2017, p.4; citing Natali, 2007, p.201),

which I also realised upon my own personal research, often finding little to no literature on their contributions.

Bashur: Kurds in Iraq

Kurds in Bashur also had faced systematic oppression, especially in the latter half of the 20th century, under Saddam Hussein's regime. Many Kurdish political leaders fled in the 1970s, followed by an even larger number of them in the 1980s, after the Anfal campaign, an extermination campaign led by Saddam Hussein's regime, against the Kurdish population. This campaign included the Halabja massacre on the 16th of March 1988, when Iraqi forces dropped chemical weapons on the Kurdish town, killing an estimated 5,000 civilians and leaving thousands more with long-term health defects (Moradi et al., 2019; Human Rights Watch, 1993).

The result of the Gulf War in 1991 also further displaced Kurds, with many seeking asylums in Europe (Baser et al., 2015, p.4). As a result of successive conflicts and wars in Iraq, many Kurds were forced to flee (McDowall, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 1993).

Sites of remembrance such as the Amna Suraka Museum in Slemani, once a notorious Ba'athist prison and torture centre, now serves as memorial grounds to preserve memory and render state violence visible. When I visited in 2022, the guide explained how the Ba'athist authorities falsified the birth dates of minors in order to categorise them as adults and thus make them eligible for execution. Some prisoners carried belts stitched with the dates of their scheduled executions; others left behind

letters or inscriptions on walls pleading for pardon. Confronting these artefacts made the scale of suffering tangible, and I felt overwhelmed with grief. Hirsch's concept of postmemory, 'the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up' (Hirsch, 2008, p.106), captures this transmission. Even without direct experience, material traces carry trauma across generations. For me, this resonance was heightened by Amna Suraka's location in Slemani, the city my family is from, making the connection both personal and historical. Yet amid such devastation, the 1990s also marked the emergence of a de facto Kurdistan Regional Government.



Fig. 1.3 Amna Suraka Museum, Slemani (2022)

An Autonomous Kurdistan Region

The shift began following the 1991 Kurdish uprising against Saddam Hussein. Large numbers of Kurds fled to neighbouring Iran and Turkey, prompting a northern no-fly zone after the First Gulf War to enable their return. Continued clashes between Kurdish fighters and Iraqi forces eventually led Baghdad's troops to withdraw from the region in October 1991, leaving Kurdistan to operate with de facto autonomy. A Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was subsequently recognised by allied forces in 1992 (Amini, 2025). The U.S.-led invasion in 2003, and the political restructuring that followed Saddam Hussein's fall also culminated in the adoption of Iraq's new constitution in 2005, which recognised an autonomous Kurdistan region (UK Visas & Immigration, 2023).

For cultural life, the KRG's autonomy represented a crucial turning point. Freed from the most extreme forms of Ba'athist repression, Kurdish society experienced a revival of language, literature, media, and dress. Kurdish festivals are celebrated more openly, often marked by traditional garments and colours that had once been policed under Saddam's rule. The semi-autonomous region thus became not only a political entity but also a cultural stronghold, where clothing once again functioned as an everyday expression of Kurdish identity.

Impact of Diaspora Movement in Everyday Life and Dress

At a glance, Kurds who live within these four countries are inevitably faced with mistreatment and discrimination due to the 'hegemonic nationalism in each country that minoritised the Kurds and deemed them ineligible to claim national sovereignty' (Amini, 2025). This long history of political exclusion forces Kurds into a double struggle: on the one hand, resisting assimilation within the Middle East; on the other, building new lives and identities in host countries abroad.

In Europe, and elsewhere, expressions of Kurdish identity are most visible at commemorations, Kurdish festivals, community classes, and political mobilisations, rather than in everyday public life (Baser, Emanuelsson & Toivanen, 2015, pp.4-7). Within this context, dress in diaspora also shifted; no longer part of daily wear, it became a symbolic act reserved for key moments, preserving memory and signalling belonging in contexts where Kurdish identity itself was marginal.

It is estimated that at least two million Kurds live in Europe, with one million residing in Germany alone (Baser et al., 2015, p.4). Reliable statistics are scarce, as Kurds often hold the citizenship of their country of birth, many remain undocumented, and population counts rarely differentiate between Kurds from different parts of Kurdistan (Baser et al., 2015, p.4). This statistical invisibility mirrors the cultural invisibility Kurds frequently experience in host societies. Within such contexts, traditional dress takes on added importance: it becomes one of the most immediate ways to assert Kurdish identity when official recognition is absent.

Although dispersed since the early 20th century, the Kurdish diaspora ‘provides ample evidence of complex transnational engagements that diaspora communities and their members continue to foster’ (Baser et al., 2015, p.2). In practice, this has meant sustained connections to the homeland through remittances, activism, and lobbying. Research also shows that ‘the second generation is enthusiastic about ‘giving-back’ to a homeland that they have never experienced at first hand’ (Toivanen, 2014). Kurdish activists in Europe and North America have also played an important role in lobbying host states on issues ranging from refugee protection to Kurdish autonomy (Gunter, 2013, p.180).

Beyond formal politics, however, the diaspora also became a crucial arena for the preservation and reimagining of Kurdish culture. Community centres, weddings, and annual Kurdish celebrations provide spaces where dress, dance, and oral tradition can be maintained (Toivanen, 2014). Traditional clothing in particular is frequently mobilised in these contexts, serving both as a nostalgic reminder of ‘home’ and as a visible assertion of Kurdish identity in environments where it is otherwise invisible (Baser et al., 2015). Survivors of the Anfal campaign and the Halabja massacre carry these memories into the diaspora, where dress worn during commemorative gatherings becomes a visible reminder of loss and resilience. In this way, clothing preserves stories where written records, linking embodied practice to collective memory.

On the whole, Kurdish identity in the diaspora emerges as both political and cultural, sustained through activism, remembrance, and everyday acts of continuity. This context raises a deeper question: how is identity itself negotiated across

displacement and exile? It is to these negotiations that I now turn to the next chapter, examining how Kurdish women articulate belonging across multiple geographies, generations and relationships.

Chapter Two: Negotiating Kurdish Identity in Exile

Building on the previous chapter's account of the historical and political conditions that shaped Kurdish displacement, this chapter examines how those conditions are lived in the diaspora through identity negotiations, understood here as the shifting ways Kurds adapt, conceal, assert, or transform their sense of belonging across different contexts.

Identity in the diaspora is not fixed but negotiated across multiple geographies, histories, and relationships. For Kurdish communities, who remain stateless and fragmented across the Middle East, these negotiations are complicated by the denial of national recognition and the experience of exile. Hall (1990, p.225) reminds us that cultural identity is always both 'being' and 'becoming'; it is rooted in shared histories but continually reshaped through displacement and encounter.

For Kurdish women, this negotiation is particularly charged. Pereira-Ares observes that women are often positioned as the 'bearers of culture in diaspora' (2017, p.36) and are expected to model femininity through body and dress in ways that guarantee continuity. Their identities are therefore shaped both by pressures of integration into host societies and by expectations of preserving cultural belonging within families.

In this chapter, I trace how Kurdish women in the diaspora articulate identity and belonging. Drawing on my autoethnography and the narratives of three participants, Ashna, Shlear and Muazaz, I show how belonging is experienced in shifting and sometimes contradictory ways: as concealment in contexts of repression, as pride in

community spaces, and as hybridity across multiple attachments. These stories unfold across different generations and geographies, highlighting how Kurdish identity is lived in movement and through relational contexts. Using frameworks of diaspora (Brah, 1996), global identity systems (Friedman, 1994), hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), and simultaneity (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004), I argue that Kurdish identity is both deeply rooted in collective struggle and continually remade in the diaspora. The following sections trace this negotiation through my own trajectory across Jordan, Canada, and London, alongside the narratives of participants, to show how Kurdishness is lived across borders and generations.

Negotiating Kurdishness Across Borders

My own movements across countries provide a first lens on these negotiations. Between 1999 and 2002 I lived between Canada and Jordan, before settling permanently in Amman in 2003 for the following decade. Growing up in Jordan, where Jordanian and Palestinian Arab identities dominated the national imagery, I often felt there was little space to express my Kurdish identity outside the home. One moment in particular stands out when I was about twelve years old, which shifted the way I expressed myself. I was at my friend's home, with a few others from school, when I spoke with my mother in Kurdish over the phone. After I hung up, my friend asked what language I was speaking. I took this as an opportunity to share something about myself, explaining that I am Kurdish, that I was speaking my native tongue and that it is different from Arabic. I made it clear that I was not Arab. She quickly responded, 'What

do you mean you're not Arab? Yes, you are'. That was when the questioning began: 'how do you live here?' and 'then what passport do you hold?' I tried to clarify that Kurds have their own language and culture, but she insisted otherwise. She then drew her mother into the conversation who, albeit without the full context, turned to me warmly and said, 'You should be proud to be Arab, sweetheart'. I remember the silence that followed. I did not plan to argue with an adult, while my friends laughed along. That moment taught me that my Kurdish identity was not only unintelligible, but almost threatening in that space.

From then on, I hid that side of my identity and kept conversations to a minimum. I did not want to risk hearing someone else tell me who I was or dismiss the very foundation of my being. It made life simpler, and easier to blend in without explanation. That sense of concealment shaped the way I moved through my teenage years in Jordan, compartmentalising my identity. I was Kurdish at home, Arab in public. This concealment illustrates Hall's (1990, p.225) point that identity is never a fixed essence but always in motion, reshaped by circumstance. My 'being' Kurdish was erased by dominant narratives, while my 'becoming' was shaped by the need to survive in a context where difference was denied.

This silencing was not only personal but structural. Anderson (1983) shows how nation-states create a sense of belonging by imagining a shared identity, a process that often privileges certain groups while marginalising others. In Jordan, Jordanian and Palestinian identities form the core of national imagination. Scholars of the Middle East similarly note how dominant groups often present their ethos as representative of the

nation as a whole, reducing the visibility of minority identities (e.g. Haddad, 2011).

Within this framework, Jordanian and Palestinian identities become central, restricting recognition of alternatives such as Kurdishness. My silence in that moment was thus not just personal, but shaped by the politics of nation-building that favoured some identities at the expense of others.

When I moved back to Toronto in 2012, I no longer felt that Kurdishness marked me as an outsider in the same way it had in Amman. The city's diversity meant that difference was ordinary, and I did not stand out in the way I had felt I did in Jordan. In this environment, I began to express my Kurdish identity more openly. My sister played a crucial role in this process. Through her involvement in political demonstrations and Kurdish community events, I was introduced to a wider network of Kurdish peers and allies. Witnessing her activism made me feel prouder of my culture and more comfortable articulating it beyond the private space of our home. These experiences illustrate how belonging in the diaspora is not only shaped by national policy frameworks such as Canadian multiculturalism, but also by family influence and community engagement, which together created a space for me to embrace my identity with greater confidence. One of the ways this newfound confidence materialised was through adornment, a necklace my mother gifted me in the shape of Kurdistan.

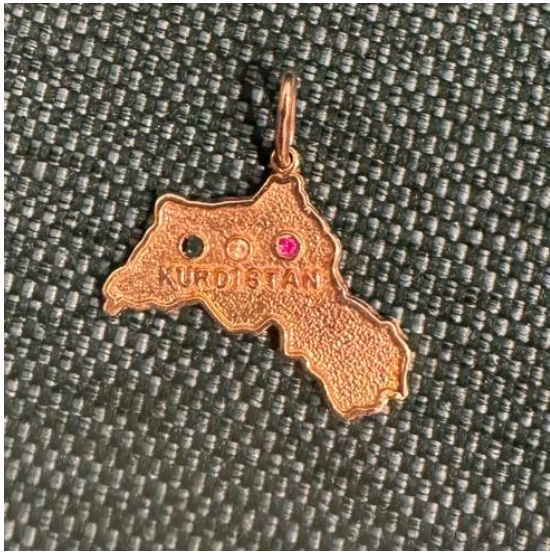


Figure 2.1 Kurdistan map pendant, Canada (2025)

One of the first ways I made Kurdistan tangible for myself was not through a map, but through a piece of jewellery. As a teenager, my mother had a necklace custom-made in the shape of the Kurdistan map. I wore it constantly in my late teens and early twenties, first in Jordan as a subtle, almost hidden marker of identity, and later in Toronto as a more confident declaration. It became a wearable homeland, a way of expressing myself through fashion that felt personal yet public. While I often silenced parts of myself in Jordan, the pendant allowed me to hold on to my Kurdish identity without needing to vocalise it.

It was only later that I understood how such symbols connect to larger questions of homeland and belonging. As Kaya (2020) argues, Kurdistan is not a fixed or inevitable entity, but a political and cultural construction continually reimagined through discourse and practice. The map of ‘Greater Kurdistan’, she notes, has become ‘synonymous with the idea of “Kurdistan” in the minds of the Kurds’ (Kaya, 2020, p.6).

Wearing the pendant was my own way of materialising that imagined homeland, not on paper but on my body, through dress and adornment. It shows how identity is stitched into everyday life in subtle but powerful ways, made visible through symbols that travel with us. These symbolic and material practices of belonging also travelled with me to London in 2024, where a new layer of negotiation unfolded.

In London, various ethnic communities are visible, with established networks, political organisations and cultural events, much like in Toronto. Yet Kurdishness in London is not unknown but woven into the city's broader diasporic fabric. Living in London, I experienced what Bhabha (1994) describes as hybridity, the creation of a Third Space where identity is constantly negotiated between multiple attachments. I carry with me the experience of Jordan, where Kurdishness was silenced, and Canada, where it was made hyper-visible through explanation, and now in London I encounter a new layering. I was both Kurdish and Canadian, shaped by Middle Eastern displacement and Western multiculturalism, and positioned within a British context where diaspora is both celebrated and racialised. Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) capture this experience with their notion of simultaneity, in which migrants inhabit multiple social fields at once. My Kurdish identity in London cannot be separated from my experiences in Toronto and Amman; rather, they exist together, informing how I navigate belonging in each space.

What these movements reveal is that the Kurdish identity is not a singular possession, but a set of negotiations shaped by place, politics and relational encounters. From my own experience, in Jordan, Kurdishness was disavowed, in Canada, it was

claimed but constantly explained. And now in London, it has become part of a wider diasporic hybridity, layered and relational. These shifts are not linear but cyclical, resurfacing in unexpected ways whenever identity is named, denied or demanded. To be Kurdish in the diaspora is to live within these tensions, carrying the silences of one place, the explanations of another, and the hybridity of yet another, all at once. My story is only one account. To understand the broader contours of belonging, we must also attend to the voices of Kurdish women across different generations.

Generational Voices on Belonging

Ashna, Shlear, and Muazaz's narratives, drawn from my interviews, show how belonging is lived, silenced, and reimagined across different times and places. Their perspectives highlight both continuities and differences from my own experiences.

Ashna, the youngest of my participants, was born in Canada in 1993 to parents who fled the Kurdistan Region of Iraq via Turkey before resettling in Canada in the early 1990s. Her reflections highlight what it means to carry a Kurdish identity in a Canadian context where it is often fragile, marginal, and little recognised. Like my own experiences in Jordan and Canada, Ashna's story shows how Kurdishness had to be continually negotiated. Growing up in Hamilton, she quickly realised that few of her peers knew who Kurds were. As she recalls, 'I knew that our culture specifically was... not a lot of people knew who Kurdish people were, and I would have to explain that to my classmates' (See Appendix 1). Her account resonates with my own trajectory from

concealment in Jordan to visibility in Canada, illustrating Hall's (1990) point that identity is always both 'being' and 'becoming'. For Ashna, 'being' Kurdish during her childhood was fragile and sometimes denied by others, while her later 'becoming' required a deliberate and public assertion of presence.

These constant questions left her vulnerable to dismissal. At times, she chose ambiguity rather than the labour of explanation, 'Sometimes I just let them think I was Arab, because it was exhausting to explain all the time' (See Appendix 1). By the time she reached university, Ashna reframed the burden of misrecognition into a form of pride. As she explains, 'Now, when people ask, I say I am Kurdish, and I am representing my people' (See Appendix 1). She now takes it as an opportunity to be one of the first people someone meets who is a Kurd, and so she wants to make sure she represents this culture in the best way. Her comment exemplifies Brah's (1996) idea of diaspora space, in which migrants become not only individuals but representatives of a collective.

She also highlights the gendered pressures attached to this responsibility. Reflecting on the young people she grew up with, she observed that Kurdish girls are expected to excel and maintain the community's reputation, while boys have not been subject to the same scrutiny. 'A lot of the young girls that I grew up with, they all ended up like finishing school and doing really great things in their lives... but some of the young men that I grew up with, they ended up like not going into the best paths' (See Appendix 1). Her observations point to the unequal weight placed on women as representatives of Kurdish identity in the diaspora. This sense of responsibility aligns

with Pereira-Ares's (2017, p.36) argument, that women in the diaspora are often positioned as cultural bearers. For Ashna, the act of correcting others was not only a statement of personal pride but also an enactment of her role safeguarding her Kurdish identity in contexts where it was otherwise invisible.

This evolution also reflects Levitt and Glick Schiller's (2004) notion of simultaneity, since her sense of self in Canada is shaped by both the political struggles of Kurdistan and the dynamics of recognition in her host society. Taken together, her story illustrates the hybrid, relational and transnational dimensions of Kurdish identity in diaspora. While Ashna's experiences show how Kurdishness in Canada was marked by fragility and misrecognition, Shlear's story traces a different path, shaped by the risks of openly asserting Kurdish identity under authoritarian rule.

Shlear, now in-between her fifties–sixties, was born in Kirkuk and spent her early life moving across Iraq due to her father's government post. After marrying, she lived in Erbil for twelve years before relocating to Oman, later the United Arab Emirates, and eventually Canada in 2004. Her life history illustrates how Kurdishness can be silenced, endangered, and later reasserted across different political and social contexts.

Her early years had been marked by authoritarian repression and the Arabisation policies that sought to erase Kurdish presence. As she recalls, 'In the '80s, they started this project, Arabising Kirkuk... So, most of the Kurds were pushed out of Kirkuk and they brought so many Arabs from south of Iraq, and they put them there. At that time, they called them the 10,000 people because each Arab, they give them... 10,000 dinars to settle in Kirkuk' (See Appendix 2). Drawing on Hall's (1990) theory of cultural

identity as a contingent, contested 'production' shaped by power, one can argue that Kurdish belonging has been not only denied but actively overwritten through state-driven processes of assimilation, like Shlear's family experienced (p.222).

Although her family moved frequently due to her father's job, her mother insisted on preserving their culture within the home, teaching her children to read and write in Kurdish, and to memorise songs and national anthems. This insistence brought the family into conflict with the state. One incident in particular left a profound mark. While living in a southern city in Iraq, Shlear's mother insisted that her younger sister appear in Kurdish dress and sing the Kurdish anthem at the school performance when the Iraqi Prime Minister visited. The act was read as a provocation. 'One of the incidents was really huge at that time. It caused my father to be in prison because my younger sister... had the Kurdish dress and sang a national anthem at that time. And then after that, one day after that, my father was in prison for a few days' (See Appendix 2). Here, dress functions as what Crane describes as 'a form of nonverbal, visual communication is a powerful means of making subversive social statements, because these statements are not necessarily constructed or received on a conscious or rational level' (2000, p.237). In this case, the Kurdish dress was a rebellious political statement, one so charged with meaning that it had been punished. This moment encapsulates the risks of Kurdish visibility in Iraq during that period. For Shlear, Kurdish identity had been inseparable from danger, something her mother pushed into the public sphere at great personal cost.

After a personal incident, Shlear left Erbil for Oman in 1996 and later the United Arab Emirates. In the Gulf, Kurdishness was once again muted. She explains, 'You are afraid to express yourself. You don't know what are the results. You don't know what will happen to you, to your family, to everything. So, you are pushing back' (See Appendix 2). Her words resonate with my own concealment in Jordan, where silence became a survival strategy.

Her perspective, however, shifted dramatically after 2003, when the Kurdistan Region was granted autonomous status. She shares, 'The situation in Kurdistan changed... Our mentality changed, how we think about ourselves, how we express ourselves... We have to show people that we are strong, we are Kurds, we are not afraid anymore' (See Appendix 2). Her migration to Canada in 2004 reinforces this transformation. No longer bound by fear, she embraced visibility with confidence, 'I think many factors affected why we are in Canada more showing it, more like identifying or emphasising on it' (See Appendix 2). This marked what Hall (1990) calls a process of 'becoming', as repression gave way to pride and new forms of visibility, illustrating how identity is continually reshaped by political context (p.225).

She emphasises that this was not only about self-expression but also about transmitting Kurdishness to her children, and about correcting misrecognition in daily life. Everyday moments became opportunities for pedagogy: 'When they say, "north of Iraq", I will correct them' (See Appendix 2). These acts echo Kaya's argument (2020, p.2) that Kurdistan is not simply a territorial entity but a socially and politically

constructed idea, sustained and reproduced through discourse, whether in cartographic representations or in daily assertions such as correcting ‘north of Iraq’ to ‘Kurdistan’.

At the same time, her life exemplifies Levitt and Glick Schiller’s (2004) concept of simultaneity, her sense of self in Canada remained entangled with political transformations in Kurdistan and her earlier experiences of repression. These shifts also confirm Friedman’s (1994) view that identities are continually reconfigured by changing global conditions. Shlear’s narrative therefore reveals Kurdish identity not as fixed but as hybrid and contingent, forged across repression, autonomy, and diaspora.

Where Shlear’s experiences highlight the risks of Kurdish visibility and the slow move towards confidence, Muazaz’s account reframes Kurdishness more expansively. For her, identity is not only about struggle but also about privilege and responsibility, lived across multiple geographies and generations.

Muazaz, the eldest of my participants, was born in Baghdad. She grew up at a time when Kurdish identity was heavily repressed in Iraq, yet her family was able to preserve it through language, stories and cultural practice. Her life has taken her from Iraq to Geneva and later to Canada, giving her a perspective that spans both the Middle East and the West. Trained as a lawyer in Baghdad, she later worked in translation and refugee settlement in Canada before qualifying as an immigration consultant and founding her own practice, Canada New Life, specialising in refugee sponsorship and resettlement. She describes this work as an extension of her Kurdish identity and a sense of responsibility to act as a representative for her community, bridging the

struggles of her parents' generation with the diasporic lives of her children and grandchildren (See Appendix 3).

She describes how the Kurdish struggle was instilled in her from the very beginning, 'The Kurdish plight and cause was literally given to us with the bottle of milk... it is the DNA. Without it, I don't feel I have any identity. This is my identity, because the struggle, it is being a Kurd' (See Appendix 3). This claim resonates with Brah's (1996) idea of diaspora space, where identity is produced not only through displacement but also through the inherited struggles and responsibilities that structure everyday life. For Muazaz, Kurdishness is never abstract; it is embodied from infancy as both heritage and obligation.

Her account also shows how identity is continually performed across borders. 'Being a Kurd,' she noted, was enacted through action, presence, and the way she carried herself across Baghdad, Geneva, and Canada. Like my own pendant, which I wore as a quiet assertion of identity, her life demonstrates how Kurdishness is reconstituted in different locations, through dress, memory, and everyday practices. This enactment exemplifies Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity; not simply a compromise between cultures but the creation of a Third Space where new forms of belonging emerge.

She articulates this hybridity expansively, framing Kurdish identity not as a limitation but as a privilege, 'I always felt special, being a Kurd, as if it was a plus, I was born with a plus, because I was a Kurd... what is my responsibility [is] to be the ambassador of this wonderful nation' (See Appendix 3). Here, hybridity is not a burden

but enrichment; Kurdishness becomes a resource that adds rather than subtracts, positioning her as both a representative and a mediator across contexts.

For her, Kurdishness is never carried in isolation but always alongside other attachments. She identifies as Kurdish, Iraqi, Canadian and, ultimately, global. Her metaphor of being ‘born with a plus’ and acting as an ‘ambassador’ captures how she located Kurdishness within a wider field of affiliations. This layering illustrates Levitt and Glick Schiller’s (2004) notion of simultaneity: the ability to inhabit multiple social fields at once, where national, cultural, and transnational identities co-exist rather than cancel each other out.

If my own hybridity has often felt like negotiation, passing, explaining, concealing, Muazaz frames hers as expansiveness. As she put it, ‘Do I want to be one of the crowd? Of course, not... Without losing the core of who I am, I only add on. It’s like having an earring, you have a necklace too... It only makes me more... agreeable, nice, and it makes me happy’ (See Appendix 3). This sense of ‘adding on’ reflects Bhabha’s hybridity not as tension but as creativity, a Third Space of becoming. For Muazaz, belonging is not fragmentation but enrichment, lived across many places and identities at once.

The narratives of Ashna, Shlear and Muazaz reveal the layered and contingent nature of Kurdish identity in the diaspora. Each woman’s account demonstrates how belonging is shaped by context: for Ashna, fragility and misrecognition in Canada had become a source of representation; for Shlear, repression and silence in Iraq and the Gulf had transformed into confidence and pedagogy in Canada; and for Muazaz,

Kurdishness is carried as a struggle and a privilege across multiple global sites. Read together, these stories affirm Hall's (1990) view of identity as becoming and show how diaspora space (Brah, 1996) and simultaneity (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004) are lived differently across generations and migrations. My own trajectory, from concealment in Jordan, to expression in Canada, to hybridity in London, resonates with and diverges from these accounts: like Ashna, I have felt the exhaustion of explaining Kurdishness; like Shlear, I have known the survival strategy of silence; and like Muazaz, I have sought to frame hybridity as enrichment rather than loss.

These accounts also point to the importance of embodiment and material practice in sustaining belonging. Clothing, jewellery, and gestures such as correcting 'north of Iraq' to 'Kurdistan' materialise identity in ways that words alone cannot. It is to these embodied practices that I now turn to Chapter Three.

Chapter Three: Carrying Kurdistan: Dress and Memory in the Diaspora

Dress in the Kurdish diaspora is never just fabric, it is a carrier of memory, a marker of identity, and a means of survival across generations. Building on the previous chapter's focus on identity and belonging, this chapter turns to the embodied and material dimensions of Kurdishness. My analysis draws on photo elicitations with family members, a wardrobe study with Ashna, interviews with participants, and my own autoethnographic reflections. Through these approaches, I show how garments and jewellery function both as everyday practice and as archives of memory, acting as vessels of continuity, adaptation and transmission across generations. I begin with a formative scene from my own family album.

First Memory of Dress

My earliest memory of Kurdish dress is captured in a photograph taken in 2003. My sister, Mardin, and I were dressed for Newroz, the Kurdish New Year that marks the spring equinox. The picture was taken in Canada; I was five years old, and she was nine. A family friend had brought garments tailored to our sizes from her recent visit to Erbil, a city in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, at my mother's request, and, together, she and my mum helped us into them. Kurdish dress is layered and intricate, not something a child can put on alone, and while I did not understand its cultural weight, I remember being enthralled by the process, from the bright colours, the textures, to the sound of the

beads clinking together. As a little girl who loved dressing Barbie dolls, I felt like one myself, momentarily stepping into the world of the women I admired.



Fig. 3.1. Me (left) and my sister Mardin (right) in Kurdish clothes for Newroz, Canada (2002)

When I revisited this photograph with my mother and sister, I was struck by how differently each of us remembered it. My mother explained that she had wanted us to know our origin, that wearing Kurdish dress is a way of holding onto heritage (See Appendix 6). For her, clothing is a thread of continuity, stitching our culture into our lives abroad. My sister, however, recalled a more conflicted response. She remembered being excited but also confused, feeling as though the dress had been a ‘costume’, something that marked her as different, and couldn’t be worn to school (See Appendix

7). While I remember only feelings of joy, excitement, and wonder, she recalled the hesitation of knowing that Kurdish dress could both connect and separate. These contrasts illustrate Hirsch's (2008) theory of postmemory, which she defines as 'the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up' (Hirsch, 2008, p.106). The photograph did not preserve a single memory but transmitted different layered recollections across generations, producing not one fixed inheritance, but overlapping and sometimes diverging inheritances. While this marked my first memory of Kurdish dress, another formative moment came through direct experience; my first visit to the bazaar in Slemani, the Kurdish city my family is from, at the age of eleven.

Embodied Beginnings: Bazaar Encounters and the Wearable Homeland

My first trip to Slemani in 2008 marked the first time I physically set foot in Kurdistan. My mother, sister and I stayed with my grandmother, surrounded, for the first time, by extended family whose presence felt both familiar and new. What stands out most vividly is the day my aunt took us to the downtown bazaar. The streets were alive with movement. From shopkeepers calling out, the smell of spices and food, and fabrics stacked in endless rolls of colour and texture. Choosing a Kurdish dress was not a simple purchase but a ritual. We moved between shops, comparing fabrics, considering

how one outer garment would dictate the layers beneath it. My mother eventually commissioned two dresses, but what captivated me most were the jewellery stalls, where I bought accessories I could wear discreetly back in Jordan. At the time, I could not imagine myself in full Kurdish dress in public, or even at a Kurdish wedding, but those little adornments became a private way of holding onto my culture, portable fragments of Slemani woven into my everyday life. Entwistle reminds us, ‘dress in everyday life is always more than a shell, it is an intimate aspect of the experience and presentation of the self and is so closely linked to the identity that these three – dress, the body and the self – are not perceived separately but simultaneously, as a totality’ (Entwistle, 2000, p.43). This diasporic dress practice can be seen as acts of remembering, belonging, and negotiating identity in often exclusionary environments. My early encounters with Kurdish clothing in Slemani had been intimate and private, bound up with small gestures of belonging. Years later, however, I experienced dress differently; publicly, performative and communal. One of the most striking recent examples was a Kurdish-Polish wedding I attended in the summer of 2025, where Kurdish garments animated the body and the collective through celebration.

Performance and Agency: Dress at the Kurdish-Polish Wedding

At the wedding, Kurdish dress was central to the celebration, animated through the movement of *halparke*, a Kurdish folk dance where people hold hands and move in a unified rhythm. Women’s garments shimmered and swayed as they linked hands, their

dresses both sensual and modest, embodying grace, beauty and pride. As Crane notes, 'clothing, as one of the most visible forms of consumption, performs a major role in the social construction of identity... [and is] useful in maintaining or subverting symbolic boundaries' (2000, p.1). In this setting, the garments not only express individual beauty but also perform Kurdish identity collectively, sustaining cultural boundaries while celebrating them in a public, communal form.

The bride later shifted from a Western gown to a white Kurdish dress in the evening, which symbolises her double belonging, a visual articulation of hybridity (Bhabha, 1994). Circulating photographs extends this performance into an archive beyond the immediate community.

Dress as Cultural Survival and Anthem

Participants also describe the centrality of dress to their own practices. For Shlear, clothing is inseparable from cultural survival: 'Dress is number one for me. Language and dress are the most important two items to keep the culture' (See Appendix 2). Her statement argues that clothing is constitutive of identity itself. She works to ritualise this continuity by establishing Newroz celebrations in Canada so her children can wear Kurdish garments annually, embedding clothing into a cycle of community practice.

Further emphasising the importance of dress, Muazaz articulates dress as both deeply embodied and profoundly cultural. 'First and foremost, it is our national costume, meaning it is our identity, like all the traditional national outfits. It reflects Kurdish culture, which is conservative, yet sensual, feminine, colourful, comfortable to wear, elegant, presentable, and extremely graceful' (See Appendix 3). Her description reveals not only how she feels when wearing Kurdish clothes, but how she understands them as symbolic of Kurdish identity itself. For her, dress embodies the balance of sensuality and modesty, of tradition and adaptability, of beauty and belonging. Her framing of Kurdish dress as inseparable from identity echoes Miller's (2010) argument that objects such as clothing are not merely reflective of culture but constitutive of it, actively shaping how people understand and communicate who they are.

She also expresses concern about how contemporary alterations risks erasing this heritage. 'Lately, however, a lot of change being made to our traditional outfits. Some very beautiful and in line with the traditional style of outfits, which is reassuring that the culture is alive... While regrettably, some are going too far, deviating from the essence of the original by turning it into a non-identified non-classified outfit' (See Appendix 3). This sense of tension between innovation and authenticity underscores her belief that Kurdish dress, while open to creativity, must retain its core to remain recognisably Kurdish. This tension reflects Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity, where cultural forms are continually rearticulated in the Third Space. For Muazaz, however, hybridity must be bounded by recognisable authenticity in order to preserve Kurdish identity.

For Muazaz, the national costume is as foundational as the national anthem, 'National outfit is like the national anthem... You can change the bits here and there, but the core, don't touch it, because it loses the essence of what it is' (See Appendix 3). This metaphor captures how she views clothing as more than aesthetic: like music or language, dress functions as a collective symbol, a condensed form of identity that empowers both the individual and the community. As Crane (2000, p.237) reminds us, clothing is a form of non-verbal communication; in Muazaz's words, Kurdish dress not only represents her personally but also signifies Kurdish belonging to others.

Availability and Adaptation: Improvising in the Diaspora

My mother explains that during her years in Baghdad, she rarely sought Kurdish clothes: 'I never tried to look for it in the first place. Yeah, it was hard. And that's the reason why Kurds in Baghdad didn't wear Kurdish clothes. Because from 1991 the borders closed between Kurdistan and Iraq, and so we wouldn't go to Kurdistan.' (See Appendix 6). The no-fly zone meant many Baghdad-based Kurds had no direct access to the region, making garments scarce (McDowall, 2021, p.391). Migration to Canada continued this absence. When we looked at photos of a Newroz party that took place in the early 2000s, I asked her why she didn't wear the traditional dress, like others did. She responded, 'I didn't have Kurdish clothes. They had Kurdish clothes, so they wore it. But because I didn't have Kurdish clothes, I didn't wear it' (See Appendix 6). Availability shaped practice as much as desire.

Other participants echo this theme. Muazaz recalls sourcing fabrics from Indian shops in Canada, 'All my Kurdish garments are from Indian stores... I took a Kurdish dress to him, and he did it. So, this is all sari' (See Appendix 3). Shlear remembers bringing older garments to tailors so they could be copied in new materials, preserving continuity through replication, as 'options are very limited' (See Appendix 2). Ashna describes how her mother had sewn Kurdish dresses herself: 'If it wasn't for her, we wouldn't have worn Kurdish clothes... she worked so hard to keep it... it was a labour of love' (See Appendix 1). These practices align with Crane's (2000, p.247) argument that fashion continually absorbs and redefines influences through cultural exchange, and with Bhabha's (1994, pp.37-38) concept of hybridity as a Third Space where tradition is reimagined through adaptation.



Figure 3.2 Muazaz in Kurdish-inspired custom dress, Porto (2023)

Ashna also reflects on how the meaning of wearing Kurdish dress had shifted across her life. As a child, she often resisted it for practical reasons, ‘I remember one time I went to a park party, and then I changed out of my Kurdish clothes because I wanted to run around. And then my mom was like, “I spent hours making this... and you’re going to take it off”’ (See Appendix 1). By her thirties, however, she reframed Kurdish dress as a source of pride, ‘When I see myself in Kurdish clothes, I honestly feel

really beautiful... I feel like they were made for us' (See Appendix 1). For Ashna, what began as resistance became pride with age. Her changing perspective over time reflects Hirsch's (2008) concept of postmemory, as her mother's labour of making the garments is later reinterpreted in adulthood as a source of pride and belonging.



Figure 3.3 Young Ashna (centre), with her sisters (left and right) at a Kurdish event, Canada (2000)

Dress as Embodied and Generational Practice

Placed in dialogue with other participants' accounts, these narratives illustrate that Kurdish dress in the diaspora is not simply ornamental but an embodied and generational practice. It is lived through the body in movement and discomfort, whether in the shimmer of sequins during halparke or in the weight of heavy beaded fabrics. It is also a political form, signalling Kurdish identity where it has often been silenced, and, as Muazaz stresses, acting as a kind of national emblem that must retain its core essence. Material conditions have always shaped this practice: the no-fly zone that cut Baghdad off from Kurdish garments, the tailoring of sari fabrics bought at Canadian shops, and

the labour of mothers sewing garments at home. Such examples illustrate Entwistle's (2000, p.38) argument that dress is a 'situated bodily practice', inseparable from its social and political context. At the same time, improvisations in diaspora resonate with Bhabha's (1994, pp.37-38) concept of hybridity as a Third Space where tradition is continually adapted without being erased.

What emerges is a picture of dress as both continuity and change, anchored by women's labour and reinterpreted by younger generations. It carries cultural survival across borders while also allowing for moments of agency, refusal, or pride. This interweaving of practice and meaning points directly towards the next section, where I consider how dress also operates as a site of memory, postmemory, and transmission within the family archive.

Family Archive & Intergenerational Transmission

The role of Kurdish dress in transmitting memory across generations is clear in my mother's earliest recollection. In grade one, she performed a Kurdish poem at her school's end-of-year theatre show, dressed in Kurdish clothes and wearing a gold necklace that belonged to her mother (See Appendix 6). She recalls being helped into the outfit backstage by her mother, a moment that highlights how dress functioned simultaneously as performance and pedagogy: a public affirmation of Kurdishness and a familial act of continuity. As Woodham et al. (2017) and Hirsch (2008) note, family archives are built from objects, photographs and narratives that preserve intergenerational memory. My mother's account shows how clothing and jewellery

operate as vessels of this archive, enabling Kurdishness to be staged, remembered and transmitted.



Figure 3.4 My mother in traditional Kurdish clothes, reciting a Kurdish poem at school theatre, Kurdistan (1972)

After migrating to Canada, she reactivated these practices in new ways, deliberately ordering dresses from relatives in Erbil so that my sister and I could ‘know [our] origin’ (See Appendix 6). In Baghdad, scarcity and access had limited her own use of Kurdish dress; in Canada, she reframed it as a tool of cultural pedagogy for her

children, echoing Giroux's (2004) view of culture's pedagogical force beyond formal schooling. Her wedding photographs from Iraq tell another story; while she did not wear Kurdish clothes at the main ceremony, she wore it at her engagement. This selective preservation demonstrates that family archives are not simply a matter of presence, but a curation of it, as garments are preserved and activated at particular moments, carrying a layered meaning across contexts.

My sister's recollection of her first Kurdish dress in Canada adds a further layer. As discussed earlier, she describes it as a 'costume' that could not be worn beyond the walls of home (See Appendix 7). Jenss (2015, pp.21-22) reminds us that clothing carries past associations into present experience; in her case, the dress became a marker of dissonance rather than pride. This contrast illustrates how the family archive does not produce a single inheritance but uneven, sometimes conflicting memories of belonging.

Objects as Vessels of Memory

Beyond photographs, jewellery and garments function as vessels of memory, anchoring personal and cultural histories in material form. Miller (2010, p.50) argues that objects carry biographies, accruing meaning as they move through lives and generations. In diasporic contexts, these meanings are transformed by migration, absence and resilience.

Ashna recalls the first time she wore a pair of earrings at the age of six for a Kurdish party, when her mother warned her not to lose them. ‘I felt very scared... hyper aware of them the entire night,’ she explained, adding that over the years she and her sisters all wore them in turn (See Appendix 3). Their significance is amplified by her mother’s reminder that they came from the 1970s, from Baghdad, and had been passed down before reaching her daughters. Ashna linked them to her earliest memories of Kurdish gatherings, explaining that because the family did not have many pieces of jewellery from that time, these earrings felt particularly special. She continues to wear them today, associating them with both her childhood memories and their longer family history.



Figure 3.5 Ashna’s earrings, photographed during wardrobe study, Canada (2025)

Shlear similarly highlights the bracelet gifted by her mother on her wedding day, which she still wears decades later (See Appendix 2). She also keeps her Newroz dress from the age of seventeen, alongside a large Kurdish heirloom pendant called the *Ashok Bend* that hangs over the chest. These items materialise continuity, as they allow her to revisit moments of cultural affirmation while transmitting them to her children. These

heirlooms align with Hirsch's (2008) concept of postmemory, as they embody cultural memory and enable its transmission across generations.



Figure 3.6 – Shleer's Ashok Bend (left) and bracelet (right), photographed by Shleer, in 2020.

For Muazaz, memory is bound up with both presence and absence. She recalls that her family once had heavy gold headpieces and accessories, but these were gradually sold or divided between relatives during times of movement and loss. 'Travelling and going to... from one place to another you don't usually carry those golden heavy pieces... later on, I realised, oh my God, what I did to myself, why I didn't keep them' (See Appendix 3). At the time, imitation jewellery seemed more practical, yet she now mourns the loss of the originals. This regret highlights how migration can fracture material continuity, leaving memories to carry the weight of what is no longer physically present.

At the same time, she describes how sari fabrics were repurposed into Kurdish dresses after her migration to Canada, transforming absence into presence through

adaptation. In this interplay of loss and re-creation, her account reflects what Boym (2001) terms reflective nostalgia, a way of remembering that acknowledges what is irretrievably gone while reworking fragments into new forms of continuity. This paradoxical invisibility of objects in their significance emphasises their emotional power. They are powerful precisely because they are integrated seamlessly into daily life. For migrants, such objects, specifically traditional dress, may operate as stabilising anchors amid turmoil, displacement, and cultural rupture. Clothing becomes a way to carry one's history, to touch the familiar, and to locate the self within unfamiliar settings. Miller's (2010) perspective helps to illuminate how everyday dress in the diaspora becomes part of a broader system of cultural continuity and personal resilience.

Ashna's wardrobe offers a striking example of how garments transmit histories beyond the generation that first wore them. During our wardrobe study, she brought out a gold outerwear dress that had travelled with her family from Erbil in the 1970s, through a refugee camp in Turkey, and eventually to Canada (See Appendix 4). She explains that the piece had been worn by her mother in Kurdistan, then carefully folded and carried during years of displacement, before being altered so that her daughters could eventually wear it. Though Ashna had not lived through the journeys that shaped this dress, its fabric bore the traces of that history. For her, putting it on is not only an act of adornment but a way of inhabiting a past she had inherited rather than directly experienced. This underscores how garments can participate in what Hirsch (2008) calls 'postmemorial work', the reactivation and embodiment of memories of

displacement through individual and familial acts of mediation (p.111). The gold dress is not static, its stitches record both survival and adaptation, marking its passage across borders while sustaining cultural continuity. In its material endurance, the garment embodies the affective labour of women who preserve it, ensuring that memory is not lost but carried forward in wearable form.



Figure 3.7 Collection of personal family photographs from Ashna, with the golden Kurdish dress worn throughout the years, taken in 2025 during wardrobe study.

Tracing these stories side by side shows how objects hold memory actively rather than passively. They embody the labour of women who preserve, alter and pass them down, ensuring that Kurdish dress traditions endure even when uprooted from their homeland. As Jenss (2015, p.21) suggests, they act as ‘mnemonic devices’, objects that trigger and organise memory, binding together temporal and affective registers that help individuals, especially in displaced contexts, to locate themselves in time and culture. The earrings, bracelet, headpieces and gold dress demonstrate this dynamic, functioning not merely as adornments but as anchors through which histories of migration and belonging are remembered, curated and reactivated across time. These memories and objects remind us that Kurdish dress in the diaspora is more than material culture, it is a living archive, continually reactivated through women’s labour, care, and transmission. This raises broader questions of how dress sustains identity across displacement, which I return to in the conclusion.

Conclusion

This dissertation explores how Kurdish women in the diaspora engage with traditional dress as a carrier of memory, identity, and belonging. Focusing on Kurdish women in Toronto, it examines how clothing practices preserve cultural heritage, sustain communal ties, and mediate diasporic life. Drawing on oral history interviews, wardrobe studies, photo-elicitation, and autoethnography, the study has shown that garments are not merely decorative but function as living archives, embodying stories of displacement, resilience, and continuity.

To understand the dissertation's objective, it is important to situate these practices within the historical and political conditions in which Kurdish women have grown up. Chapter One, *Fragmented Homeland: What Led to the Kurdish Diaspora?* demonstrates how Kurdish identity has long been shaped by statelessness, repression, and cultural erasure. Under these conditions, traditional dress became not only an aesthetic marker but also a symbol of endurance and resistance, carrying meaning precisely because it was threatened with suppression. Chapter Two, *Negotiating Kurdish Identity in Exile*, explores how Kurdish identity is reconfigured in Canada. The narratives of Ashna, Shlear, and Muazaz reveal that identity is not fixed but negotiated in relation to memory, migration, and social context. These women use clothing to represent Kurdishness in public, to preserve family traditions, and to balance hybridity with cultural pride. Chapter Three, *Carrying Kurdistan: Dress and Memory in Diaspora*, examines how garments and jewellery operate as embodied memory. Wardrobe studies and photo-elicitation highlight the emotional and tactile dimensions

of clothing: a gold dress carried from Kurdistan becomes a bridge between mother and daughter; a pendant in the shape of Kurdistan materialises a homeland on the body.

This research makes four main contributions. First, it documents the underexplored experiences of Kurdish-Canadian women, expanding the geographic scope of both Kurdish and diaspora studies beyond the more frequently examined contexts of Europe and the Middle East. Second, it develops the concept of the wearable homeland, showing how garments operate as portable sites of memory and belonging. Third, it demonstrates how clothing and jewellery act as intergenerational bridges, transmitting memory and identity between mothers and daughters and resonating with Hirsch's notion of postmemory. Fourth, it underscores the role of women as cultural custodians, curating, safeguarding, and adapting dress as part of the ongoing work of cultural preservation in diaspora. Methodologically, the combination of ethnography, autoethnography, and material culture analysis illustrates how reflexive insider research can generate nuanced insights into diasporic life.

As a Kurdish woman in the diaspora, my insider position has shaped the production of this research. Shared language and culture fostered trust and intimacy, enabling participants to speak candidly and show me garments imbued with deep personal meaning. Yet, proximity also risked assumption and bias, especially when interviewing family members and acquaintances. Reflexive practices—keeping a research diary, collecting data, and situating interpretations within cultural context—were essential to balancing empathy with critical analysis. Conducting this project was not only an academic task but also an act of self-discovery, reminding me that research

is never separate from the world it studies. I learned that clothing can be both a bridge and a boundary: sometimes resonating deeply with my own memories, other times confronting me with differences that sharpened my understanding. This process reinforced my conviction that garments are never just textiles, they are living archives that carry identity across time and space.

The study's scope is necessarily limited. It focuses on a small number of Kurdish women from the Bashur region of Kurdistan living in Toronto, and while this allows for depth and intimacy, it cannot capture the full diversity of Kurdish diasporic experiences. Kurdish communities from Turkey, Syria, or Iran may engage with traditional dress differently, as may men or younger generations. The reliance on personal networks introduces a degree of sampling bias, and insider research inevitably carries subjectivity. These limitations are acknowledged not as flaws but as boundaries that frame the specificity of this study. Future work could expand by tracing the historical evolution and regional variations of Kurdish dress, analysing how social and political forces have shaped its transformation over time. Equally, research into men's clothing practices, or a closer material analysis of fabrics and techniques, would enrich our understanding of Kurdish dress as a whole. Intergenerational studies and digital ethnography could further illuminate how garments and memories are transmitted, adapted, and circulated within and beyond the diaspora.

Finally, while it is common to make artefacts out of remnants of war, such as the bullet holes preserved in the Amna Suraka Museum or the clothing of the executed, it is just as crucial to preserve cultural forms independent of conflict. Kurdish dress deserves

to be documented not only as a testament to survival but as an expression of beauty, continuity, and creativity. Too often, devastation is catalogued while the beautiful is overlooked; cannons are remembered, while dresses fade into silence. This dissertation insists that garments are worth recording in their own right. Even in an imagined Kurdistan free of displacement, there still is value in documenting dress, just as the French or Italians preserve their clothing histories. The added layers of war and exile make this work urgent, but they are not its only justification. In showing how Kurdish women transform garments into archives of identity and belonging, this dissertation creates a record for future students and communities to refer to. It affirms that clothing is central to how displaced people remember, reimagine, and assert themselves, and that such documentation is, in itself, an act of preservation and care.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Consent Forms

CONSENT FORM

1. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the information sheet
2. I agree to participate in the research project as described

ual:

3. I agree to the items checked below:

- to be interviewed
- that my voice will be audio recorded
- that my photo / a film of me will be taken
- to be observed and for field notes to be taken
- that information obtained may be published with my identity included (e.g. name, voice, photos, visual material)
- that my data may be stored in an identifiable form until December 31, 2025, unless I withdraw my consent earlier

4. I acknowledge that:

- (a) I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the project at any time and request the deletion of unprocessed data previously supplied (unless already published).
- (b) The project is for the purpose of research. It may not be of direct benefit to me.
- (c) I understand that my identifiable information (such as name, image, or voice) may be included in the research outputs if I give explicit consent.
- (d) I understand that my personal information will be securely stored and only used for the purposes described in the information sheet.

Participant's Consent

'I agree to the above as indicated and give my explicit consent under GDPR Art.6(1)(a) and Art.9(2)(a) for my personal data to be processed by UAL as indicated on this form, including any special category data I may choose to provide'

Participant: Rehna Ali Date: July 28, 2025
(Signature)

Participants should be given a copy of this after it has been signed.

ual:

3. I agree to the items checked below:

- to be interviewed
- that my voice will be audio recorded
- that my photo / a film of me will be taken
- to be observed and for field notes to be taken
- that information obtained may be published with my identity included (e.g. name, voice, photos, visual material)
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Participant:

M. Aziz
(Signature)

Date:

July 24, 2025

Participants should be given a copy of this after it has been signed.

ual:

CONSENT FORM

1. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the information sheet
2. I agree to participate in the research project as described
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- that my voice will be audio recorded that my photo / a film of me will be
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- photos, visual material) that my data may be stored in an identifiable form until December 31, 2025, unless I withdraw my consent earlier

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Participant's Consent

'I agree to the above as indicated and give my explicit consent under GDPR Art.6(1)(a) and Art.9(2)(a) for my personal data to be processed by UAL as indicated on this form, including any special category data I may choose to provide'

Participant:



 (Signature)

Date: August 3rd, 2025

Participants should be given a copy of this after it has been signed.

ual:

CONSENT FORM

1. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the information sheet
2. I agree to participate in the research project as described
3. I agree to the items checked below:
 - to be interviewed
 - that my voice will be audio recorded that my photo / a film of me will be taken
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 - that my data may be stored in an identifiable form until December 31, 2025, unless I withdraw my consent earlier
4. I acknowledge that:
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