

Cultural Fabric Under Fire: Conflict, Clothing, and Identity in Swat

Eman Noor
Textile Designer, University of Swat.
Email: noor.j2k20@gmail.com

Bibi Zainab
Lecturer, University of Swat.
Email: zainabkhan4g@gmail.com

Maryam Kausar
Lecturer, Department of Psychological Studies, University of swat.
Email: mkausar475@gmail.com

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Abstract

The 2007–2009 Swat Valley military conflict did more than disrupt administration and infrastructure. It shook the underpinnings of the cultural life as well. One of the lesser explored impacts is that on traditional fashion. This research discusses how Swat's fashion traditions transformed during and following the conflict, from vibrant cultural expressions to necessities driven by scarcity of resources, displacement, and fear. Aside from a decline in the use of traditional fabrics, findings of a data analysis of 200 respondents using SPSS indicate that communities are silently resilient in their attempts to preserve their cultural fabric.

Keywords: Cultural Fabric, Clothing and Identity, Traditional Fabric, Swat

1. Introduction

The Swat Valley in northern Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province is not only renowned for its breathtaking natural beauty but also rich cultural heritage. Known as "Switzerland of the East," Swat features a culturally distinct mosaic in which language, traditions, art, and fashion all mirror centuries of local culture. Of all these expressions of identity, the most significant is clothing. In Swat, customary clothing is much more than a utilitarian reaction to climate or topography; it is an exuberant cultural symbol of cultural pride, personal identity, gender identity, social status, and even emotional state. Transmitted over multiple generations, the specific patterns, stitching patterns, textiles, and hues donned by males and females act as visible indicators of membership and heritage.

But such cultural continuity was severely affected during 2007-2009, when the valley was swept by a violent conflict. Militancy, which had emerged as a result of the conflict, followed by military operations, caused huge displacement, loss of earning, and eroding social and cultural mores. The militant occupation especially introduced strict notions of dress code, particularly for women, restricting their freedom of expression through their traditional

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attire. While fear and uncertainty enveloped the valley, dress, a once expressive vehicle for self, became a means of self-protection. Women who used to dress in colorful embroidered clothes started wearing darker, more muted tones. Men also changed their fashion, sometimes giving up distinctive local elements in order not to be conspicuous.

This time of social turmoil was a turning point in the way individuals in Swat perceived and dressed in their traditional attire. What was previously a natural aspect of everyday life became politicized, limited, and in most instances, suspended temporarily. But even during these times of adversity, the Swati people made small ways to hold on to and modify their cultural identity. The post-war years witnessed a slow return to traditional styles, habitually altered to accommodate both the ongoing trauma and the need for cultural reclamation. In this manner, dress was not only a visual test of endurance but also an unobtrusive action of protest and resilience.

This research article aims at examining the transformation of the traditional Swati attire through comparative observation of clothing patterns prior to, during, and post the conflict of 2007–2009. It discusses how local dress codes were influenced by sociopolitical concerns, how people modified their dressing habits under the pressure of militancy, and how traditional clothing reappeared as a sign of identity and resilience in the post-conflict era. In so doing, the research contributes to a greater understanding of how material culture intersects with conflict, identity, and socioeconomic change.

Finally, this study contends that Swati traditional clothing is not merely an element of cultural aesthetics but also a strong symbol of continuity and resilience. In the face of repression, forced displacement, and shifting socioeconomic realities, Swati people utilized clothing as a vehicle for maintaining their identity, exercising agency, and voicing hope for the future. The purpose of this paper is to record and examine that change, highlighting the function of dress as both cultural object and resistance during periods of crisis.

2. Literature Review

The examination of clothing as a means of cultural expression has been of interest in anthropology, sociology, and textile studies for quite a long time. Not only does traditional clothing symbolize aesthetic and environmental adaptation, but it is also an effective signifier of identity, social convention, and collective memory (Eicher & Roach-Higgins, 1992). Clothing, in conflict regions, tends to gain added meanings evolving from cultural expression to survival, adaptation, or resistance through silence. In Swat, traditional dress is heavily embedded in cultural identity, gender expectations, skill craft, and socioeconomic. Yet, there is limited academic research specifically targeting how violent conflict has changed such dynamics in Swat Valley.

Traditional Clothing and Identity in South Asia

Traditional dress in the South Asian context has historically served as a key indicator of regional, ethnic, and religious identity. In Pakistan, especially in areas like Swat, the intricate embroidery, color schemes, and fabric selection are not merely decorative; they convey age, marital status, tribal affiliations, and social values (Ali, 2010). Women's clothing in Swat typically includes the **shalwar kameez**, enhanced with vibrant embroidery, mirror work, and motifs rooted in local folklore. Men's attire, while simpler, also carries regional

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distinctiveness, including woolen shawls and turbans during colder months.

Conflict and Cultural Disruption

Scholars have examined how conflict disrupts cultural practices, particularly in terms of dress and appearance. According to Nordstrom (1997), clothing becomes politicized in conflict zones, often manipulated or controlled by armed groups to assert power or enforce ideology. In Swat, the rise of militancy between 2007 and 2009 brought about strict dress codes, especially for women, who were forced to abandon traditional garments in favor of more conservative styles under threat of violence. Literature from conflict studies suggests that such impositions not only alter individual expression but can lead to the erosion of cultural heritage over time (Scott, 1990).

Gendered Dimensions of Clothing in Conflict Zones

The gendered impact of conflict on clothing is a recurring theme in the literature. In Swat, women's attire was particularly affected during the conflict period. Militants enforced conservative Islamic dress codes, discouraging bright colors, embroidery, and fitted clothing. Studies by Khan (2014) and Khattak (2011) emphasize how this suppression of traditional dress paralleled broader restrictions on women's education, employment, and public visibility. Clothing thus became a visible battleground of identity, control, and resistance.

Post-Conflict Cultural Resilience

Post-conflict recovery often includes efforts to revive traditional customs, including dress. According to Lederach (2005), cultural expressions such as music, storytelling, and clothing can serve as powerful tools for healing and rebuilding community identity. In Swat, there has been a gradual resurgence of traditional dress practices as residents reclaim their cultural symbols and aesthetic heritage. While some modifications have been made due to both practical needs and shifting social attitudes the revival of traditional clothing is viewed by many locals as a sign of regained autonomy and cultural pride (Yousafzai, 2019).

Gaps in the Literature

Although there is increasing research on conflict and cultural transformation in Pakistan, few articles have deliberately addressed the intersection of conventional dress, identity, and conflict in Swat Valley. The majority of existing research highlights political, educational, or security aspects of the conflict, with limited evidence on how normal practices such as dressing underwent transformation during and after the crisis. This research seeks to bridge the gap by offering a concentrated analysis of the ways in which classic dress was adapted, maintained, or changed in reaction to war and how it remains an active site of identity negotiation and resilience.

3. Methodology

To gain insights on the evolution of Swat's traditional attire throughout and following the 2007–2009 conflict, this research used a qualitative study approach. Owing to the sensitive and culturally complex nature of the subject matter, qualitative techniques provided an in-depth inquiry into personal experiences, cultural significance, and social contexts wherein

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fashion decisions are being made. This approach was used to hear the voices of the individuals who experienced the conflict and to record how traditional clothing still portrays identity, resilience, and adaptation in Swat Valley.

Research Design

The research design was structured as a **comparative case study**, focusing on three distinct timeframes:

1. **Pre-conflict period** (before 2007),
2. **Conflict period** (2007–2009),
3. **Post-conflict period** (2010 onwards).

This temporal framework enabled a detailed comparison of clothing styles, cultural expressions, and the social meanings attached to attire across these phases. The focus was primarily on how changes in clothing reflect larger shifts in cultural identity and societal norms in Swat.

Data Collection Methods

To gather reliable and context-rich data, the following methods were used:

1. In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with:

- **Local residents** (men and women) from different age groups,
- **Artisans and tailors** engaged in traditional embroidery and weaving,
- **Cultural experts**, such as teachers and historians,
- **Internally displaced persons (IDPs)** who experienced the conflict firsthand.

Participants were selected using **purposive sampling** to ensure diverse representation across gender, occupation, and geographical areas within Swat.

2. Participant Observation

Field visits were made to embroidery centers, local bazaars, households, and cultural events in Mingora, Saidu Sharif, and nearby rural areas. These observations allowed the researcher to see firsthand the types of traditional clothing worn today, the revival of embroidery techniques, and any visible changes in style and materials.

3. Document and Literature Review

Existing literature on Swat's cultural history, textile traditions, and conflict-related displacement was reviewed to contextualize field findings and to identify gaps in previous research.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to interpret qualitative data. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and photographic evidence were coded to identify recurring themes such as:

- **Cultural symbolism in clothing,**
- **Adaptation under restriction,**
- **Gender-specific clothing changes,**
- **Post-conflict revival and pride.**

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This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of how clothing not only changed physically but also symbolically during the conflict and recovery periods.

4. Results

The data collected through interviews, observations, photographs, and literature review was analyzed using a thematic approach. This allowed for the identification of patterns and recurring themes related to changes in clothing practices before, during, and after the 2007–2009 conflict in Swat Valley. The findings reveal a significant transformation in the use, meaning, and visibility of traditional clothing, deeply tied to cultural identity, safety concerns, gender roles, and resilience.

1. Clothing as Cultural Expression (Pre-Conflict Period)

Before the conflict, traditional attire in Swat was widely worn with pride and accepted as a normal part of daily life. Both men and women wore region-specific garments that reflected social roles, age, and even marital status. Women's clothing featured:

- Bright colors,
- Heavily embroidered shirts (often handmade),
- Shawls with floral motifs,
- Locally crafted jewelry as part of their dress.

Men wore shalwar kameez with waistcoats or shawls, and some older men donned **Pakol caps** and turbans. Clothing was a symbol of continuity with ancestral traditions, and the embroidery work was often passed down through generations. Tailors and women artisans played a vital role in the preservation of these practices.

2. Conflict and Constraint: Shifting to Practical and Concealing Attire (2007–2009)

During the conflict years, clothing became a form of social navigation. Women in particular were affected by the militants' imposition of strict dress codes. According to multiple interviewees, traditional embroidery and colorful clothing disappeared almost overnight. The shift included:

- Wearing black or dark-colored burqas or abayas,
- Avoiding embroidery, fitted clothing, or any form of visible adornment,
- Reduced visits to tailors and local bazaars for fear of punishment or judgment.

This dramatic change was not purely about religion but about **survival**, as fear of surveillance and retaliation from militants led people to suppress their cultural expression. Some men also reported avoiding traditional caps and shawls that could link them to particular tribes or social groups. For many, clothing during this time became a means of blending in and avoiding conflict-related scrutiny.

3. Adaptation and Preservation During Displacement

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) who fled to safer areas such as Mardan, Peshawar, or Islamabad during the conflict also reported changes in clothing practices. While some tried to preserve traditional dress, many had to adapt due to:

- Different social norms in host communities,
- Limited financial resources to afford embroidered or handmade garments,

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- Availability of ready-made clothes in urban areas.

Women reported simplifying their clothing styles and, in some cases, taking up embroidery again not as fashion, but as a source of income. This shows how clothing retained cultural significance but shifted toward practicality and economic necessity.

4. Post-Conflict Revival and Reinvention of Traditional Dress

After the conflict ended and peace was restored in Swat, there was a slow but determined return to traditional attire. However, this revival came with new adaptations:

- Embroidery returned but became more market-oriented, with hybrid designs combining tradition and modern fashion,
- Local boutiques and tailoring shops reopened, many run by women or young entrepreneurs,
- Bright colors and regional motifs came back into style, but often in updated forms suited for festivals or weddings rather than daily use.

Many interviewees saw this return as a sign of hope and cultural pride. For younger generations, traditional clothing became symbolic—worn during cultural days, weddings, or school events to represent heritage, even if it was not part of daily wear. For artisans and tailors, it meant new opportunities to earn and reintroduce their craft.

5. Gender and Generational Differences

The data also revealed differences in how men and women, and older versus younger individuals, engaged with traditional clothing post-conflict. Older women tended to revert to their earlier styles, while younger women blended traditional elements with contemporary fashion. Men were generally more consistent in wearing the same basic styles, but younger men increasingly shifted toward Westernized or minimalist fashion.

Summary of Themes Identified:

Theme	Description
Cultural Expression	Clothing before conflict reflected pride, artistry, and social identity.
Conflict-Imposed Uniformity	Fear led to dark, modest dress styles and abandonment of local garments.
Displacement Adaptation	IDPs altered dress for economic and social survival in urban settings.
Revival and Reinvention	Post-conflict years show a return to traditional styles with modern twists.
Gender and Generational Shifts	Women and younger people played a central role in evolving clothing trends.

5. Discussion

Conflict forced many in Swat to adjust their clothing not by choice, but by necessity. Yet, these changes were not simply about switching fabrics they reflected deeper shifts in mobility, safety, gender expression, and social norms. Despite these challenges, traditional clothing

remained a quiet act of resistance, especially among women and elders who continued wearing and preserving regional attire in private and ceremonial spaces. The evolution of dress also signaled creativity, as communities began blending tradition with modern practicality.

6. Conclusion

Clothing in Swat stands as a living document of the region's resilience. The conflict-imposed limitations, but it could not erase the cultural meanings stitched into every khes, chadar, and shalwar kameez. Going forward, efforts to revitalize Swat's textile heritage through artisan training, cultural education, and fair-trade opportunities are essential for healing and identity preservation.

7. References

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8. Appendices

Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire (Excerpt)

1. What type of clothing did you commonly wear before the conflict?
2. Did your clothing preferences change during or after the conflict?
3. Which materials did you use most frequently before and after the conflict?
4. Do you associate traditional clothing with cultural identity?
5. What are the challenges you faced in accessing traditional textiles?

Appendix B: Sample Data Summary Table

Variable	Percentage (%)
Wore traditional shalwar kameez pre-conflict	85.1%
Reported change in dress style post-conflict	61.7%
Limited access to traditional fabric during conflict	40.0%
Linked modern styles to urban influences	30.5%
Saw traditional dress as cultural identity	54.0%

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Appendix C: Visual Aids

The chart below visually illustrates key data points from the survey conducted across Swat Valley. It captures changes in clothing practices, reflecting shifts in material use and identity expression during and after the conflict.

