

Rag Dolls and the Cultural Identity of Zoroastrian Female Society

*By Azadeh Pashootanizadeh**

After the collapse of the Sasanian Empire, the Zoroastrians of Iran formed a community united by a shared religious identity, later evolving into an ethnic group. The strategic importance of the Silk Road, combined with the familiarity of Zoroastrian textile merchants with this route, facilitated several waves of Zoroastrian migration. However, those who remained in Iran settled in various Silk Road stations and faced social pressures and discriminatory laws imposed by Islamic rulers. These circumstances led Zoroastrian women to promote textile and silk production as a means of preserving their cultural, gender, and ethnic identity. The garments of Zoroastrian women in Iran symbolize various aspects of the community's identity and encompass both intangible heritage and material culture, which are passed down through oral literature and traditions. Zoroastrian silk costumes and puppet theater performances, using Rag dolls made from recycled silk or cotton textiles, not only convey dress codes, production processes, and components of Zoroastrian women's clothing but also provide knowledge about medicinal plants and natural dyes. These practices contribute to the preservation of the Zoroastrians' unique language.

Keywords: *Zoroastrian women, Iran, Textile, Rag dolls, identity.*

Introduction

The official religion of all Iranians during the Sassanid period was Zoroastrianism. However, with the shift in the religion of the Iranians, Zoroastrians' religious and ethnic identity became intertwined, transforming them into an ethnic group.

Initially focused on preserving their religious identity, Zoroastrian women, facing increasing social threats, turned to textile production to ensure their survival and preserve both their religious and social identity. Meanwhile, some Zoroastrians, including silk and textile merchants, preferred migration due to their knowledge of Silk Road routes.

The role of dolls that migrated with settlers in preserving Zoroastrian women's cultural identity, oral literature, and traditions was crucial. These dolls incorporated textile techniques, medicinal and dye plants, garment components, dress codes, and color palettes in accordance with Zoroastrian culture.

This study examines aspects of Zoroastrian women's culture, such as the development of textile production, dress codes, and preservation through dolls designed to maintain gender and religious identities. Textile production and silk weaving were

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vital to their cultural and ethnic identity and served as a form of gender expression. Dolls representing fairies in oral traditions were also seen as protectors and metaphysical supporters.

The author, an Iranian Zoroastrian woman, offers an insider's perspective, providing insights into Zoroastrian culture that may not be fully accessible even to Zoroastrian men.

Literature Review

Iran's cultural heritage officially registered the Zoroastrian Bibi Kūk dolls as item No. 1517 in the National Inventory of Cultural Heritage in January 2018. However, the original registration file lacks comprehensive and detailed information about these dolls. While a few images attached to the file illustrate the stages of their creation, there is no explanation regarding their specific purpose or the reasons for their use. The Cultural Heritage Department of Yazd Province, responsible for the registration, has not distinguished between the silk and cotton rag dolls.

Jamsheed K. Choksy, a Zoroastrian from the Indian diaspora, has conducted an in-depth examination of the cultural geography of Zoroastrians in Iran, focusing on their religious and cultural foundations. Additionally, the identity of Zoroastrian women in Iran and their textile production has been explored in several Persian-language articles by Azadeh Pashootanizasdeh, which have been referenced in this study.

Katayun Mazdapour, an Iranian Zoroastrian woman, has concentrated her research on aspects of Zoroastrian oral literature. However, her work does not explore the relationship between dialectal language and anthropology. Therefore, her research cannot be referenced in relation to the study of rag dolls.

Methodology/Materials and Methods

The material culture related to Zoroastrian women's silk weaving and rag dolls has been gathered from private collections and museums, including the Zoroastrian Anthropology Museum in Kerman and the Zoroastrian History and Culture Museum in Yazd.

Semi-structured interviews, photographs, and documentary films from family albums and archives (including archives from the Ministry of Cultural Heritage of Iran, the National Library of Iran, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Organization, and UNESCO) are among the key sources utilized in this research.

This interdisciplinary, descriptive-analytical, and qualitative research involved (1) library research, (2) fieldwork, and (3) the use of documentary films or archival images from personal or official collections.

Zoroastrianism in Iran

Zoroastrianism, originating around 3,000 years ago, was the dominant religion in Iran until the 7th-century Arab conquests. It was the state religion of the Sasanian Empire (224-651 CE). After the Arab conquest, most Iranians converted to Islam, and Zoroastrians became a minority. However, tribute payments by Sasanian governors helped protect Zoroastrians from forced conversion and preserve their places of worship (Choksy, 2012, p. 217).

Zoroastrianism remained dominant in eastern Iran, including Sistan, Khorasan, and Transoxiana, for nearly two centuries after the invasion (Choksy, 1990, p. 213). In the 9th century, a significant Zoroastrian presence was noted in Fars, Rey, Khorasan, and Kerman (Shahmardan, 1984, p. 7). During the Iranian Intermezzo (Persian Renaissance), Zoroastrian culture persisted across Iran, from Tabaristan to central Iran.

Abu Dulaf al-Ijli in the 9th century, along with numerous reports from the 10th century by Ibn al-Faqih, Ibn Hawqal, and al-Mas'ūdī, indicate that the central and southern regions of Iran were recognized as active Zoroastrian settlements in the country¹.

Zoroastrianism gradually lost its dominance after the fall of the Sasanian dynasty and became a minority religion by the 13th century. Over time, the Zoroastrian population dwindled to fewer than 10,000, with the faith concentrated in the desert cities of Yazd and Kerman (Stausberg, 2002a). In the 1970s, the population grew to around 25,000, with many settling in Tehran (Stausberg, 2002b). However, after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, many Zoroastrians emigrated, and today their population is estimated at under 20,000, comprising less than 0.03% of Iran's total population (Rivetna, 2013).

The Forced Migrations of Zoroastrians from Iran

During the Sasanian era, Khorasan and Tabaristan were key Silk Road trade centers in Iran. Zoroastrians in these regions continued their involvement in silk trade even after the fall of the Sasanian Empire (Al-Maqdisi, 1982, pp. 474–475; Ibn al Faqih, 1988, p. 87; Al-Jahshiyari, 1969; Bayhaqi, 2004; Al-Ṭabarī, 2005). The reports from the 10th and 11th centuries highlight their role in preserving silk's intangible heritage. Over time, Zoroastrians migrated, dispersing both within Iran and beyond, with their route following the Silk Road. External migrations of the Zoroastrians over the centuries, prior to the Iranian Revolution, were mainly to India

¹For a detailed account of the geographical and cultural landscape of Iran during the 10th century, please refer to the works of several key historians and geographers. Ibn Hawqal's *Sorat al-ard* (1992) offers comprehensive descriptions of the earth's features, with particular focus on the regions of central and southern Iran. Similarly, Ibn Faqih's *Mukhtasar Kitab al-Buldan* (1988) provides a summary of the lands and their cultural significance in the same period. Additionally, Mas'udi's *Murooj al-dahab wa kaddan al-jawahir* (2005) explores the socio-cultural and economic contexts of the time, enriching the historical narrative of Iran. For further insight into the travels and experiences in 9th-century Iran, refer to Abu Dulaf al-Khazraji's *Safarhā-ye Abu Dulaf: seyri dar Irān dar qarn-e chahārom-e hejri* (1975), which is a firsthand account of a journey across Iran in the 4th century AH.

and China. Zoroastrians migrated to China during the first and second periods, which belong to the pre-Sassanian era and shortly after the fall of the Sassanian Empire, and to India during the third, fourth, and fifth periods, which span from the fall of the Sassanian Empire to the 1970s.

China

Before and during the Sassanid Period

Iranian Zoroastrians established their temples in China long before the Tang Dynasty, during the Sassanian period and even earlier, as trade centers located near marketplaces and trade routes (Liu, 2007, p. 180). During the Tang period, Zoroastrian temples were located along the Silk Road, and historical sources report the existence of Zoroastrian fire temples in various parts of China, especially in Chang'an (Benn, 2002, p. 59). Parsian Village in Yangzhou remains as a reminder from this period. The village is named after a Zoroastrian Iranian merchant who traveled along the Maritime Silk Road during the Tang Dynasty, and it has a romantic story attached to it. The inhabitants of the village consider themselves descendants of Iranian Zoroastrian merchants. (The Circle of Ancient Iranian Studies, 2003)

The End of the Sassanian Era and Shortly Thereafter

Little is known about the Zoroastrians who migrated to China during this period, apart from the tombs of two Sassanid princes, Narseh and Peroz III, the latter of whom was recognized as the "King of Persia" at the Tang court in Chang'an. Additionally, historical records mention the existence of a Zoroastrian temple in Chang'an, which became a sanctuary for Zoroastrian refugees following the Islamic conquest of Sassanid Iran (Foltz, 2010, p. 95). After that, there is no clear trace of Zoroastrian silk traders in Chinese history. The only references to the killing of Zoroastrians can be found in a few Arabic sources that document the Guangzhou massacre (Gernet, 1996, p. 292).

India

Zoroastrians migrated to India in three waves and are categorized into three groups based on the time of their migration:

- the Parsi (8th-10th centuries)*
- the Farsi (16th-18th centuries)*
- the Irani (19th-20th centuries) (Marashi, 2008)*

Simultaneously with the Third Wave of Zoroastrian Migration from Iran to India in the late 19th century, Keikhosrow Shahrokh—whose mother was involved in textile weaving—established three schools for Zoroastrian girls. Furthermore, in 1903, another girls' school was founded by a Zoroastrian cotton merchant named

Khosrow Shah Jahan. These institutions provided a conducive environment for practical textile training among Zoroastrian girls (Hajji Akbari, 2015, pp. 13, 15). However, the lack of written instructional resources led the masters of silk weaving to form an association in 1925, under the leadership of a Parsi woman from India named "Zar-Banu" (Pashootanizadeh, 2022a, p. 134). The association began publishing educational materials specifically focused on textile production and weaving, with the aim of providing comprehensive training in textile arts and garment production to Zoroastrian girls. However, the 19th and 20th centuries were also marked by events both from outside and within the Zoroastrian community, which will be analyzed in the following section.

✓ The Industrial Revolution and the large-scale migration of Zoroastrians threatened their traditional textile industry. Weavers migrated, and industrial fabrics replaced handwoven textiles. Migration also endangered the preservation of the dress code and cultural identity of Zoroastrian women, leading to their gradual erasure. To preserve their traditional dress code, Zoroastrian women created portable dolls resembling small mannequins, serving as reminders of their cultural identity as migrating women in a foreign land. Given that the Industrial Revolution brought changes to women's clothing styles in line with shifts in lifestyle, Zoroastrian women created rag dolls as models to teach the proper way to wear their traditional costumes. The costume of Zoroastrian women was incompatible with the new lifestyle brought about by the Industrial Revolution due to its diverse components. As a result, even in the sewing of these dolls, Zoroastrian women adhered to a miniature format of their traditional garments to facilitate the replication of the clothing pattern for making garments in full size (see Figure 1).

Some types of women's clothing, made from silk and cotton, included:

Dārāi Haprang (K²)/ Dārāi Haprang (Y³)/ Dārāi Haft rang (P⁴): A silk scarf (wimple) with seven colors.

Kīšī Sāyekūi (K & Y)/ Čārqaḍ (P): A feminine silk scarf with intricate patterns.

Sāyakūi (K)/ Soyakūi (Y)/ Dasmāl Sar (P): Silk handkerchiefs that women tied on the Maklū.

Kolta (K)/ Klūta (Y)/ Dasmāl Sar: The handkerchief that girls wore under the Lačak to cover their hair.

Rīsarī (K & Y)/ Rūsarī (P): Scarf.

Lačakī (K)/ Lačak (Y)/ Lačak (P): A small cap worn under the Maklū.

Maknū, Maklū (K)/ Maknā or Maqnā (Y)/ Maqnaeye boland (P): A very large scarf.

Perana (K)/ Perāna (Y)/ Pīrāhan (P): A woman's dress.

Šarvār (K)/ Savolī (Y)/ Šalvar (P): Floral pants that reach up to the ankles.

Šavāl (K & Y)/ Šavāl (P): Loose, floral shorts that are knee-length.

Sardārī (K)/ Kema/ Kemā (Y)/ qabā (P): A type of long robe (Pashootanizadeh, 2022b, pp. 18-19).

²K: Dari Behdini Kermani.

³Y: Dari Behdini Yazdi.

⁴P: Persian.

Figure 1a. *Silk Rag Doll***Figure 1b.** *Cotton Rag Doll, Photo by the Author, 2024*

✓ Due to increasing social pressures and discriminatory government laws against non-Muslims, especially Zoroastrians (Choksy, 2012, p. 222), Muslims refrained from purchasing agricultural products and selling textiles to Zoroastrians (Pashootanizadeh, 2021b, p. 72). As agriculture was a primary livelihood for Zoroastrians, women turned to textile work to support their families' economic survival. Zoroastrian men also shifted their focus from cultivating food crops to growing cotton, dye plants, and mulberry trees for sericulture to assist women in textile production.

✓ Zoroastrian women faced safety concerns and rights violations due to discriminatory laws. Government regulations mandated specific dress codes, such as dark yellow or yellowish-brown clothing (Houtum-Schindler, 1882, p. 57) for Zoroastrians in Yazd and Kerman, in order to distinguish them from Muslims (Pashootanizadeh, 2020, p. 259). Zoroastrian women used luxurious silk clothing as a protective measure that kept them safe from danger. By mimicking the attire of elite Muslim women, they were able to prevent sexual assaults by Muslim men, as such assaults could have serious consequences.

Zoroastrian Women's Textile Legends

Zoroastrian women, utilizing the distinct language of the Zoroastrian community, created oral narratives with educational content that encapsulated elements of their intangible cultural heritage and oral traditions related to textiles. These legends were recited at specific seasons, periods and in designated settings and were categorized into various thematic groups based on the raw materials used in fabric production.⁵ For example, the Zoroastrian legends related to wool⁵ were narrated during winter nights in a place called “Čāressun/ Čārestūn”. The listeners of these stories included women of all age groups within the Zoroastrian community, ranging from wool weavers to those engaged in knitting (Mazdapour, 2017, p. 103). Since cotton and silk fibers were used to make summer clothes, stories related to these materials were told from morning until noon in a room called “Genze Pariūn” (Pashootanizadeh, 2021a, p. 92). This room was always kept clean because it was considered the dwelling of the fairies, and the attendees of the storytelling sessions were young girls and women of the Zoroastrian community. During the cold seasons, this room was exclusively used for the care of family members who became ill and were quarantined there until recovery.

Specifically, the stories related to silk were divided into two distinct categories:

- The Serpent King (explaining the duties of married women and mothers): intermediate difficult stages (weaving, natural dyeing, painting on fabric with natural colors, and implementing various techniques to produce fabrics).
- The Fairy King's Daughter (explaining the duties of girls): initial stages (preparation of raw materials for natural dyeing, sericulture, spinning, and sectional beam) and supplementary stages (embroidery and patchwork) (Pashootanizadeh, 2024, p. 127).

Puppet Theater as a Pedagogical Instrument

The insecurity felt by Zoroastrian women led to fairy protagonists with magical powers protecting them in stories. These stories, supported by puppet theaters using rag dolls, taught dress codes, garment wear, color palettes, and symbolic motifs. This method of storytelling effectively passed on silk weaving knowledge, preserved the Zoroastrian language, and taught women how to create garments for self-protection.

Dari Behdini Language

Zoroastrian Dari, also known as Behdini or Gavruni, is an endangered Iranian language spoken by the Zoroastrian minority, who mostly live in Yazd and the surrounding areas, as well as in Kerman and Tehran. Zoroastrian Dari is a unique

⁵For more information, see Pashootanizadeh, A., Vasiq, B., & Lezgee, D. H. (2010). The symbolic layers of Wahmaru's tablecloth story in Unwritten Fictions & Folktales Khoramshah of Yazd. *Literary Criticism Quarterly*, 3(11), 117-142. Available at <http://lcq.modares.ac.ir/article-29-4590-fa.html>.

Iranian language due to its historical background and the large number of subdialects (Gholami, 2018, p. 195)

The oral nature of these legends makes the Zoroastrian language become an important factor in enhancing the verbal component compared to the non-verbal (Pashootanizadeh, 2024, p. 128). In addition, the stories played a crucial role in preventing the sudden death of the language. Even after the successive migrations of the Zoroastrians, these tales continued to help preserve the language. However, with the onset of the Industrial Revolution and the decline in the number of listeners, a gradual death of the language occurred⁶.

Classification of Rag Dolls based on Raw Materials - Summer Clothing

Zoroastrian women use two types of dolls in puppet theater, and the content of the stories presented varies depending on the materials used in their creation. These differences are more pronounced through the use of various sub-branches of the Zoroastrian language, which reflect the ecological environment of the Zoroastrians. Some Zoroastrian neighborhoods were suitable for cotton cultivation, while others were known as mulberry belts, ideal for sericulture. In this context, the relationship between language and ecology played a role in narrating stories related to cotton, using cotton dolls, or stories related to silk, using silk dolls.

A. Silk Rag Dolls

These dolls, representing silk fairies with a metaphysical role, are placed in Zoroastrian temples or sacred sites, known as “Pirān⁷”, associated with the tombs of the displaced Sassanian royal family who died while fleeing from the Arabs. The pilgrimage season to these tombs occurs in the spring and summer, when various plants are available. During this time, young girls gather plants from the mountains to use for stuffing the silk dolls.

The embroidery (Zartošti-dūzi) on Zoroastrian girls' silk garments is inspired by images of real plants, thus serving as a useful guide during the plant collection process for the girls. Elderly silk weavers narrate silk tales and perform puppet theater with silk dolls. Afterward, these dolls are placed in sacred tombs for pilgrims to take and offer a donation. In return, the pilgrims not only take a beautiful silk doll to the "Genze Pariūn" room in their home but also acquire a first aid kit. Because the silk dolls contain medicinal plants inside them.

⁶Also see Gholami, S. (2020). Guest editor's introduction: Endangered Iranian languages: Language contact and language islands in Iran. *Iranian Studies*, 53(3-4), 347-351. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2020.1721997>

⁷It appears that the term “Pariān,” meaning “fairies” in the Zoroastrian language, later evolved into “Pirān.”

A.1. The Creators of Rag Dolls:

In each Zoroastrian household, several silk rag dolls were kept, which, during the illness of a family member, would have their seams opened to access and use medicinal plants. After the patient's recovery, they would make several Silk rag dolls and place them in the Pirān for use in puppet theater or in Zoroastrian temples. Both locations led to a similar fate for the silk rag dolls, as they would eventually make their way to the homes of the pilgrims. The scarcity of old silk rag dolls among contemporary Zoroastrians is partly due to the removal of their medicinal contents. The recovered patients who were donors or creators of these dolls are divided into several groups: Adult and underage girls and boys⁸, who are considered the children of a family; and women and men who were the mothers and fathers of the family.

Considering that each of the creators is classified into a specific traditional and gender group, and that they do not possess the same abilities in making the silk rag dolls after recovering from illness, these dolls were therefore made or commissioned in various ways.

Girls are categorized into adults and minors.

Underage girls:

Girls under the age of 12: They are supported by their mothers, and after recovery, the mothers make the Silk rag dolls as a token of gratitude for their child's recovery.

Girls between the ages of 12 and 15: Although they still wear cotton clothing to prevent skin allergies and are less familiar with silk garments, they make the Silk rag dolls as part of practical assignments, both in Zoroastrian girls' schools and during internships at silk weaving workshops. Therefore, it cannot be expected that the dolls will be flawless; however, they serve as a suitable tool for evaluating the quality and extent of learning in silk weaving techniques and complementary arts for luxury silk garments. The abundant access of this group to fabric remnants in silk weaving workshops, which included a complete system for producing silk garments for Zoroastrian women, was not only a valuable resource for their practical exercises but also contributed to sustainable development and the reduction of waste of natural raw materials.

Adult girls:

This group of girls, aged 15 and above, showcase their skills by creating silk rag dolls. The techniques they intend to use for making their wedding dresses are applied to these dolls, so that they have a preliminary model of their wedding dress before starting its production. In this regard, the silk rag dolls creations of this group are exceptionally beautiful and eye-catching. Many of the pilgrims who choose these dolls end up proposing to their creators. (Fig 1.a) ك

⁸In Zoroastrianism, the age of maturity for both girls and boys are considered to be 15, at which point they can choose their own religion and also, see Andrés Toledo, Miguel Ángel. Textiles in Zoroastrianism, in *Luxury and Dress: Political Power and Appearance in the Roman Empire and Its Provinces* (Universitat de València, 2013), 23-30, p. 26.

Boys are categorized into adults and minors.

Both groups, as they are not the audience for fairy tales, and due to the separate educational systems for girls and boys in Zoroastrian schools, which cater to the different needs of each gender, are not generally capable of creating the silk rag dolls. Although many of them, due to their involvement in the silk trade on both a retail and wholesale scale, as well as in raw silk and silk textiles, are knowledgeable about the quality of various types of silk, they are not able to create these dolls.

Underage boys:

Boys under the age of 12: It follows a similar pattern to girls under the age of 12.

Boys between the ages of 12 and 15: After recovering from illness, they commission the creation of Silk rag dolls from the workshop managers, who are mostly elderly women highly skilled in silk weaving, but due to certain age-related ailments, these women primarily work as storytellers of silk fairy tales and managers of silk workshops. In exchange for paying the workshop managers' fees, this group transports silkworm feed from the mulberry orchards to the sericulture section of the workshops. This method of payment and service delivery takes place at the earliest opportunity after the dolls are made, coinciding with the sericulture season.

Adult boys:

This group is similar to the previous one, but due to their greater physical abilities, they are considered complementary to the previous group and engage in activities such as planting mulberry trees and cutting mulberry branches. In this regard, almost all adult boys over the age of 15 have contributed to the production of mulberry orchards. This strategy resulted in the transformation of the Zoroastrian habitats, which were conducive to sericulture, into a “mulberry belt” by the young boys.

Zoroastrian parents:

Fathers of the family: They act in two distinct ways: either they request the creation of the silk rag dolls from their wives and pay them with raw silk equivalent in weight to the doll, or they commission the creation of the dolls from elderly managers of silk weaving workshops and, instead of paying wages, repair damaged loom parts or engage in the renovation of the workshop environment. The first method is typically chosen by silk merchants, while the second is carried out by farming men.

Mothers of the family: They create different types of silk rag dolls from their damaged or worn-out silk garments. Unlike the other versions, these dolls are not filled with medicinal plants; instead, they are filled with dye plants used for traditional dyeing. Given the importance of purity⁹ in Zoroastrianism and the second-hand nature of the silk fabrics used in the creation of this type of doll, these dolls are never taken to sacred spaces. However, they are purchased by dyers as protective fairies for dyeing workshops. The money paid for these dolls was used to print books on religious and textile content. Due to the mothers' desire to preserve natural materials in accordance with sustainable development patterns, cotton

⁹Purity is one of the most important themes in Zoroastrianism (Pashootanizadeh, 2024, p. 125).

textiles are sometimes used in the creation of these dolls, and some parts of the clothing are made from cotton fabrics.

B. Cotton Rag Dolls

The creation of this type of doll was specific to the female community; however, different forms of these dolls represented various stages of a woman's life. Unlike the Silk rag dolls, which is exclusive to the Zoroastrian community, the cotton rag dolls is produced jointly by Muslim and Zoroastrian women. Another difference is in their placement, as the Cotton rag dolls is not placed in sacred spaces, and therefore, no fee is paid for it by the pilgrims. However, there is a profound difference in the purpose of production between the Cotton rag dolls made by Muslim women and that made by Zoroastrians. (see Figure 2.)

Figure 2. *The Cotton Rag Dolls, which is created simultaneously with the onset of a Girl's First Menstruation*



Source: Photo by the author, 2024

The Creators of Cotton Rag Dolls

The first time a Zoroastrian girl creates this type of doll coincides with her first menstruation, marking her entrance into womanhood. She then gifts the doll to girls who have not yet reached puberty, thus serving as a form of premonition for other girls, helping them become aware of the signs and process of puberty. The design of these dolls is not based on traditional silk garments. Instead, they are made with various types of cotton fabrics and filled with cotton. The intended purpose of these dolls is to serve as children's toys, and they are not used in puppet theaters related to cotton stories.

The abstract shapes of these dolls, which are made by combining geometric forms, are created by women who are going through the pre-menopausal stage (a combination of triangle/s and circle) or the menopausal stage (a combination of multiple triangles), and they are sold for charitable purposes. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3. *The Sale of the Dolls for Charitable Purposes*

Source: Photo by the author, 2024

Conclusions

Zoroastrianism was the original religion of all Iranians prior to the fall of the Sasanian Empire. However, following the empire's collapse, Zoroastrians gradually transformed into an ethnoreligious minority. For several centuries after the advent of Islam in Iran—during a period often referred to as the Iranian Intermezzo—Zoroastrians continued to preserve their cultural and religious identity. They concentrated on two key Silk Road stations, Khorasan and Tabaristan, where they engaged in silk trade and sericulture. Over time, some Zoroastrians settled permanently in prominent Silk Road hubs within Iran, while others migrated abroad—India serving as an intermediary country, and China, regarded as the homeland of silk, becoming a major destination. Zoroastrian migrations to China occurred in two phases: the pre-Sasanian period and the early post-Sasanian era. Migration to India unfolded in three distinct waves: the Parsi (8th–10th centuries), the Farsi (16th–18th centuries), and the Irani (19th–20th centuries).

The Industrial Revolution in Iran and the decline of traditional textile production, along with financial support for the intergenerational transmission of silk weaving, increasing social pressure, and discriminatory government laws targeting non-Muslims, as well as the need for protection against sexual assaults by Muslim men, were among the key factors that contributed to the growing importance of textile and silk weaving in shaping the religious and cultural identity of Zoroastrian women. In this context, oral literature, through the use of puppets and puppet theater

performances, became a means for the intergenerational transmission of textile and silk-weaving knowledge.

The rag dolls, which were made from materials suitable for the warm seasons, were of two types: Cotton rag dolls and Silk rag dolls. The silk rag dolls, except for one, were filled with medicinal plants, resembling a form of first aid kit. An exceptional example was made by mothers from damaged silk garments. Due to the issue of purity in Zoroastrianism, these dolls were not offered to Zoroastrian sacred places; instead, they were filled with natural dye plants and served as protective spirits for dyeing workshops. Children of both genders, as well as their parents, played a direct or indirect role in the production of these dolls, which were dressed according to the dress codes defined in alignment with the religious and cultural identity of Zoroastrian women.

Cotton rag dolls are shared between Zoroastrians and Muslims, with the distinction that the makers of Zoroastrian dolls are either girls who have just started menstruating or women who are in the pre-menopausal or menopausal stage. These dolls do not adhere to the rules of silk rag dolls and are created in abstract forms.

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