

PROSPERITY FASHION IN PALESTINE

EXPERIENCES BETWEEN THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

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Abstract

This paper investigates the production of Palestinian textile and clothes before and after the 1948 Israeli occupation and the shift to fast fashion as a consequence. It also foregrounds how contemporary efforts in sustainable fashion production are hindered by the ongoing occupation of Palestine. Through a chronological analysis, the article highlights revived Indigenous sartorial and social practices. It examines their role in facilitating connections between producers and consumers—extending the life cycle of clothing (whether acquired or gifted) while also enhancing the prosperity of collective creators. The case studies presented demonstrate how Palestine's partially forced, extra-slow fashion production is positively influencing international consumers to reconsider their consumption habits, particularly in terms of production pace.

Keywords: *Indigenous practices, De/humanizing fashion, Storytelling*

INTRODUCTION

Palestine may not be among the world's fashion capitals. In fact, only a handful of small-scale fashion shows have been held there over the years. Yet, an often-overlooked fact is that clothing is a pivotal component of Palestinian identity. Long before the global frenzy over fashion weeks, Palestinian attire served as a profound cultural marker, reflecting the lives of individuals and communities, as well as the region's natural and historical landscapes. The art of embroidery, practices, skills, knowledge and rituals in Palestine have been inscribed by the UNESCO¹ in 2021 on

the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO, 2022). The world reduces Palestinians to either victims or aggressors, submerging the rest of their lived reality, including their deep-rooted sartorial heritage. For over a century, this tradition has sustained eco-conscious, culturally rooted production, defiantly maintaining locally handmade garments over fleeting trends. Yet colonial occupation violently disrupts this: while displacement forces families to desperately recycle clothing, economic hardships push others toward cheap, polluting fast fashion—a double erosion of autonomy and sustainability.

¹ UNESCO: The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs a decolonial qualitative approach to analyze prosperous Palestinian sartorial practices across historical and contemporary contexts. Combining historical documentary research (books, articles, lectures, and archival materials) with case studies of three contemporary designers, the methodology centers Palestinian narratives while critically engaging with cultural preservation as an indirect agent of prosperous fashion practices. Secondary data traces sartorial techniques, materials, and socio-economic influences, supplemented by analysis of publicly available designer interviews (from documentaries, podcasts, and publications).

As an insider researcher, I draw on my lived experiences and cultural understanding to enrich my study. I balance this insider perspective by cross-checking data with multiple sources (triangulation) and reflecting on my own biases (personal reflexivity). Ethical practices guided how I used public interviews and ensured findings aligned with my community's values.

PROSPERITY LED BY INDIGENOUS PRACTICES: HISTORICAL PRACTICES AND FABRICS

During the Ottoman rule², urban people in the Middle East copied clothing styles of the ruling class and became increasingly Westernized in the 19th century. However, traditional Palestinian clothing in towns and villages remained largely unchanged, featuring linen fabrics and silk embroidery with centuries-old patterns (Karaman Munayyer, 2011). Palestinian women wore hand-embroidered dresses (thobes) paired with head shawls. The thobes were as treasures, the wearer being aware of the effort and time invested by neighbours and family members in creating the bespoke pieces.

In the nineteenth century, Palestine was known for its rich and flourishing textile culture. Many Fabrics were woven locally while others were imported from neighbouring countries such as Egypt and Syria. These fabrics included cotton, wool, goat and camel hair, flax, and silk before European fabrics flooded the Palestinian market towards the end of the century. Dyes were extract-

ed from local plants such as madder, cochineal cactus, saffron, indigo, and insects such as kermes. Fabrics imported from Syria- another textile centre in the region- were created especially for the needs of Palestinian women who made their own dresses and headwear (Weir, 1970). The use of natural materials and dyes for creating Palestinian clothes is a testament to the sustainable practices that were embedded in the region's textile production. According to dress historian, Wafa Ghnaim, Palestinian embroidery (tatreez³), not only added to the aesthetic value of the garments but also ensured durability. Tatreez made clothes resistant to wear and tear without the need for additional linings by keeping the garment intact from the inside as well as the outside (The Jerusalem Fund and Palestine Center, 2019). These garments were slowly made to last for decades, unlike fast fashion, where clothes are produced for short-term use and are considered by some consumers and producers as disposable.

During the British mandate, multiple Palestinian towns were known for their weaving workshops, such as Safad, Nazareth, Nablus, Beit Jala, Hebron, Gaza, and Majdal. By the end of the 19th century, Nazareth had 300 looms, and in Majdal, almost every family owned a loom, with a total of 500 looms. Beit Jala, too, was known for its weaving expertise (Weir). Majdal, a town in southern Palestine, had "even special factories to weave the specific material needed for the Malak⁴." (Kawar & Nasir, 1980, p. 125). Many thobes worn in numerous Palestinian towns and villages are known as *majdalawi*, after the town Majdal where the fabrics of these thobes were woven.

William Arnold Stewart was an English craftsman who has been sent on a mission after the First World War to Mandatory Palestine to advise on re-establishing crafts and industries affected by the war. According to Stewart, in the beginning of the 1940s, "The town of Majdal which, before the war, had 600 narrow width hand- looms, now has 1,000 looms including at least 60 wide width fly-shuttle looms. [Palestinians] are very conservative and would not change their methods before the

3 Tatreez: an ancient embroidery technique mostly associated with cross-stitch, dating back to the Canaanite era around 3,000 years ago (Palestinian Ministry of Culture, 2020).

4 Malak was the dress worn by Palestinian women in Bethlehem and neighbouring areas starting in the early twentieth century. "It is made of a blend of silk and linen, woven in bright multi-coloured stripes. Over the dress comes a short-sleeved jacket that glistens with embroidery. With this costume, women wear high, fez-like headdresses bearing the glinting coins of their dowry, crowned by a sheer shawl." (Kawar, 2011, p.136-137).

2 The Ottoman Turks occupied Palestine between 1516 and 1918, when the Ottoman Empire lost the war against the Allies.

war” (Stewart, 1944, p.265). Despite maintaining the indigenous practices, Stewart claims that there was “a demand for every meter of cloth and the weavers [were then] prosperous” (Stewart, p.266).

CHANGES BROUGHT BY THE BRITISH MANDATE AND 1948 NAKBA

During the British Mandate of Palestine, local head shawls, especially in coastal cities, were replaced by imported ones from Spain and Japan. These imported shawls became so popular that they were required as part of bridal attire. Palestinian workshops with the indigenous know-how in textile production eventually started producing these shawls locally to meet the demand, showing ability to compete with the quality standards of imported shawls. However, after the Nakba⁵ in 1948, which saw the expulsion of Palestinians and the destruction of many villages, economic hardship led to the replacement of high-quality hand-embroidered dresses with cheaper machine-embroidered alternatives (Kawar & Nasir).

It is worth noting that the afore mentioned Majdal, which was a coastal town in the south of Palestine, and its centre of weaving textiles has been wiped of the map entirely in 1948 by Zionist militias, and on its lands, the Israeli city of Ashkelon was built.

After the Nakba, a few weavers in Gaza whose ancestors were forced out of Majdal in 1948 strived to preserve the art of weaving Majdalawi fabric, especially under threat from ongoing violence and displacement. After October 2023, none of the looms in Gaza survived the Israeli attacks.

One family of weavers has been evacuated to Egypt, where they rebuilt a replica of the manual loom they owned. They are now proceeding to produce and pass the production methods of the majdalawi fabric to others in hopes of redeeming this craft and fabric from extinction (Abdel-Razzaq, 2024).

With its deep-rooted craftsmanship and cultural significance, clothes production in Palestine would have had the potential of becoming a hub for fashion production, perhaps similar to its neighbouring Lebanon. Lebanon, which prior to the British Mandate formed one political unit called

the Levant alongside Palestine, Syria, and Jordan, has long been recognized as the Arab world’s fashion capital. Its vibrant arts scene, featuring singers, actors, and socialites, fostered a culture of extravagance, paving the way for designers like Elie Saab and Zuhair Murad to gain global acclaim. In contrast, Palestine, under Israeli occupation since 1948, faces significant barriers to artistic and creative production, including fashion. Due to these challenges, Palestinian artists, politicians, diplomats and other public figures often wear garments adorned with traditional embroidery during public appearances, using fashion to assert their identity. Unlike celebrities all over the world who follow global fashion trends, Palestinian figures prioritize showcasing local and indigenous practices.

This is especially crucial as cultural symbols, including traditional dress, remain under constant threat of erasure. For instance, during Israel’s ongoing war on Gaza-described by Israel as a war against terrorist organizations-, key cultural institutions were among the first targets of the Israeli airstrikes. Almathaf Museum, which housed a collection of traditional Palestinian thobes, was destroyed by Israeli airstrikes on October 10, 2023, already (Sahweel, 2024).

The harsh economic reality imposed by the ongoing occupation of Palestine since 1948, not only eliminated the opportunity of local fashion production, but also made Palestine among the major victims of imported fast fashion. These fast, cheap and polluting trends, although low quality, are threatening the possibility of reviving Palestinian textile and fashion production. Hence, the once prosperous textile towns and weavers in Palestine are a victim to fast fashion more than any other country.

COMMUNITY AND STORYTELLING IN DRESSMAKING

Clothes tell the story of the Palestinian people. The rich cultural heritage embedded in Palestinian dressmaking is not just about fabric and technique but about community and storytelling. Each hand-embroidered piece tells a story, whether it’s about the local flora and fauna, cultural traditions, or the personal history of the wearer. The various colours, stitches and shapes on the Palestinian thobe are indicators of their wearer’s origin, and their social and marital status. Fashion, in this sense, is a way of telling one’s personal and collective story. As Palestinian artisans and designers work to preserve

⁵ Nakba: (catastrophe in Arabic) refers to the mass displacement and massacre of Palestinian people, the destruction of their towns and villages and the theft of their homes by Zionist militias in 1948.

their craft, they are also constantly building the connection to their cultural history, ensuring that each garment has meaning and resonance.

Art historian Rachel Dedman who was invited to curate three exhibitions on Palestinian embroidered thobes in Lebanon, Palestine, and the UK, emphasizes this connection. According to Dedman, “Each dress tells a story of the woman who made it, carrying her memories and personality. By examining it closely, we can uncover insights about her life and the era she lived in.” She describes Palestinian embroidery as “the most important, rich, and fascinating living tradition of the country—perhaps its most iconic cultural material.” (Kettle’s Yard, 2023, 2:40).

One such garment, was a linen dress, showcased in the Labour of Love exhibition held at the Palestinian Museum (2018–2019). The dress, originally owned by a woman from Ramallah⁶ was donated to another woman taking refuge in the city after being forced out of her home in 1948. The new owner expanded the dress using flour sacks provided by UNRWA⁷, identifiable by the blue lettering characteristic of these sacks (Kettle’s Yard). This garment, like many others, tells a poignant story of displacement and resilience. It embodies the harsh realities of its wearers and offers a tangible link to Palestine’s past and present. It shows how Palestinians over the years had to recycle their belongings, including clothes, although forcedly. Although 76 years have passed since that incident, these very unfortunate circumstances are still relevant today. Currently, around two million displaced people in Gaza are forced to apply a zero-waste policy. Countless videos are being circulated on social media platforms showing Palestinian men and women creating clothes out of old duvets, and shoes out of wood logs collected from the ruins of destroyed buildings and structures.

Before 1948, Tatreez worked in circles of people often talking and singing while each piece could take up to six months to make. The resulting garments survive decades or even generations, passing from mother to daughter, according to Palestinian fashion designer and researcher Yasmin

⁶ Ramallah: a city around 10 kilometers to the north of Jerusalem.

⁷ UNRWA: The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees. “Following the 1948 War, UNRWA was established by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 302 (IV) of 8 December 1949 to carry out direct relief and works programmes for Palestine refugees. The Agency began operations on 1 May 1950.” (The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, 2024).

Mjalli, creative director behind the brand Nol Collective (TEDx Talks, 2021). This sort of labour was not done for money, rather, it was part of social life in which dress-making gatherings were an integral part of the preparation for any occasion. The slow production practice testifies the immense emphasis placed both on creativity and quality.

Palestinian women treat their hand-embroidered thobes, with deep emotional attachment. These clothes are not just items of clothing but are cherished as symbols of creativity, identity, heritage, and family pride. Embroidery is seen as an act of preserving history and culture. As these garments are passed down through generations, they retain their emotional value, forming a tangible connection to the past. This personal connection to fashion and dressmaking is a crucial element of sustainable fashion, as it encourages longevity and care for the garments.

It is unsurprising, how difficult it is for one let go of a dress which consumed months of hard labour, created by loving family members and friends in joyful gatherings. While visiting a family friend residing in Ramallah a few months ago, she expressed her sadness when her siblings got rid of their late mother’s thobes that were not wearable anymore. She on the other hand, framed the embroidered parts of her mother’s thobe after it had so much wear and tear. These thobes, even after being cut are recycled and made into ornamentation pieces that decorate her house as well as many other houses and institutions all over Palestine, and wherever Palestinians reside (see Fig. 01). Thobes that maintained their good shape are kept in her closet, and she makes use of them on several occasions and even lends them to friends and family members to adorn. These timeless pieces created decades ago transcend any fashion trend and gain more and more emotional and monetary value over the years.

In a sense, the above-described scene of women gathering, chatting and singing while creating each other’s thobes is contradictory to sweatshop workers in poor countries forced to work long hours in inhumane conditions, being paid wages that in no way contribute to a dignified life. Palestine’s clothes making in the past fostered social prosperity as it enforced friendly relationships within local communities. It also fostered the perfect environment for creativity, as it is very rare to see two identical thobes. Each thobe carries with it long hours of creatively creating customized

scenes on fabric which the wearer will not hesitate to boast.

PERSONAL AND EMOTIONAL CONNECTIONS

Industrialization, even more so fast fashion, has doubtlessly played a significant role in forcing a separation between us and our acquired things, clothes included. We have no emotional connection to our belongings anymore. The most expected outcome of buying a cheap piece of clothing from a fast fashion retailer nowadays is tossing it away after a single wear, or in some cases without even wearing it.

Mjalli, who strives to recreate indigenous Palestinian practices of clothes making and dying using sustainable and natural materials, tells a story about a dress she designed in which five different embroiderers were assigned five different designs. The client would get their dress based on the pace and life circumstances of the designer. Clients who ordered the red version of the dress received their order last because the embroiderer lost her daughter (TEDx Talks). Apart from reviving traditional manufacturing materials and practices, Mjalli aims to bring back the human aspect of fashion. As the name of her brand Nol Collective suggests, the work is done by several artisans, and to her every artisan counts as a crucial link in the process of delivering the final product to the client. In fact, a certain connection is formed between the client and the creators of their clothes (TEDx Talks). This line of slow production also provides a stable and adequate income for artisans in refugee camps and villages, usually being women.

Her brand emphasizes empathy and humanity in fashion. “We’ve dehumanized clothing,” she says. “We view workers as machines. Conscious fashion is about reintroducing empathy and allowing for slow production, storytelling, and human connection.” (TEDx Talks, 09:28). This philosophy extends to moments of collective grief. After the death of a producer’s nephew, Nol Collective paused production, an incident Mjalli is not apologetic for as she sees the necessity of halting the expectation of inhuman speed in fashion. She advocates for patience and understanding in the production process, and is proud of fostering a community of people engaging in a unique experience of consumerism they are not accustomed to. This experience projects clients to ethical and slow fashion, but also to the realities

of life in occupied Palestine (TEDx Talks).

This community is both global and local as Mjalli’s orders are placed by clients in Palestine, Arab countries, the United States and Europe. Their common interest is not fast fashion trends, rather something much more prosperous for less fortunate craftspeople rather than fast fashion capitalists.

Just like thobes took months to create before 1948, so does Mjalli’s slow fashion initiative handle production. Unlike fast fashion conglomerates taking advantage of the bad circumstances of workers in poor countries, Mjalli, among other contemporary Palestinian designers insist on employing artisans from marginalized communities to make their life conditions better.

SUSTAINABILITY AND SLOW FASHION

Apart from their focus on community, Nol Collective revive the indigenous Palestinian practices of using natural materials -including Majdalawi fabric- and dyes, focusing on hand labour and tatreez, and using dead-stock materials (Nol Collective, n.d.).

Similarly, Saudi Arabia based Palestinian fashion designer Reema Dahbour, renowned for recreating Palestinian tatreez motifs on fashionable evening and wedding dresses is an advocate of slow fashion. Tatreez motifs were historically related to geographical origins, varying from North to South of Palestine and from one city or village to another. To maintain this identity marking aspect of tatreez, Dahbour works closely with her clients, focusing on each of them individually as each client becomes the muse behind the design of her bespoke piece. She draws inspiration from her client’s personal background and family roots, combining regional motifs to craft garments that tell unique stories. The resulting masterpiece is a one-of-a-kind dress that carries memories of an entire nation deprived of its ancestral land. Like Mjalli, Reema Dahbour describes her slow fashion process as a collaboration between her, the client, and the women who embroider it, working together for months, and forming a bond that brings pride to everyone involved in the production of the customized garment (Dahbour, 2022).

Palestinian brand HINDHILAL directed by its namesake architect turned fashion designer, was initially founded out of her love for fashion. Nowadays, Hilal (n.d.) has a different mindset, stressing in her biography that:



Fig. 01

Fashion is no longer the way to follow... [she believes] fashion transcends what it has become; it should embody authenticity and integrity—an expression of [people's] origins, identities, and true selves, stripped of pretence and noise; a way of living, not consuming. [She is] committed to defining fashion as a narrative of self-discovery and connection to [Palestinian] cultural heritage. (about us).

Hind Hilal's atelier, located in Bethlehem, takes pride in producing handcrafted, exclusive garments that showcase the region's rich cultural heritage. Each piece reflects exceptional artisanal craftsmanship, combining skill and precision to create timeless designs meant to be cherished for generations. The brand carefully selects high-quality, durable materials and subjects every item to rigorous quality control to ensure superior standards of style and longevity.

In line with its commitment to sustainability, Hind Hilal thoughtfully sources long-lasting fabrics and repurposes fine-quality dead stock materials from local and international resellers. This approach not only reduces waste but also

allows for the creation of distinctive and exclusive apparel.

The brand's philosophy of responsible fashion prioritizes small-scale, mindful production. Hind Hilal emphasizes quality over quantity, producing limited, made-to-order pieces for each collection. This ensures minimal waste while offering customers unique garments designed to stand the test of time (Hind Hilal, n.d.).

MODERN CHALLENGES AND THE FUTURE OF FASHION

Today, Palestine faces significant challenges in preserving its fashion and clothes making heritage. The Palestinian fashion industry is heavily impacted by the Israeli occupation, which has destroyed much of its infrastructure and disrupted its economy.

The Palestinian garment and textile industry thrived before 2000, with around 900 factories employing 36,000 workers, mostly subcontracting for Israeli companies. Between 2000 and 2006, the sector declined sharply due to Israel's shift toward high-tech industries and the QIZ

agreement, reducing factories to 400–450 and jobs to 20,000.

After Israel's 2007 blockade on Gaza, the industry nearly collapsed, with only 50–100 factories remaining (employing 2,000–2,500 workers) and shifting to local markets. Partial recovery began in 2014 when Israel eased restrictions, allowing exports to the West Bank and Israel. By 2017, factories increased to 137, employing 2,500–3,000 workers.

As of 2023, the sector showed modest growth, with around 300 factories and 8,000–9,000 workers, though challenges like political instability, material shortages, and import competition persist (The Apparel and Textile Industry Federation, n.d.). The federation's website lacks updates after October 2023, when Gaza's infrastructure and economy faced total destruction.

Furthermore, the global dominance of fast fashion, has made it difficult for local artisans to compete in Gaza and all over Palestine. Since the Israeli control over Palestinian borders occupied in the year 1967, makes online shopping from other countries almost impossible for Palestinians residing in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, a phenomenon of Palestinian intermediaries of retailers like Shein and others has recently surfaced. These intermediaries, live in cities and towns considered part of Israeli territory to which merchandise can be shipped. They place mass orders for clients; hence get items for reduced prices.

In addition, local markets are flooded with fashionable items usually imported from Turkey and sold for very low prices. For these competitive prices, quality is much compromised. Therefore, durability is not guaranteed when making such purchases. These trendy and cheap choices are extremely popular, which is not surprising, given that the average daily income for males in Palestine is \$30.67 and that of females is \$29.29 (Palestinian Bureau of Statistics, n.d.). From an economic perspective, a change towards more expensive but durable and sustainable fashion choices is not expected soon. This is a result of thousands of Palestinian workers, who previously worked for Israeli employers losing their jobs after October 2023. Unfortunately, the major, or maybe the only deciding factor for fashion consumption in Palestine currently seems to be low cost.

Despite the above-mentioned challenges, there is a growing movement toward ethical,

sustainable fashion. Brands like Hind Hilal, Reema Dahbour and Nol Collective strive to create contemporary designs that honour Palestinian heritage while focusing on sustainability and slow fashion. By embracing a mindful production system, these small businesses are helping to revive the Palestinian fashion industry and promote a future where fashion is seen as a tool for cultural expression, community, and sustainability.

In addition, Generation Z Palestinians are developing an affection for vintage and second-hand clothing, a phenomenon which was not common one decade ago. Vintage clothing stores are present in major cities like Ramallah, Bethlehem and Nablus. Furthermore, clothes swapping or second-hand clothing events are timidly finding their way to the Palestinian fashion consumption arena.

CONCLUSION

Palestinian fashion historically embodied sustainability, prosperity, and cultural identity through indigenous practices like embroidery and use of indigenous plants for dyes.

Colonial practices enforced by the British Mandate and the ongoing Israeli occupation dismantled Palestinian textile economies multiple times and imposed fast-fashion dependencies.

Fast fashion's dominance, aggravated by geopolitical constraints places a huge obstacle in the face of creatives and artisans in the Palestinian fashion arena.

Despite these challenges, contemporary designers are reviving prosperous indigenous techniques, centering slow fashion, ethical labor, and storytelling. Their modern fashion designs have the agency for cultural preservation and political assertion, in addition to its more traditional functions.

The future of prosperity fashion in Palestine hinges not only on reviving the past but on stitching it into a tapestry of local and global ethical consciousness, by including customers into the identities and living circumstances of their fashion creators.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Chest, back panel, side panels and sleeves of a Malak thobe dating back to the early twentieth century. These frames are part of a huge collection of thobes transformed into art pieces by artist Vivi Siniora, generously gifted to Dar al-Kalima University in Bethlehem, Palestine.

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