

TATREEZ: A VEHICLE FOR PALESTINIAN IDENTITY

By Tej Gedela

Tatreez, a unique type of embroidery, originated in Palestine over three thousand years ago. This art form uses colorful threads in a variety of patterns to create traditional motifs or designs which, over the years, have taken on a broad range of meanings in Palestinian culture. *Tatreez* has a rich history which has been shaped by Palestine's struggle for liberation. Passed down from generation to generation, the embroidery has also come to symbolize identity and heritage.

The history of *tatreez* reflects the changing landscape of historic Palestine and has been a method through which Palestinian women developed a collective identity. Originally widespread, the practice of embroidery subsided when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were exiled during the Nakba in 1948, following the establishment of the Israeli state. Women began devoting their time to more pressing jobs to support their families. *Tatreez* returned in the 1960s, reflecting a harsh economic reality with the use of cheaper cottons and simplified motifs to produce the patterns. The Palestinian refugee crisis, which displaced Palestinians across the world and within Palestine itself, led to the development of regional embroidery styles.

For example, artisans in Ramallah primarily used bright red as opposed to the brownish red used in Al-Khalil.¹ Similarly, artisans in Gaza preferred a light cornflower blue, while those in Beersheba used a dark royal blue.²

As *tatreez* styles gained visibility, embroidered clothing became a symbol of Palestinian nationalism and heritage, spreading awareness about Palestinian history, culture, and their struggle. During the First Intifada—an uprising against the Israeli occupation that spanned from 1987 to 1993—Palestinian women created the “intifada dress,” embroidered with national flags, symbols like orange trees and olive branches, and phrases such as “we will return [to Palestine].” Through *tatreez*, Palestinian women challenged Israeli bans on exhibitions of Palestinian nationalism and were able to assert their own political agency. Their defiance of Israeli occupation played a central role in resistance and self-expression during struggles for liberation, helping to forefront Palestinian identity and culture in the movement.³

Tatreez is mainly practiced by women; as such, it has become an emblem of women's resistance and identity. The development of the intifada dress not only indicated growing political agency, but it also linked nationalism and gender identity, challenging stereotypes about women in the Middle East. Embroidery provided a source of income during

times of economic hardship, especially for families in refugee camps. *Tatreez* empowered women to become independent breadwinners rather than rely on their

husbands or fathers; it also helped women who were divorced or widowed support themselves.⁴ Additionally, motifs were used to exhibit identity by symbolizing important events like a pregnancy or a wedding. Likewise, colors were used to symbolize different stages of life. Passing through Hebron, a visitor might see young women wearing green while older women wear purple.⁵

This art form also holds cultural significance in that it ties families together across generations. *Tatreez* is passed down from mother to daughter at a young age, and training may begin at as young as two years old. At folklore festivals, children are shown and taught various patterns and stitching styles that they can use in their own artistic expression. Elders in the community teach children skills and motifs that they learned or created, preserving cultural heritage.⁶ In this way, Palestinian women tell their stories, mark historical events, and develop traditions.

Tatreez serves as a vehicle for tracing Palestinian history over decades and across regions, strengthening the agency of Palestinian women in the face of oppression.

THEIR DEFIANCE OF ISRAELI OCCUPATION PLAYED A CENTRAL ROLE IN RESISTANCE AND SELF-EXPRESSION DURING STRUGGLES FOR LIBERATION