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# Crossroad Imagination: The Thob Mediating Between Palestinian Material Culture and Gendered Activism

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**Received Date: March 11, 2020****Published Date: March 18, 2020****Introduction**

This study explores Palestinian women's performativity regarding the thob as a form of agency because, as wearers, designers, and advocates of the Palestinian thob, they gain authority over the discursive inventions of cultural and national symbols. They reconfigure what has been historically connected with tradition and antiquity into contemporary and fashionable. As their traditional - which is yet dynamic- dress and as a sign of their various identities, Palestinian cultural clothing and other types of ornamentation serve as means for Palestinian women in the US to enlarge their social role in addition to generating new meanings as "expressive culture of the community" [1] for a displaced population.

Clothing conventions function as devices of social and cultural powers, and these powers operate to reveal the cultural particularities that "discipline the body" [2]. By confirming these conventions, individuals may construct a comfortable and dynamic zone and affirm their identity in relation to their communities. Clothing also reflects the intersection between the personal and group identity in which personal taste of how to dress is reflected and certain spaces such as community gatherings, celebrations, workplace, and college are used to demonstrate how the function and meaning of dress change in different social settings. In this way, women deliberately choose to maneuver within their society's standard code of dress in order to increase their mobility. They also circumvent and redefine conventional constructions. In Palestinian context, these conventions are related to how women's roles are shaped in the contexts of colonial, national, and Islamic discourses; these roles define them as the keeper of the nation honor, raising the nations young generation, the household managers, symbols of modernization, and the like, for which dress is used as an indicators of what these discourses prescribed for the women.

In addition, in diaspora context, Palestinian American women revitalize the meaning of cultural dress and incorporate contemporary fashion into its design as an act of contesting the binary between mainstream fashion and traditional garb. In this way, women claim a space for themselves within the national discourse and the use of their dress as a sign of cultural gendered identity. Thus, since the earlier days of refugee camps in neighboring countries to the contemporary global Palestinian diaspora, women assumed preserving the dress as their duty to preserve the imagined Palestine villages erased through the Zionist colonial project in Palestine. Thob as the authentic dress of the fallaha, the Palestinian peasant, has become the embodiment of the idealization of the Palestinian land and community, symbol of national unity, perseverance of culture, resistance to colonialism and occupation, and nostalgic longing for and the political expression of identity as a displaced group.

The traditional dress of Palestinian women, though diverse in style and form, is called thob (thobe, thawb /thob) which is an elaborate hand embroidered, long and long-sleeved dress. The garment with its designs and colors of embroidery varied from one region to another in Palestine yet, due to dispersal, the style has become "universal" in time [3]. Now, it constitutes one of the major objects of the Palestinian heritage preservation agenda [4]. Various studies addressed the dress as a whole or in parts still gets recognition and viability as one of the main objects of material culture serving the maintenance of the heritage of the nation. Yet, the conservation of cultural artifact as a dress and inventing ways of its functionality to be used in different spaces gives more meanings than national symbolism; its designation as gender specific garb- with importance to the nation- allows women to use and implement their fashionable tastes. It became a woman-

controlled domain increasing their voice and visibility. As part of the meaning and symbol it has gained after the occupation and the displacement, and through the use of modern communication technologies and social media platforms to popularize the dress and its transformation, the thob has been brought into the global mainstream. As a result, through the revival of its usage, extension to its longevity, and efforts for transgenerational transmission, the thob gains a more malleable and plastic cultural significance which differs from what was previously perceived to be old-fashion and traditional.

This paper borrows from the (post) structuralist tenets that objects and things are “textual” formations to read, decode, and interpret, and brings it together with the key postcolonial insights and concepts including representation, hybridity, and hegemony. The acts involving social signs such as language and gesture construct social reality/ identity [5]. Dress and the redefinitions, recreations, and transformations in clothing conventions similarly point out “symbolic social signs.” These signs evolve and change; the evolution of the meaning of Palestinian cultural dress is reflected in historical context and political/ social developments shaping these contexts. Indeed, these discussions demonstrate that what we refer to as “traditional” had continuously gone through transformations throughout history. Thus, I want to note that what I mean by “traditional” Palestinian dress is in general what women used to wear in their villages before they had to leave their land. It also applies gender and historical perspectives to unearth generational, historical, and cultural conditions that inform and transform the ways women conceptualize the modes of dress. Apart from the historical discussions, it utilizes from the narratives of twenty women belonging to the first generation arriving between the 1950s-1970s and their American born daughters in Milwaukee, US. It also utilizes community and family albums, videos, media appearances and online commercials to discuss the thob as a gendered garment among American Palestinian women. Accordingly, in this paper, I divide the evolvement of the Palestinian dress. First, I provide a brief review of the thob before immigration with an emphasis on colonialism and the Orientalizing of dress and its meaning; second, I focus on the post-1948 period until the 2000s, and lastly, I deal with the contemporary orientations since the 2000s.

### Pre-1948: The of Meaning of Dress

“Mirror,” “narrative,” “biography,” “(personal) story” are some of the words literature on clothing commonly uses when theorizing dress as identity and contemplating on its expressive aspect beyond a basic daily need. Personal identity is inextricable from cultural/ social/ national or other broader categories of self-affiliation. Also, dress is a major constitutive element of the collective memories of communities, and it is a communicative tool of nations. The expressive power and symbolic meaning of Palestinian clothes, particularly as political expression, existed before the creation of Israeli state and the following Palestinian displacement. Within the national territory, clothing reflected regional identities with differences in the styles and embroidery, and interestingly these

differences were displayed through women’s clothing while men’s clothing was largely unified and did not display much diversity [6]. Clothing similarly could reveal a woman’s marital and social status. Such local and personal information conveyed through dresses largely disappeared with the modernization of the clothing. In her research on Palestinian Costume, Shelagh Weir summarized the symbolism and diversity of Palestinian clothing that was prevalent until 1948:

Up to 1948, and to an extent still today, styles of dress reflected the major social division of Palestinian society. Male and female costume differed primarily according to whether the wearer was a town dweller, villager or Bedouin, and secondarily according to the region they came from. Within each region there were also finer distinctions between the costumes worn by the women of different villages and Bedouin tribes, though less so that of men [7].

Motifs and designs not only indicated the region and status of the wearer, but also communicated personal wishes and feelings of a woman. They could even tell how many children a woman wants [8]. As Weir noted, women created “their own language;” or as Widad K. Kawar, a researcher and collector of Palestinian costumes, said, they read their stories through the ornamentation of their clothes [9].

In pre 1948 period, Palestinian clothing was also influenced by different cultures due to Ottoman rule and British Mandate. Yet, the influence of the Ottoman and European styles was stronger in urban settings than in the villages, which gave way to a more explicit division. In terms of techniques and skills, the arrival of European missionaries improved clothing as an industry; the missionaries opened schools and courses to teach crafts, which also improved the social life in small towns and villages, and the participation of women in social life [10]. The introduction of European textiles and motifs was another outcome. Particularly, with the British Mandate, the elements of clothing that indicate higher status and fashion were redefined. For instance, shawl became an important complementary piece while some traditional pieces such as *khirka* were largely abandoned [11]. Towards the end of this period, with the awareness of the Zionist plans, Palestinian nationalism and its reflections in clothing began to emerge. W. K. Kawar noted that based on this awareness, Ottoman and European hats were replaced by “Palestinian village headwear- the *keffiyeh* and *ikal*,” [12] or women’s scarves and veil.

However, clothing in this period is complicated by the role of missionaries in giving the dress binary and shifting meanings, romanticizing it as belonging to Mary, and also the modernizing efforts. Women’s appearance and modernizing the dress were targets of the modernizing project. Missionary teachers, for example, obliged their students to change the way they dress underlying that thobs were premodern/village dresses, which emphasized the class division. When they were admitted to American schools, young girls were required to dress in European style; “American teachers thought they would “rescue” these “victim” girls from both the veil and the thob [13]. On the other hand, the Palestinian

clothing was associated with Jesus' mother Mary's culture. Sara Hadley, a missionary teacher, wrote in her memories "one could easily imagine this homemaker, with her lovely native dress, to be just the kind of hostess that Mary of Nazareth would have been two thousand years ago." Both the modernizing project and the romanticizing served to distance and other the thob. In this sense, in pre-1948 period, the use and meaning of the thob was subverted already reflecting the fragmented society.

### 1948-1990s

The evolving of Palestinian dress from individual, regional, and status-related symbolism into national significance took place after 1948. Actually, the value and meaning consciously attached to the object (the thob) was now more ideologically or politically informed. The prevalence of the national symbols on the thob instead of the personal stories after 1948 is a reverberation of the Palestinian national and immigration history with the rise of nationalist movements and efforts to preserve the national heritage. It is further influenced by other dynamics, though, such as economic conditions, the pressure to integrate into the host society, along with continuation of the regional/local concerns. For instance, some immigrant generation women interviewees expressed that the thobs they brought along reminded them the families/clans and villages they belong to in which they still took pride, as well as the sense of belonging to the Palestinian nation. No woman among the second-generation women, however, referred to the regional or local significance the thob possessed. Nationalist feelings and political agenda stimulated by wars and displacement constituted the dominant discourse among the society until the increasing influence of the Islamic movements towards the end of this period. Accordingly, regional differences lost their importance [14].

This period signifies a myriad of efforts by Palestinian women in different settings to preserve, revive, and develop the Palestinian thob based on a conscious involvement and resistance, and political activism to continue to "exist" [15]. These efforts and the metaphorical connection to the land and origins through dress resulted in the production of a scholarship on Palestinian dress, various forms of collections, and teaching centers, all initiated and conducted by women. Initially, women who found themselves in the refugee camps continued to make and wear the thob as a sign of the zeal to preserve and demonstrate their identity and tradition. The adverse economic conditions, yet, forced them to abandon delicate and rich embroidery; women primarily used the fabric they had access to and focused on the practical use of clothing rather than representative and artistic considerations. This contributed to the transformation of regional differences [16] into the dominance of the common identity of "Palestinianness" in the group feelings and the embroidery styles [16]. Particularly in the 1960s, the embroidery was simplified, and more European styles were adapted [17].

1980s and 1990s, particularly in the aftermath of the first intifada, the thob was revived, with women beginning to

incorporate national symbols and their individual expressions of national identity in the designs and embroidery. The historical and political incidents produced immediate results demonstrating the reactions and expressions; for example, after Six Days War, shops in New York sold embroidered large amounts of thobs (which were modernized to suit mini-skirts) [18]. According to Widad K. Kawar, the preservation of the thob was a primary consideration after the wars in 1948 and 1967, as part of people's struggle for existence and cultural survival [19]. As a child refugee herself, Widad K. Kawar realized the importance of collecting and documenting Palestinian costumes seeing that people were selling out their valuable costumes and make simpler decorations on clothes due to the war [20]. This attempt to revive and embrace Palestinian dress was a postcolonial expression. Definitely, an important turn for postcolonial social movements and studies is the "cultural liberation" of the postcolonial societies against the "Western neocolonialism" [21]. Here, by "postcolonial," I do not mean the chronological and political situation of the decolonization period; instead, I refer to the ideological struggle against colonialism in its all forms (cultural, territorial, etc.). In this sense, postcolonial struggle involves the actions and views of Palestinians regardless of their factual conditions in relation to their territory (natives, exiles, immigrants, etc.). For example, in this period, Palestinians inscribed in their objects the colors of their flag, the name of their country, and images of their national symbols. Indeed, these expressions can be strikingly complex in determining and reproducing what is national or colonial. For example, the shawl that was indeed promoted by the British and was relatively a new element of the Palestinian clothing and "originally developed for the foreign market," and yet, now constituted "'traditional' look" and "political consciousness," became the symbol of the intifada and was worn to express the national pride.

Women's initiatives to revive Palestinian clothes and craft also served the strengthening of the connection between homeland and diaspora. These attempts generally included a combination of research, fieldwork in Palestine, creation of centers and museums in several settings, and the dissemination of heritage and knowledge beyond borders. The Palestinian Heritage Center started by Iman Saca, with her mother Maha Saca, is an example of the collaboration among different disciplines as well as institutions in the US and Palestine. Such initiatives and immigrants' individual endeavors to bring and keep thobs were stimulated by the same motives of identity integration. The increasing propensity to own and wear a Palestinian dress in global / diasporic settings reflects the nostalgic yearning for one's history, tradition, and identity after the forced displacement. It connects the wearer with family, community, and other kind of social relational linkage in which the dress is used as a performative act to reflect group connection and identity. For example, Afaf, a woman who immigrated to Milwaukee, US in 1957, said that she brought "a lot of the Quran frames and a lot of the crystal and cross-stitching pillows, a big frame" with "cultural" motifs on them, as well as clothes, that she described as "cultural; the way we wear like the old ladies, the way they wear the dresses." These objects functioned as mnemonic devices that

spatially and temporally connected them to their “origins.” She said she brought these objects “to keep us thinking, not to forget about our culture and always remember it.” Palestinian dress takes an active role in terms of conveying the heritage values because “[a]n object’s significance lies more in its role in sustaining a socially symbolic meaning, such as local or national identity, rather than in their contexts of use or consumption”. For example, the wedding thob has operated as “a marker of identity; as a regional and national symbol; as a statement of resistance against the Israeli occupation, and a political map of the landscape to which the style and colour of each speaks of its specific location and the land lost in the occupied territories”. A participant in specific a museum and research project conducted among Palestinian Australians said that “after the occupation the thob becomes a flag while the flag cannot be displayed, the dress takes its place”. Afaf, for example, expressed she felt “proud” when she wore the thob as many other immigrant women who referred to the pride, they take in wearing the thob.

Women also obtained clothes in order “to pass them onto their daughters and daughters-in-law so that they know about their culture,” as Afaf said. Faten, another immigrant generation woman, noted an interesting point; back at homeland she did not use to wear cultural clothes because she was raised up in the city; she said that compared to her life in the Palestinian city back then, American Palestinians tend to wear cultural clothes more. She said, “I did not wear those thobs; no, I just see it here; I never see it before,” and that she does not have clothes passed down to her from her mother unlike other women coming from villages. This has also to do with the political significance of the thob gained at a time when nationalist movements and discourses strongly informed homeland and diaspora politics, discourses, and organizations.

### Post 2000s

When Rashida Tlaib was sworn into Congress as one of first two Muslim Congresswomen, it sparked a lot of reaction. Apart from the political discussions on media, fashion magazines keenly featured her first day for the dress she wore, which also transformed to social media in a celebration of the Palestinian thob [21]. This was presumably the first moment when the interrelationship among politics, society, and fashion was intensely and openly revealed. A short while ago, another Palestinian American woman, Nujoud Merancy, who is a NASA spacecraft engineer, announced that she updated her NASA official photo in a blazer designed with Palestinian embroidery. From Tlaib’s entirely traditional design to Merancy’s updated style, women’s inspiration to display their cultural clothing and identity continues after 2000s in different forms.

While women have used dress to have control over the meaning of the national heritage and claim visibility and agency within the power structure of the national discourse, they also have the power to change and transform the meaning of the garment, as well as how to use it and fashion it. They integrate fashion and traditionalism, and national and global, and create hybrid expressions of identity. Their manifestations show that “dress is a dynamic, interacting

system, unbounded by time and space that articulates directly with the larger cultural system in which dress operates,” [21]. Contemporary interest in the thob brings traditional embroidery and motifs and Western clothing together. National and nationalist sentiments still claim power and exist in a mode of competing or cooperating with both Islamic dress code (as Islamic discourse and hijab has been the prevailing discourse among the Muslim diaspora) and the modern fashion styles (for example, miniskirts, bags, etc. in the style of thob).

The distinguishing characteristic of the recent decades in terms of women’s efforts to redefine or popularize Palestinian thob is the global significance it obtained through the Internet. The Internet does not only inform and strengthen the connection between cultural artifacts and objects and the communities they belong to, but it has also altered the process of their commercialization and facilitated its spread, ultimately creating a web among all these dimensions. The thob’s narrative is now conveyed and spread in the digital space transmitting its popularity in weddings, cultural and national events, and local settings. Thus, the Internet not only facilitates the access to the cultural clothing but also creates another space to show and present clothing. Women who wear thobs only during weddings or other cultural events, the Internet, especially social media, transcends this immediate presentation into a permanent demonstration with a stronger effect. The popularity of the traditional clothing is increased by the Internet and social media postings that show the identity markers to everyone rather than constraining it into in-community contexts where the observers are generally the community members. The visibility of the clothing surely adds to the popularity and significance of the dress as an identity marker.

Among the second-generation, the wedding ceremonies, particularly the henna nights, are still the events when and where Palestinians express and demonstrate their connections to their origins by the “exhibiting” national symbols such as flag, wearing national clothes, and playing national music. Renda Serhan views this as a way to handle dislocation:

Their project is one whereby they connect to the past through wedding rituals in order to cope with exile and instill Palestinianness in their children and grandchildren. The Palestinian nation is modeled on both the Western and post-colonial models of nationalism demonstrated through the idealization of the peasant, wearing thobes and scarves, carrying the flag, and finally in performing the ideal-type gender roles. The seamlessness of the weddings begs two additional questions: do these individuals live their daily lives according to these precepts? And how is the image maintained of the steadfast Palestinian peasants who “never left... never changed”? [20].

As to the Milwaukeean community, in terms of weddings, , the cultural dresses, symbols, and rituals are even more favorable. While marrying outside the national group is a tendency among the young second-generation, intermarriages have led to the increased use of cultural elements. After defying fierce or minor oppositions from

their families and cultural communities, the women wish to practice their own cultural conventions in weddings, as a way to mitigate the reactions. Facing parental oppositions, young couples generally compensate for marrying an outsider through embracement of the cultural rituals and customs including the clothes. This situation is of course an affirmation of their continuing belonging to their cultural and national origins, and that their (inter)marriages do not violate this membership. For example, Farah, a second-generation woman who married a Pakistani man, reflected on her wedding as follows: "It is so funny now because, at that time, my mom was freaking out that I was not going to be wearing the thob. And every time she would start freaking out, I would tell her "mom, just wait until you see it!"

Also, similar to the immigrant women, their American-born daughters expressed that they feel "proud" when they wear the thob. Ayah, for example, said that she feels "cultural and proud" when she wears her thob that is passed down to her from her mother because it conveys the "authenticity of your culture." Ala expressed her feelings as follows: "I love it! Personally, it reminds me of being in Palestine. It is like a piece of my culture. I will stick to it; I want my kids to be able to have it and to wear it. It reminds me of my identity." Malak, a second-generation woman, said that she was given the thob by her mother and yet she "made it into my own different style, but I like the embroidery on it; I kept it the same." In addition, she likes to buy modernized versions from both Palestine and the US. These combinations acknowledge that, as Jeni Allenby said about Palestinian clothes, "the message now being communicated through the language of contemporary Palestinian costume is that we must not forget the past, but equally we must move forward in terms of design and culture" [19].

These women's expression of pride can be basically attributed to the concept of home and roots as an idealized notion unbounded by space and time. Young women's narratives demonstrated that they feel "Palestinian" when it comes to politics whereas they widely discredit many traditions related to national origins and highlight their American and/or transnational identities at other times. For them, the homeland is associated with a national struggle against colonial politics, and existence and survival. The politically situated position of the youth is not a weaker tie with the origins than the nostalgia and remembrance for the immigrant generation. The desire of older women and their daughters for sustaining the tradition of passing down the thob is a shared aspiration for preservation of the heritage, and for an "imagined community" [18]. A striking point is that while younger generations abandon and indeed challenge most of the practices of national culture that inform and shape their daily lives, particularly those related to their position as women, such as marriage, they increasingly incline to adapt ritualistic and symbolic expressions of culture. This demonstrates the dilemma posed by their context as members of a transnational community in a global setting; within this dilemma, they find strategies to reconcile their personal choices and the demands of their society and culture. Signification of the sense of belonging to their nation is a meaning, strategy, and political expression imbued in the thob. The messages it gives are layered

considering the addressee of the message; to themselves, to their families and local communities, to their nation globally dispersed, and to the colonial politics.

## Conclusion

As W. Kawar noted, the dress of a Palestinian woman historically has become her "passport;" "a bearer of her identity" [21]. From the pre-1948 period when it communicated the personal story of a woman and her regional identity, to the contemporary times when it has become a symbol of their national identity, the thob conveys women's skills, sense of belonging, and personal aspirations.

The acts of creating, choosing, and controlling dresses construct a space in which women can be expressive of their identities and choices and exert agency. This carries us to the initial point when village women incorporated into their embroidery their wishes and dreams, personal stories, and messages, which they were unable to/denied conveying in an open way and equal to men. The thob, for instance, communicated differences and identities more strongly than men's clothing in its traditional use. Its more metaphorical and symbolic designs with messages of personal stories indeed indicate the division between men and women in terms of the ways through and spaces on which they can express themselves. Culturally, women's voice regarding their choices, preferences, and desires about their own life and was not let out or heard within the community. For contemporary women, however, dress as a language is not only a form of self-disclosure (indeed was still latent and limited); instead, women controlling this domain, and as the "artists", rather than art, creators rather than objects, "authored" the signs and symbols. They use dress to contest and challenge the social structure which is a major component of the human behavior and group culture and defined as "the way or ways in which humans organize themselves into defined roles and groups" (Jean A. Hamilton).

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## Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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