How does art, design or popular culture respond to racial injustice and/or legacies of colonialism?

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Fashion Communications: Histories and Theories

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This essay will explore how the keffiyeh has responded to the legacies of colonialism, in the 20th and 21st centuries. As seen in Figure 1, the keffiyeh is a headdress that originates in the Middle East with Bedouin people, defined by its hand-woven nature and patterns. Although there is some dispute over the exact meanings of the patterns present in a keffiyeh, they are most commonly described as the fishnets, the bold lines, and the olive leaves- illustrated in Figure 2. The keffiyeh is imbued with layers of historical, cultural, and political significance. While it began as a practical garment for protection against the harsh desert environment, over time, it has evolved into a powerful symbol of resistance, identity, and solidarity, particularly in the context of colonial legacies in Palestine. This essay explores how the keffiyeh responds to the legacies of colonialism, examining its transformation from a regional garment to a global symbol of anti-colonialism and solidarity with the Palestinian people.

The keffiyeh, also known as a Shemagh, was traditionally worn by Bedouin men "in Palestinian society; until the 1920s, Bedouin men were distinguished from villagers and urban dwellers by their headgear, hattah or keffiyeh"(Renfro, E. 2018) this was in contrast to the tarboosh that was worn by those living in cities. It was not until the British mandate and the ensuing Arab revolt between 1936 and 1939 that the keffiyeh became a symbol of collective Palestinian identity and liberation. The British mandate being an act of colonialism that can be imagined as “the excitement of advance, of forward movement through time, and of the conquest and control of space.” (Dyer, R. 2017). The keffiyeh was transformed into a symbol of anti colonialism. “[The] peasantry and the bourgeoisie came together to resist occupation; a sense of nation was

fostered when both groups adopted the keffiyeh, collapsing markers of identity,". AS John Fiske said "it is an excorporation of the commodity into a subordinate subculture and a transfer of at least some of the power inherent in the commodi fi cation process. It is a refusal of commodi fi cation and an assertion of one ' s right to make one ' s own culture out of the resources provided by the commodity system." (Fiske, J. 2010)

This symbolism of anti-colonialism was continued in response to Israeli settler-colonialism that continued throughout the rest of the 20th century and is still continuing in present day. The symbolisms of keffiyeh as a representation of collective identity was solidified in popular culture in the 1960s. Yasser Arafat leader of the Palestinian resistance Movement always wore a black-and-white keffiyeh as seen in Figure 3. Arafats use of the keffiyeh coincided with Israeli occupations ban of the keffiyeh between 1967 and 1993. Arafat reclaimed the keffiyeh as symbol of resistance. During the 60's the keffiyeh was worn in the west only by anti war activist however it status a signifier of ani-colonialism and leftist politics quickly emerged with revolutionary figures such as Fidel Castro and Nelson Mandela which can be seen in figure 4 wearing them. In 1997 Mandela declared "We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians," this was three years after South African apartheid ended. The global adoption of the keffiyeh by revolution figure in the mid 20th century reflects the interconnectedness of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles. In the context of visual culture and media, the keffiyeh's prominence in photographs and videos of protests amplifies its political message. Images of activists wearing keffiyehs have become iconic, symbolising the ongoing struggle against oppression and the fight for justice. This visual impact reinforces the keffiyeh's role as a powerful political statement.

As the Keffiyeh gained importance in western popular culture in the 70s and 80s, it “shifted from a symbol of Palestinian solidarity to a general signifier of liberalism and anti-authority sentiment” (Haidari.N. 2023). In figure 5, Madonna can be seen photographed in 1982 and by the late 80s the keffiyeh was simply a fashionable accessory. The keffiyeh trend continued into the 1990s and early 2000’s. In Figure 6, Carrie Bradshaw can be be seen wearing a keffiyeh halter-neck in 2005 season four of Sex and the City. The meaning behind the keffiyeh here is more complicated than in other cases as the top was designed by Micheal and Hushi for their 2001 Persian collection. Hushi is an Iranian designer who has been historically vocal about his support of Palestinian liberation and described the Persian collection as a depiction of “the strength of women and celebrating the beauty of women in Iran and the entire Middle East, and how women are Orientalised, commodified, objectified, othered, and stereotyped by both the West and the East, as well as the Islamophobia they face.” (Davidson, E. 2024) Nonetheless, the separation of Palestinian liberation and the keffiyeh in popular culture was present during this time, it was transformed from a symbol of resistance to a commodity. This can be seen in RAF Simmons Riot Riot Riot collection; Nicholas Ghesquière’s Balenciaga fall 2007 “traveller” collection and Isabel Marant’s Spring 2008 collection. In 2007 W Magazine named the item one of fall’s top 10 accessories (Haidari.N. 2023). By the the mid 2000s the keffiyeh was available widely in many high street shops “including Urban Outfitters, who sold it as an “anti-war” scarf.” (Haidari.N. 2023) The keffiyeh's transformation into a global fashion is a case study into cultural appropriation and the commodification of symbols of resistance. In Western fashion markets, the keffiyeh has been mass-produced and marketed as a trendy accessory, often detached from its cultural and political significance.

While the keffiyeh was gaining popularity as a trendy accessory in the West, the second intifada—a significant Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation that began in 2000—was unfolding, resulting in over 3,000 Palestinian and 1,000 Israeli deaths. Interviews with hipsters

sporting the scarf suggested they were unaware of its significance in the Palestinian context. (Haidari.N. 2023) However, this doesn't mean their choice was entirely apolitical. "It's easy to forget that there was strong anti-Bush sentiment, even among the most apolitical hipsters, in response to the invasion of Iraq," (Haidari.N. 2023) says the creator of the Indie Sleaze Instagram account, which documents this period in style history.

The commodification of keffiyeh of fashion brands continues today, the brand Summery Copenhagen is currently selling clothing featuring the keffiyeh design. The dress seen in Figure 7, clearly displays the bold lines and olive branch motifs of the keffiyeh. However, the brand describes the keffiyeh as the materiel as “handloom weave pattern is originally designed at our studio in Copenhagen”. (Summery Copenhagen.2024) However, the use of a keffiyeh in fashion as symbol of solidarity with Palestinian liberation can be seen with Bella Hadid. In figure X she can be seen wearing a Micheal and Hushi keffiyeh dress to the Cannes film festival. Hadid is a Palestinian America who has continued to champion Palestinian liberation.

Despite the popularising of the keffiyeh is western fashion, this has not translated into sales for Palestinians. Today there is only one Palestinian owned and produced keffiyeh factory, the Hirbawai Textile Factory. Sadly “production of the factory fell from 150,000 units per year in 1993 to a mere 10,000 units in 2010.” (Hirbawai Textile Factory. 2024) This was due to the second Intifada, an increase in overseas low-cost manufacture, “most Kufiyas seen today can no longer hold ties to the land it represents.” (Hirbawai Textile Factory. 2024) Furthermore, the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords and the adoption of a free-market policy, the import of low-cost kufiyas produced overseas began to flood the markets worldwide. The growing competitive pressure of mass-produced alternatives began to hurt local Palestinian weavers. This pressure is further exacerbated with the Israeli occupation, Israeli checkpoints and roadblocks have created further hindrances to the production and trade of Palestinian small businesses. (Hirbawai Textile Factory. 2024) Production and trade from Palestinian small business is

dwindling, and the Palestinian economy has been steadily starved. leaving just the Hirbawi textile factory today. his commercialisation erases the keffiyeh's historical and anti-colonial meanings, reducing it to a mere fashion statement. This trend is seen as cultural appropriation, where a symbol of resistance and identity is co-opted and depoliticised for commercial gain. The mass production of keffiyehs in countries far removed from their cultural origins, further complicates this issue, raising questions about the ethics of such practices. However, in recent years the production at The Hirbawi Textile Factory has been successfully, and with keffiyeh seeking out in minutes (Hirbawai Textile Factory. 2024)

The keffiyeh's journey from a practical piece of headwear to a global symbol of resistance and anti-colonialism is a testament to its enduring cultural and political significance. It responds to colonialism's legacies by embodying Indigenous identity, resistance, and solidarity. While its commercialisation raises important questions about cultural appropriation, the keffiyeh remains a potent symbol of defiance against oppression and a call for justice. In a world where colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary realities, the keffiyeh reminds us of the ongoing struggles for self-determination and the importance of preserving cultural identity. It stands as a symbol of resilience, connecting past and present movements for justice and liberation. Through its visual and political impact, the keffiyeh continues to inspire and unite those who fight against colonial and neo-colonial forces, affirming the enduring power of symbols in the struggle for a more just world.

Images

Figure 1: Black and white Hirbawi Kufiya

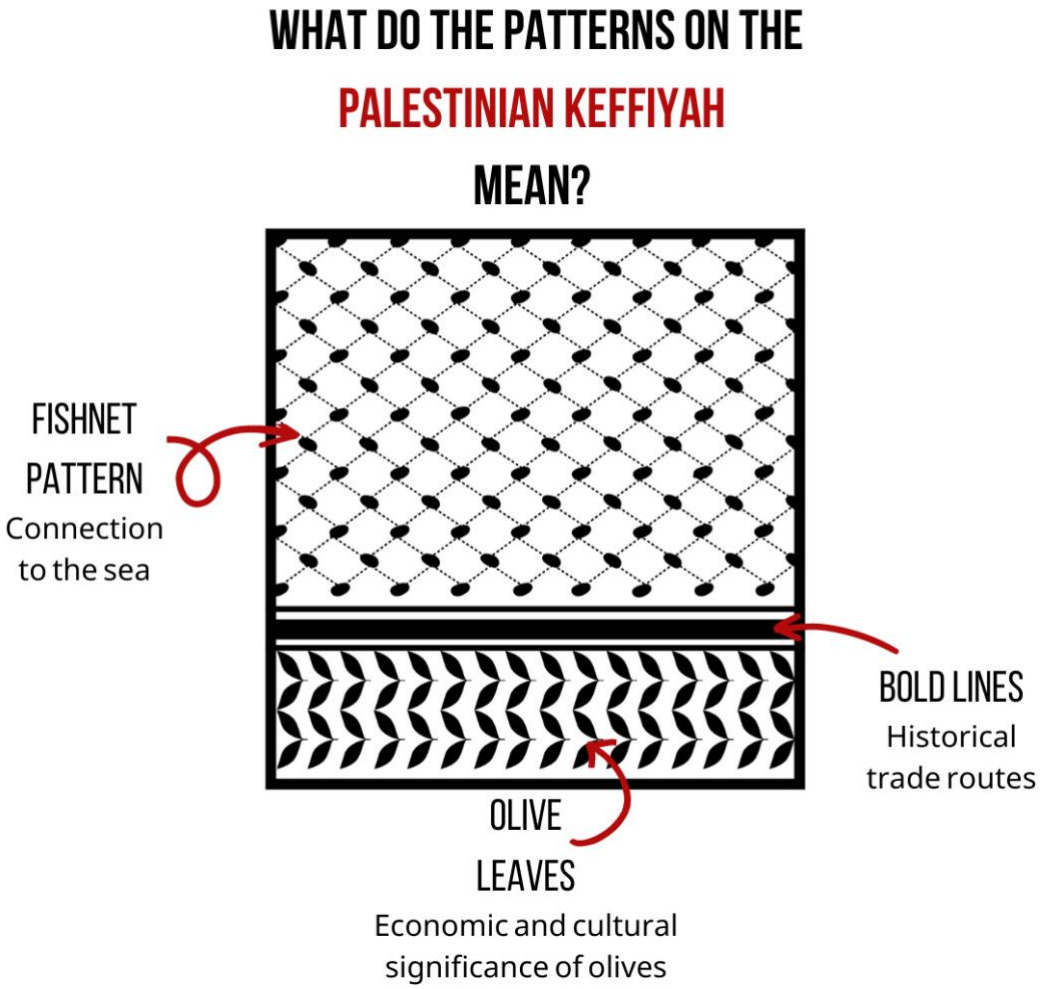

Figure 2- symbolism of the keffiyeh patterns

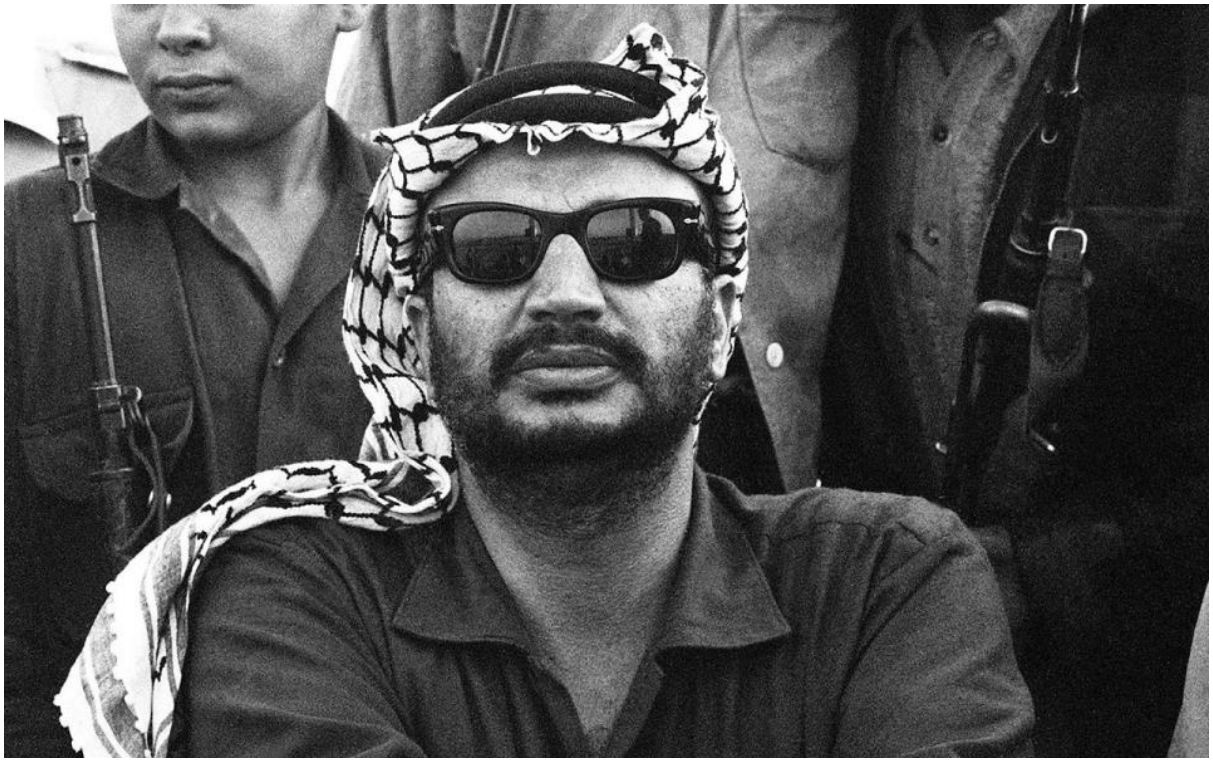

Figure 2- Yasser Arafat pictured in 1970, at a ceremony marking the end of a military training program in Damascus

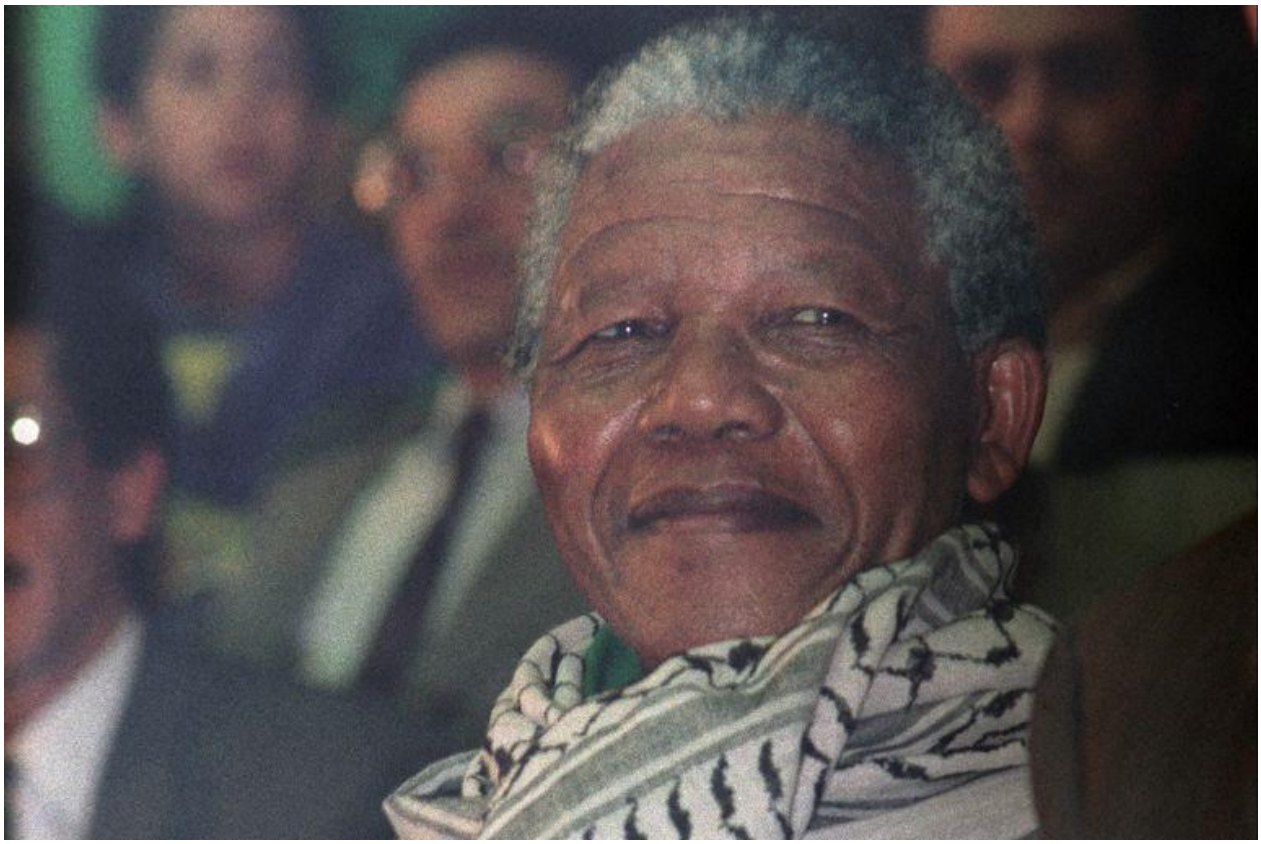

Figure 2. South African anti-apartheid leader and African National Congress member Nelson Mandela (C), wearing a keffiyeh in 1980

Figure 5- Maddona wearing a keffiyeh 1980

Figure 6- Carrie Bradshaw wearing a Micheal and Hushi Keffiyeh halter neck top

Figure 7- Summery Copenhagen dress, that displays the keffiyeh design

Figure 8 – Bella Hadid wearing a Micheal Hushi Keffiyeh dress 2024

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What makes popular culture a site of struggle?

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Fashion communication: Histories and Theories

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Palestinian embroidery, tatreez, was once a reflection of rural Palestinian life. Tatreez motifs, as can be seen in Figure 1, were passed down from mother to daughter and embroidered on garments and objects to reflect the individual women's taste but also as a marker of her local

identity. (Skinner and Kamel Kawar, 2007) Today however, “embroidery in symbolic as in physical form has played a fundamental role in the articulation of Palestinian nationalism since 1948” (The Courtauld, 2024, 8:57). Tatreez then became more than just heritage, it became Palestinian life. This essay will argue that tatreez is a site of struggle as Palestinian folk culture was transformed into a site of resistance against Israeli occupation, apartheid and violence. This essay will explore the transformation of tatreez and the evolution of the resistance since the 1948 Nakbha. I willl be arguing through the ideas of John Fiskes essay on incorporation and exportation.

Trateez is folk culture. It is an inherited practice that has developed over generations made by Palestinian women for Palestinian women. Folk culture is a form of popular culture. However, due to the occupation this folk culture began to hold new meanings. It became a form of resistance, as Palestinian tatreez embroiderer Subyiye Krayem said “folklore is politics unto itself, it means I exist” (The Courtauld, 2024, 9:03). Tatreez became a site of individual action and a sign of solidarity, garments featuring trateez would be seen as an expression of solidarity with the Palestinians. Both an economic solidarity, as you are purchasing a garment and symbolically as you are recognising Palestinian heritage. In 1987, the Palestinian flag became illegal, Intifada dresses (Figure 2), then made women's bodies sites of protest. This embroidery was made under very difficult circumstances, it speaks to the steadfastness of the women and highlights that resistance is a process not a singular event. (The Courtauld, 2024) Reclaiming the Palestinian flag through trateez “is an excorporation of the commodity. It is a refusal of commodification and an assertion of one ’ s right to make one ’ s own culture out of the resources provided by the commodity system.” (Fiske 2010). Furthermore, in 1987 the Tatreez left the body and became a symbol, the embroidered woman, the rural female body became a pre-eminent symbol, she became literally the motherland. While she gained importance she was reduced to a symbol. (The Courtauld, 2024). Nonetheless, this resistance and solidarity is an expression of agency, a hope that there can be a change in the world.

The solidarity, through wearing and purchasing tatreez has its limitations, as the handmade tatreez has now been commodified. “Were it not for organisations that run modern embroidery projects,the richness of this art would have disappeared” (Skinner and Kamel Kawar, 2007). Tatreez is no longer made for Palestinian women to wear “it is done to earn income” (Skinner and Kamel Kawar, 2007). Furthermore, being handmade and labour intensive is expensive, and is often too expensive for the embroiderers themselves to wear. Meaning that only the privileged can afford to perform this act Palestinian solidarity. (The Courtauld, 2024,) Although, tatreez embroiderers have a great sense of pride in their work and embroidery continues to be a quiet resistance that continues to evolve with the women who make it. After 1948 Nakbha the local incracies of tatreez were homogenised, what once was a symbol of local identity is, today, a symbol of Palestinian nationhood. This is seen in the ‘new dress’, which was made in refugee camps in the 1950s. Where Palestinian embroidery was once made using Syrian silk it was now made using Egyptian polyester. (The Courtauld, 2024,) This shows it is even more complicated.

In conclusion tatreez is a symbol of the memory of a Palestinian rural life and a reminder of the folk culture that has been passed down through generations. Although we cannot be sure as to when trateez started we can be sure it was a labour of love passed down through many generations. Through the violence of the Israeli state and its settlers tatreez was forced into a commodity. It is longer a labour of love; it is just labour. However, the people who still produce handmade trateez have been able to find community, resistance and a way to protest against violence. The work of men in Israeli jails highlights the power of this cultural practice. However, the act of consuming tatreez alone is not enough.

Figure 1: 19th century trapeze sampler

Figure 2 ; Intifada dresses

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