



Keeping tradition alive in the diaspora

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Tatreez & Tea: Embroidery and Storytelling in the Palestinian Diaspora
(<https://tatreezandtea.com>) by
Wafa Ghnaim (2016)

It seems fitting that *Tatreez & Tea* – a self-published book primarily focused on Palestinian artistic heritage and passing the knowledge on in written form – was authored by a woman who, along with other women in her family, has dedicated much of her life to informing the public regarding Palestine.

Wafa Ghnaim is a Palestinian-American who was informally apprenticed from age four by her mother to learn the practice of *tatreez*, or Palestinian embroidery. Her mother, Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim, is recognized as an expert in her field and has worked closely with the Oral History Center of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Abbasi-Ghnaim, who was born in Safad in northern Palestine, spent much of her life in the US educating the public on the beauty and uniqueness of *tatreez* with her young daughters in tow.



TATREEZ & TEA

Embroidery and Storytelling in the Palestinian Diaspora

BY WAFI GHNAIM

The focus of most books on Palestinian embroidery has been dress before the 1948 ethnic cleansing of Palestine and how particular regions developed their own costumes and embroidery motifs.

Tatreez & Tea, however, makes a point to address the development of *tatreez* in the diaspora, where Palestinian dress has become a national symbol and regional styles have tended to blend together.

The result is a publication that feels modern – even while focusing on a folk art – and pushes the idea that the existence and continuation of the *tatreez* tradition itself is an act of national pride.

Stories of a lost art

Tatreez is usually taught informally, passed on from one woman to another, generation to generation. But most Palestinians do not make it anymore, Ghnaim notes, as it is time-consuming and diaspora life does not leave much time for art.

The book offers 27 *tatreez* designs created by Ghnaim and her family. They are mocked up on grids in the book so they can be emulated by anyone familiar with embroidery. There is also a good deal of practical embroidery-making advice, such as which threads and fabrics are best to use and how to clean *tatreez* once it is made.

The book includes seven Palestinian tea recipes, along with the health benefits of each type and basic instructions on how to steep – or soak – them. The stories attached to these recipes reflect the linkage the author has made between drinking tea and creating *tatreez* and the sense of comfort she derives from tea.

Indeed, while the *tatreez* mockups are crucial to the book, the stories surrounding each piece are equally essential to understanding the significance of the designs.

This is nowhere clearer than in the explanation for the “Missiles Design.” This particular *tatreez* traces its history back to the British Mandate. When the British colonized Palestine, they brought along their more advanced weapons and methods of modern warfare that Palestinians had no exposure to beforehand.

The chest area of the dress is covered in missiles, and in the embroidered panels are upside-down trees telling of the destruction these weapons wrought. At the hemlines are embroidered flowers that represent areas the missiles haven’t touched.

A common thread throughout many of the accompanying stories about *tatreez* is that the craft provided an outlet for expression to Palestinian women who in generations past were often not literate.

As Abbasi-Ghnaim notes about the “Missiles Design,” “women couldn’t talk about politics at the time, or protest, so she embroidered her expression of feelings about what the weapons were capable of on her dress.”

A way to communicate

A second piece, the “Birds Design,” is relayed with some family history. The *tatreez* features a pattern of birds alternately facing and turning away from each other, conveying the difficulties of a newly married woman moving into the home of her in-laws, with whom she may or may not get along.

Abbasi-Ghnaim tells a story of her grandmother, whose friend’s son had just gotten married. The mother of the groom lived in another village and visiting would be impossible for Abbasi-Ghnaim’s grandmother, but she wanted to ask how her friend was faring with the new bride.

Since neither women knew how to read or write, the grandmother decided to use the “Birds Design” to communicate with her friend, embroidering the design on a pillow cover and having her husband take the gift to her friend. The inquiry was understood immediately and responded to with another *tatreez* gift.

Family stories like this motivated Ghnaim to write this book – from her family’s harrowing expulsion from Palestine during the 1948 Nakba, or catastrophe, to her mother’s journeys in *tatreez* and art while living in Jordan and Syria before eventually moving abroad, to Ghnaim’s childhood as the “other” in white suburban America.

Anecdotes detailing Ghnaim’s encounters with prejudice were in part due to her mother’s “openness about her Nakba story to the press and the attention that the Oral History Center [where she would often hold *tatreez* demonstrations] began to receive.” The author remembers “malicious calls to the house and witnessing direct threats against my mother when she walked us to school.”

The stories are a reminder of the alienation felt by those displaced by the Nakba and the need to preserve Palestinian identity, all of which ultimately strengthen

Ghnaim's resolve to protect traditions like *tatreez* as an act of resistance and to ensure that they continue for generations to come.

Marguerite Dabaie is a Palestinian-American illustrator and cartoonist based in Brooklyn, New York. Her work can be found at www.mdabaie.com (<http://www.mdabaie.com/>).

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