

Haaretz

An Englishman in Palestine: Fashion Designer Takes on the Old Palestinian Elites

The final project by fashion design graduate Samar Assaf packed a wallop both in terms of its aesthetics and its sharp criticism of Palestinian men.

Shachar Atwan Follow

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There's one thing about the end-of-the-year fashion shows at design schools that audiences have come to expect: The presentations of the opening and closing collections are likely to be especially theatrical. Why?

The first collection is meant to make a positive first impression and the final one is supposed to leave a mark; the former outlines the direction of the show, while the latter embodies the spirit of the graduating class.

This logic was put to the test at the end of last month, at the show presented by graduates of the fashion design department of the WIZO Haifa Academy of Design and Education. Was this the best way to open the evening? That was the question that came to mind upon viewing the first collection. And that question continued to echo thereafter, with no clear answer, as



Samar Assaf. Credit: Herzi Shapira



Samar Assaf's presentation. Credit: Herzi Shapira



GRADUATION PROJECT



more collections followed. But then, suddenly, a collection appeared that made it clear to all which one should have opened the show: Samar Assaf's "Shufuni Ya Nas" ("Look at Me, People," in Arabic).

To the sounds of contemporary Arab music, five models in tailored suits appeared on the runway one after the other. The suits resembled the traditional British style, but featured clever changes that connected them to another culture and offered a new version. These included a wool jacket, with a fish-skeleton pattern, that also converted into a cape; a suit jacket and slacks that were connected to each other and looked something like a jumpsuit, with the lower part playfully reminiscent of the kumbaz (a long Arab peasant tunic made of cotton or silk); and a classic-looking jacket with two strips of fabric hanging from either side.

The whole spectacle exuded unmistakable energy. It was the kind of performance that glues viewers to their seats and instantly focuses their attention – which may have been wandering a bit in the course of the lengthy show.

A week later, after Assaf's designs earned raves in every media review, the 27-year-old graduate admits she was expecting a positive reaction. "I think that when you go with your truth, when you have a concept and you stand behind it, then it has power," she says with quiet confidence, recounting how the morning after the

event she awoke to an email from her adviser, Dr. Omri Goren, congratulating her on the great reviews. “That’s when it really hit me that I’d succeeded. I started reading everything that was written about me online and I was very happy.”

That joy brought great relief from much of the stress Assaf had felt while working on the collection.

“In Arab society, there’s a lot of unconstructive criticism about putting a new spin on tradition: You’re expected to honor and preserve the tradition, not to expand it to modern contexts, and so you’re not supposed to be giving it a new adaptation,” she says, also acknowledging that the theme she chose caused her much trepidation.

“I was afraid of falling into this place that’s practically become a cliché – and doing what’s expected of me as the only Arab student in my class, something related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with keffiyehs or arabesques.”

And as if being in that situation wasn’t complicated and potentially volatile enough in itself, Assaf, a Haifa-born citizen of the state, chose as her main theme the changing identity of the Palestinian man in the early 20th century, during the British Mandatory period, using it as a means to express social criticism of the old elites in Palestinian society.

As Assaf sees it, neither that society’s leaders nor its

members did an adequate job of preserving the Palestinian people's identity during that era. Instead, they assimilated to some degree, she says: They tried to emulate the ruling power's culture while obscuring their own, with the clearest outward sign of this being the new modes of attire that were adopted. The young designer believes the effects of this Westernization process still reverberate in terms of the identity of the modern Palestinian man and his attitude toward the Israeli occupation.

“The Palestinian elites believe they successfully preserved their identity over the years,” she explains, “but they quickly became weakened vis-a-vis the British. They didn’t represent their people with honor, and before long, you saw the process I’m talking about, in which many stopped wearing traditional Arab dress and started wearing Western suits.

“To come now and say, ‘You changed,’ ‘You got lost’ or ‘You fell apart’ is very important in a society that is very masculine but where no one talks about it. There’s plenty of talk about women’s victimhood, but no one talks about the weakness of the Palestinian man. The men are very withdrawn into themselves and incapable of recognizing the change that has happened to them or asking themselves questions about it.”

‘Neatly pressed suit’

By way of illustration Assaf mentions her paternal grandfather, who “is in his 80s and still gets up every

morning and puts on his neatly pressed Western suit, with a tie and proper shoes – and just sits at home.

When I ask him why he bothers, he tells me he likes to dress that way. That he's comfortable that way. Of course, my grandfather isn't the only one who does this.

“Someone who doesn't come from our tradition might not notice that you have a whole group that suddenly made itself European because it lived with Englishmen, and traveled to Lebanon, which was a modern cultural center then – and then got lost.”

One of the inspirations for Assaf's collection for WIZO was a photograph she found in the family album, showing her great-grandfather at a family wedding in Nazareth in the 1950s: “I was surprised to see all the men in these tailored suits, and for me it was further proof of the overly hasty abandonment of traditional attire. Of course, in reality, it happened gradually: At first they wore the kumbaz with a suit jacket over it.

Then came the three-piece suit, but still with a keffiyeh and kumbaz, until the keffiyeh ‘disappeared’ from the wardrobe and daily attire, and became a symbol of the Palestinian struggle. But I don't think they were aware of any of this. They truly believe that they have preserved their tradition.”

With this as her point of departure, Assaf embarked on her graduate project by placing familiar Arab symbols on the wall of her workspace. “Of course, I started off

with a keffiyeh print and some Palestinian embroidery, but I was really afraid of falling into all the expected traps. Especially since when I first started the project, my messages were very confused and my research hadn't come together yet. But after a while I started taking tailored suits and a kumbaz and then took them apart to try to understand them better."

Goren, who met with Assaf weekly, explains how she arrived at her thoughtful viewpoint on history and the local experience.

"Samar's idea was to create a new hybrid of Arab and English identity as a way to raise questions about identity and its loss. In other words – not necessarily to point an accusing finger at someone, but rather to analyze an identity, and through this analysis to lead one to ponder what might have happened had Palestinian men not given up their traditional identity," he says, describing Assaf as a diligent and curious student. "Even though by a certain point she had a very clear idea of what she wanted to do, she was always ready to listen to suggestions and new ideas, and didn't let herself off the hook until she was completely satisfied with her work. I really enjoyed working with her."

Ran Shabani, head of WIZO Haifa's fashion design department and one of Assaf's third-year teachers, says the connection between her and Goren was key to the project's success, before adding that, "Samar really knows what she wants. She has firm opinions and has

no problem expressing them.”

He recalls that she had dealt with the Palestinian theme before, in designs that incorporated maps and the concept of territory. “You could already see then that when a student connects with a subject that really matters to them, chances are the result will be good, and that’s what happened with her final project, which is stunning.”

Indeed, the final result – the collection – reflects Assaf’s ideas in a subtle and sophisticated way, and challenges the viewer by virtue of the fact that it is not overly theatrical or explicit. Take, for example, the brown wool suit with a classic English silhouette, with the fabric on top also acting as a cape or shawl. Assaf says that the rounded “feminine” lines of this suit were not part of a conscious design plan: “Maybe it’s because I’m a woman designer. I wasn’t trying to imply anything about the weakness of these men by giving it a feminine quality.”

Clearly, the word “shufuni” [“look at me”] in the collection’s title has a meaning beyond that of wanting to show off.

“Yes, it’s ‘Look at me, somebody look at me,’ but it’s also, ‘Why should I see you? What have you done? How have you coped?’”

Unfriended on Facebook

Samar Assaf was born and raised in Haifa. Her father is a contractor and her mother is a preschool teacher who

now runs a day-care center at home (“About every year I get a new Jewish little brother whom my mother looks after in our house”); she has two siblings. She describes the home she grew up in as “very modern, very much a part of contemporary society – a home in which the daughter can go study and do more or less whatever she wants – but also part of a society in which she is still expected to conform to conservative attitudes toward marriage, and is regularly asked: ‘So, when are you going to get married and have kids?’

“It’s even hard for guys my age to be with a girl who says she wants to change something in her society. And I have a really hard time with people who want to tell me what to do. It infuriates me. I don’t think a woman has to act aggressively in a masculine way to be a feminist, but I do get worked up quickly.”

And what would you say should be the new, ideal Arab male type?

“I don’t have an ideal for the new Arab type, but I’d like it if men from the young generation were able to express traits that are considered more feminine. I think real men can also get excited about clothes, that real men don’t have to fear a woman’s strength, or fear being labeled as feminine, and that they can also admit failure. To admit, for example, that it’s hard for them, and that the occupation has exhausted them.

“Unfortunately, this hardly happens with our leadership, which tries to present a strong and

triumphant front. The occupation has changed us a lot, and if we won't try to understand just what happened here, what it has changed in us and what we want to do about it, it will be very depressing."

Assaf has decided to try her luck abroad, and plans to leave for London soon: "I have family there, and I'll learn how the international industry works, what can be done and how. Only then will I see if I'm going to come back here and start an independent label. Because here amid all the different tensions – political, economic, social, employment – it's very hard to be creative. You don't have much emotional space left to focus on developing your work. There were days when I would just come home and lie down on the couch and wonder why there has to be so much tension."

As a young Arab woman living in 21st-century Israel, Assaf says she often feels that she is in a very tricky position. Indeed, her inner struggle between the desire to escape and the desire to face the situation here and now is apparent. She has a hard time with the common perception of Arabs here, which reduces them to "good hummus, a keffiyeh and a little talk about women's status. I have a lot to say about that, but at the same time I despise this stance of victim. It doesn't lead anywhere. You just have to be true to yourself and work with it."

But that's not so easy to do when you're constantly aware of the gaze that is upon you, of society's expectations.

“Sometimes the Israeli side is crude and repressive, but on the other hand the society also has high expectations of you, concerning what you’re supposed to do.”

What do you mean?

“There is this need to fulfill what’s expected [by Jewish Israeli society] of the ‘good Arab’ ... But still, sometimes it’s not easy. There were all kinds of friction, especially during the war in Gaza [last summer]. Dozens of people deleted me from their Facebook friends because I identified with Gaza. Those are times when I want to pack a suitcase and flee from here. True, I live in Haifa where there is coexistence, but how much must the pain be denied in order to maintain this coexistence?

“The Nakba [or “catastrophe,” a term used by Palestinians to describe the establishment of Israel] is a formative event for me even though I didn’t experience it personally, even though my father never spoke about it. At the same time, my attitude isn’t one of ‘It’s my right’ or ‘Who was here first?’ And I think that if we don’t understand what happened and try to resolve the ongoing crisis – we’ll just keep on getting being caught up in hatred and violence, and that’s a terrible shame.”

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