

## **For Suzy Tamimi, clothes are a gateway to change.**

By Samaa Khullar

Article from undergraduate NYU journalism class “Elective Reporting Topics: Writing the Profile”



Before sitting down for a midday Zoom call on what should be a lazy Sunday afternoon, Palestinian designer Suzy Tamimi has already wrapped up a morning photo shoot, hand-stitched a piece for her newest collection, and talked business strategies with a new client.

Her Brooklyn apartment is filled with a mountain of old clothing scraps, and while clearing her desk, Tamimi notices that her phone is about to die. "I've been a one-woman show since I started," she says while playing with her braids. "Now there's a growing demand for what I'm doing, and it's getting to be overwhelming to keep up with orders."

Tamimi, 41, carved a space for herself in the fashion industry by repurposing vintage Tatrez (embroidery) into modern pieces. Her sustainable work often includes the phrase "freedom fighter" in different languages and powerful imagery such as doves, a symbol of peace, olive trees, an iconic staple of Palestinian agriculture, and poppy flowers, commemorating all the lives lost since the beginning of the war.

Every piece is handcrafted by Tamimi herself, but due to increased attention and demand, this is the first year she has looked for other artists to join her line. "I feel like since the pandemic hit, everyone is shopping online," she says of her business strategy. Tamimi's merchandise can be found on her [website](#), ranging from \$40-60, and her custom designs are sold exclusively through [social media](#) with varying price ranges depending on the size and scale of the piece.

In 2019, her work was featured in [Vogue Arabia](#) alongside pictures of Rashida Tlaib, donning the iconic Indigenous "thobe" (women's garment) while being sworn into Congress. Tamimi remembers the moment fondly, realizing how far the Palestinian cause has grown in the past few decades. "For a long time, I didn't believe in myself or my self-worth because of the adversity I faced," she reflects. "But I started to realize that there's a lot of power within me. I can make anything I want happen."



*(Picture from Vogue Arabia 2019 spread)*

Tamimi's late father was from Al-Khalil (Hebron), and her mother hailed from Sandala, a small northern agricultural village. During the 1967 Israel-Palestine war, both sides of her family moved to East Jerusalem. In the mid-1970s, her parents moved to Redwood City, San Francisco, a relatively welcoming environment to immigrants from the global south.

Her father was determined to create a better life for his family in the U.S. His first job was as a line cook at San Francisco's Sunshine Café. He slowly worked his way up to being the owner of two different restaurants. "My father came to the states in the '70s with only the clothes on his back. He worked every day of his life and instilled a strong work ethic in us all," Tamimi says.

Born and raised in the Bay Area, Tamimi explains she's always felt more Palestinian than American. "It's hard to put into words," she says. "You smell the air there, and it just feels like home. Even the dirt, you feel so connected to the earth. It all resonated with me so much more than American culture."

Her fondest childhood memories in California are also infused with a Middle Eastern spirit. "Me and my mom would clean the house together, and she would make it fun by putting old Arabic music on," she smiles. "We would belly dance and clean at the same time. It was really cute."

Mejdy Tamimi, Suzy's younger brother, says he doesn't quite understand how she found her artistic side. He currently works in the operations sector of Earle's Organic Produce in San Francisco and says that no one in their family had a background in art before Suzy. Mejdy vaguely remembers his father drawing sometimes, but his work took priority over passion like most immigrant fathers. "He worked every single day running a restaurant," he says. "He woke up at 4:00 in the morning and got home around 6:00. He never had time to do anything else."

Tamimi internalized her father's work ethic at a young age. She graduated at the top of her class at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco in 2003 and won a scholarship to study in Paris at Studio Bercot. Her senior collection in college, inspired by revolutionary anti-war messages from the 60s and 70s, made it through the prestigious International Talent Support

competition that chooses top talent at fashion schools. "I was the only American that got chosen. My whole collection was based on Palestine and the conflict, juxtaposed with Andy Warhol and colorful playfulness." In 2002, Tamimi presented her work in Italy to students worldwide and joked that this was before Palestine was "popular."

Before then, she explains that she never felt as though she belonged. "People never acknowledged me as Palestinian," she says. "In school, for instance, they have you check off the boxes: Are you Black, White, Asian, Hispanic, or 'other'? And I was always 'other.' What does that mean? I don't count as a person? My roots don't matter? My country, is it nonexistent to you?"

However, after receiving recognition in Italy, Tamimi felt a renewed sense of confidence and moved to New York in 2014 to pursue her fashion career. She quickly found a home at threeASFOUR, an avant-garde fashion house that has worked with artists like Bjork and Sean Lennon and whose works have been displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The eclectic group was a perfect fit for Tamimi, who felt isolated due to her identity in the fashion world. She felt inspired by the "genius" of the three designers behind the brand. "The lead designer, Gabi Asfour, is Palestinian, but he's a refugee who grew up in Lebanon," she explains. "Adi [Gil] is Israeli, and Angela [Donhauser] is from Tajikistan and has German roots. They always inspired me because they're trying to show unity between these opposing cultures."

Tamimi met some of her biggest inspirations at threeASFOUR, including Hanan Munayyer, the "godmother of Tatrez." While Tamimi was warned not to meet her heroes, she was the exception. Munayyer invited a young Tamimi to her home and posed an exciting challenge. "Hanan proposed that if I could make a gown using her scraps, she would show it to the United Nations during her exhibit on preserving Palestinian identity through embroidery," she recalls.

The task at hand was not as simple as sewing together old pieces of clothing lying around in New York. Tamimi had to travel to Palestine in 2014 to pick up the fabrics from a woman in Gaza, a territory that has been under blockade since 2007. The woman planned to meet Tamimi in

Ramallah, a city close to Jerusalem; she took a U.N. van to the West Bank, a difficult, often humiliating journey for Gazans, and had a two-hour window to hand over the fabrics to Tamimi before the Israeli military closed checkpoints for the day.

"You could see the tattered parts of the embroidery, especially on the chest part, because women would clean and wipe their hands there," Tamimi reminisces on the pieces she retrieved. While she now has her materials shipped from Jordan and Palestine, Tamimi will never forget that first trip. "They're like artifacts. Sometimes I could smell the fabric. Just think of the life that was living in that," she says. "I wanted to preserve that because what will these pieces be doing in a bag?"



*(Left: Tamimi's mother Gigi in her early twenties; Right: Gigi in 2021 wearing her daughter's design)*

Her experiences in Palestine retrieving these fabrics were life-changing and heartbreaking. "You feel the suffering of the land and your people, and you see the inequality and injustice," she says. Even before her fashion career began, she understood that fear often defines Palestinian reality on the ground. At 10-years-old she was traumatized by her first experience in Jerusalem: "I remember seeing soldiers with rifles putting children against the wall and searching them, and I was just like, What is going on?"

Her brother describes the process of returning to Jerusalem as humiliating. "They hold us in the Tel Aviv airport for four to seven hours and interrogate us," he says. "When you look at your American passport, it says you're not supposed to be detained or held up in other countries. But if you're of Palestinian descent, whether you have an American passport or not, it's a problem. They'll hold you, and there's nothing you can do."

Despite all the work she does for her community, Tamimi still feels guilty when she gets burnt out or needs to turn off the news. "When I see these sad videos of what's happening back home, it takes a big toll on me," she says. "I get emotional, and it drains the life out of me. My heart starts to palpate. I get scared," she says.

Tamimi says that she suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression and believes that she needs to prioritize her mental health to keep creating. "How will I be a strong fighter and a strong voice for my people if I don't take care of myself? I've gone through my own traumas. I also know that I feel the traumas of my ancestors. It's embedded in us in some shape or form," she reflects. Along with her fashion ventures, Tamimi also donates to the Gaza Mental Health Foundation to destigmatize mental illness in the Arab community.

Tamimi's fiancé, Trinidadian restaurateur Kevin Skinner, echoes what everyone around Tamimi says about her personality: she's sensitive and passionate but also fiery. He often comes home to heaps of clothes every day, but the environment doesn't bother him. "It's more than her work. It's her life. Her work takes over the place, and I'm cool with it," he says. He also affirms that with Tamimi, what you see is what you get. "On Instagram, you see people talk, but you're like, do they live by what they say? But her work *is* her." Tamimi and Skinner regularly attend protests for various causes in New York.

"When I was a lot younger, I thought I would join the Peace Corps," Tamimi says, laughing. She insists that she's "not just saying that for brownie points" but because she genuinely believes social justice needs to be at the forefront of whatever she's doing to feel fulfilled. Until she began incorporating Palestinian artwork into her designs, she questioned her purpose. "In school, I was like, So what? Why am I here? Why do I want to be a designer? I don't just want to make pretty

clothes. I want clothes that can make a difference and speak. To do something more powerful than look pretty."

As for what's next for the skilled designer, Tamimi hopes to work with established western companies and Palestinian women in refugee camps throughout the Middle East to popularize their designs and create economic opportunities for people in difficult situations. "We all deserve the right to make all of our desires come to fruition," she says.

"You know when you *know* you've been put on this earth to do something?" Tamimi asks with a sweet smile. "It doesn't happen for everyone. Maybe half of us do, but we know it in our veins. We know it in our whole being that we're here to spread a message. It can be really difficult, sometimes emotionally, really taxing. But I know why I'm here. I know this is my calling."