

The Lady with the Golden Needle



The boutique is stacked with one-of-a-kind, intricately detailed clothing

A bijou boutique in Havelock Town has found a snug niche selling one-of-a-kind Indian ethnic wear

Words Yomal Senerath-Yapa | **Photographs** Vishwathan Tharmakulasingham

Hawwa Kareem is the artist wielding the “Golden Needle”. This shop in Havelock Town is small compared to the reputation it has built for itself. The walls are a golden yellow, and the ends of the cloth racks curl like scrolls. The whole shop was lit by the bright clothing that lined the walls. It is said that colours release happiness, and indeed I had the feeling of Serotonin gushing in and melting the pressure on my temples, surrounded by all these bright hues.

Though the store’s history spans more than two decades with success running like

a motif, Golden Needle moved to bustling Havelock Town much later, when Hawwa had time on her hands with her children completing their education. But when she initially decided to enter the business she was really tracing her mother's footprints, consciously or not. Her mother is Indian and did sewing for her friends. Hawwa herself has many affinities with India: so it is not surprising that she has a passion for the designs and prints of the vibrant subcontinent.

Hawwa sums up with admirable simplicity the appeal of ethnic wear today. In a climate such as ours cotton clothing is the most comfortable and suitable. Bollywood, she adds with a smile, is another factor. But she stresses the fact that each Indian piece of clothing, with intricate individual patterns, is unique. Few things embarrass a woman more than meeting someone dressed exactly like her. At Golden Needle, Hawwa says, "unless I make two or three sizes, I never repeat the same design."

"At almost any event today you see more and more ladies in ethnic wear." "Going ethnic" is very fashionable in a cosmopolitan world where women want to go beyond norms and experiment with brighter colours and exotic designs from tribal or traditional cultures. They are almost therapeutic with happy colours and tinsel and glitz.



Designs and embellishments make the clothing unique

Hawwa's clientele is so varied that all your traditional notions of 'who wears what' would be shattered. Professionals from many fields love to wear her clothes to work, and her customers represent all ethnicities and ages. They not only come for clothes but for advice on what is matching and other wardrobe-related matters, and Hawwa is ready to oblige them. Her fame had reached the level where foreigners, intrigued by her bijou shop and its one-of-a-kind pieces, ask her to send clothing overseas or have them ready before their stay is over. "Transit passengers give the order, and in two-three weeks come back to collect."

All the clothing in Golden Needle may not be designed and made by Hawwa, but the final touches and the stamp of approval are always given by her. That is how Golden Needle has maintained its reputation, earning a name even in the film and teledrama industry. Indicating the space around us, Hawwa names each type of salwar. There are dhotis, patialas, palazzo pants and push up pants. Palazzo pants and the elegant, figure-hugging lehengas, she says, are the sensation these days. Today's ethnic wear also borrows from the West, while retaining the beads, the mirror work and the paisley designs.

The wonderful thing about ethnic wear according to Hawwa is that it can never go out of fashion. What was in style half a century ago can make a comeback and no one can say 'passé'. The other wonder is that anyone can wear any design.

Though she has plans to expand the store, making it accommodate more of her lovely clothes, she is adamant on staying within the intricacy and vibrancy of the genre in which she has come to excel, and which she personally admires and loves to wear.

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