

## Rebels and Madness in the Native Informant: Six Tales of Defiance from the Arab World

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Ramzi Salti's *The Native Informant: Six Tales of Defiance from the Arab World* published in 1994 is an example of Jordanian fiction written in English. Salti is an Anglophone writer attempting to re-write English by infusing it with Arabic expressions, songs, and names. Salti's short story collection considers marginalized identities in the Arab world, specifically Jordan. The Jordanian self is presented as occupying a hybrid space, a space between *turath* and modernity, a space between the self and the collective, and between the private sphere and the public sphere.

The notion of upholding traditional values and positing them as indisputable truths is known as *turath*, as Joseph Massad carefully identifies it in *Desiring Arabs*. *Turath* in Arabic literally translates to heritage. When the postcolonial Arab self and sense of identity were faced with the many repercussions of colonialism, and with a tide of rising globalization, this idea of *turath* came into being. Massad clarifies the ideas attached to the term: "The term *turath* refers today to the civilizations' documents of knowledge, culture, and intellect that are said to have been passed down from the Arabs of the past to the Arabs of the present" (17). For Massad, *turath* was set up against modernity and Western ideals and globalization. Because the East was, in a sense, Europe's childlike version of itself, its past, it was seen by the elitists and "civilized" as backward, unable to move along, unable to embrace civilization.

Salti's short stories depict the struggles of the gay community, hybridized individuals, and oppressed women. The first short story, "Vivian and Her Son", presents a mother struggling with the death of her son, who she later finds out has been a closeted homosexual and was never able to "come out" to his family or friends. The second story, "Checkpoint", deals with Sami, a young man returning to Jordan from the United States, where he had adopted a more Westernized view on life, and was able to be openly gay. Sami feels suffocated and unable to establish his sense of self amidst his multiple identities as Jordanian, gay, assimilated, yet part of a traditional family. The third story, "Antara and Juliet," deals with two teenagers, a Christian boy and a Muslim girl, who are not allowed to date because of their opposing religions.

The main character aims to re-write William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in order better to fit an Arabic self, incorporating the Arabic Antara instead, the lover who was forbidden to marry his love because of his dark complexion. The fourth story is "Wedding Song," which deals with a young woman, Su'ad and her abusive husband. "Wedding Song" is the only story that deals specifically with the subordination of women in a patriarchal society and the subsequent madness of the protagonist both as a result of society's oppression, and as an escape from the hegemonic order. The fifth story, "The Taxi Driver" also examines homosexuality in Jordan, when a young man, Ala' meets a gay taxi driver for the first time and has a sexual encounter with him, forcing him to question his own repressed sexuality. Ala' must deal with his own prejudices, traditions, and his own desires. Finally, the last story, "The Native Informant," presents the character of Majid, an educated young man who is given the task of being a translator and a tour guide for a British woman who is writing a book about Jordanian history and culture.

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Majid must find his own place within that situation, not wanting to betray his culture, not wanting to be a "native informant", and unable to embrace either the East or the West. Majid's encounter with the British woman, Ms. Penn, proves to be a neocolonial one based on racist stereotypes, and eventually, he is wrongly accused of harassing a foreign woman. Power relations between East and West are most exemplified in this final story.

"Wedding Song" clearly exemplifies the Jordanian woman who is driven into madness by patriarchy. The female protagonist, Su'ad, whose name translates into happiness, is a seventeen-year-old woman who is married to an abusive husband. Su'ad belongs to a family who struggles with poverty and is thus quickly married off at the age of fifteen. Once married, Su'ad finds that life becomes torturous as she is constantly beaten by her husband. The story begins with Su'ad's narrative, as she prays to God that her husband has not come to fetch her from her parents' house, where she has been hiding after being beaten severely. Su'ad narrates: "Oh God please tells me that the door bell did not ring just now...You know, my God, that I didn't mean to deny you. When I said you didn't exist, you couldn't exist, I was just angry, and hurt...Please don't make me pay for it" (35).

Salti presents Su'ad's internal struggle and her problematic relationship with a God that has forsaken her, left her to be abused by a monstrous husband and a family who are unable and unwilling to put a stop to the abuse. For Su'ad, it is not only religion that has disappointed and betrayed her, it is also her mother's betrayal of her that leaves her feeling abandoned and helpless: "I don't know who this woman is. She used to be my mother...She was my daughter as well as my mother. And look at what she has become. Look how ugly her face looks now...and how her eyes look at me as if I have never been her daughter" (36). Su'ad feels estranged from her mother, from the maternal, expelled and rejected from that secure and protected space that had enveloped her as a child. Su'ad struggles with being heard, nobody listens to her, not even her mother who had always protected her. In the face of patriarchal dominance, Su'ad's mother is unable to protect her or shield her, and adds to her misery by urging her to go back to her abusive husband. Su'ad is able to understand the importance of female solidarity, yet her mother is unable to do the same:

Su'ad directed her eyes toward her mother's and tried to find a glimmer of familiarity or recognition in them. For a whole second, she felt that ruptured bonds may not be completely unrecoverable, that two women in a world of misery were naturally drawn together against cruelty and degradation; but the estrangement that had settled upon them for the past two years...returned as soon as she heard the next words (37).

Su'ad's mother voices the words of the patriarch, the words that have been instilled and engraved within her to ensure patriarchal domination. Su'ad's husband blames her for being infertile, which we soon find out that she is actually fertile, and it is his lack of fertility and "low sperm count" that is the basis of the problem between them, a problem he will not take responsibility for because it ruins his reputation and dignity as a man (47). Su'ad's husband never confronts her with his infertility; rather she finds the doctor's diagnosis amidst a pile of papers (46). He continues to guilt-trip her and patronizes her for her lack and her inability to "fulfill a woman's most essential function" (45). Su'ad's husband's speech demeans and reduces her to a mere vessel of procreation:

'You frigid whore,' he had shouted. 'You are a bundle of damaged goods...Eighteen months of marriage and your belly is still as flat as the day you walked into this house. You cannot even fulfill a woman's most essential function.' Su'ad had tried to ward off his fists, but ended up taking refuge in the bathroom. He had kept banging on the door, repeating his insults, equating her existence with her reproductive capacity (45).

Salti, criticizes society for rendering women invisible, for reducing their subjectivity and existence to mere biological functions. The entire neighborhood, including Su'ad's family, begins to identify her husband as a saint, as a victim, who "did not even think of taking a second wife...no wonder he loses his temper, who wouldn't?" (47). The neighborhood people, like Faqir's Storyteller, are unable to see women's realities. When Su'ad tries to express herself and voice her pain, she is silenced by her mother who tells her: "Do not repeat those words to anyone, including me, ever again...Face your infertility, *yabinti*, and don't seek to blame your husband, for your own sake. It is the only way to survive" (47). Salti's usage of "*yabinti*" which translates into "my daughter" is not translated for the Western reader.

Su'ad's mother continually refers to her as "*yabinti*," yet the words lose their meaning each time, as she sacrifices her daughter's happiness and self-worth, handing her over to society and an abusive husband who threaten her subjectivity and sanity. As a result of this continuous cycle of patronizing, Su'ad begins to internalize the harsh words of her mother, her husband, and society: "[She] had begun to doubt her own self" (48). Su'ad is denied any form of expression, any voicing of her painful reality. Alienation enters the picture and she spirals into a descent into madness.

Through her neurosis, Su'ad is able to see through the patriarchal ideology that dominates her life. Su'ad experiences neurosis and is unable to differentiate between her father and her husband, for they have become one and the same, the same patriarch: "For a moment, she mistook her father's voice for her father's. She became confused and shut her eyes, but when she opened them the image was still there...she was no longer able to distinguish between the two men" (48). Su'ad is forced to return to her home, as her husband has arrived to retrieve her. As Su'ad's mind begins to disintegrate, she begins to replay the traditional wedding song: "She shut her eyes and allowed the words to resurface: *Tal'ah min beitabuha/Rayhabeit el-jiran/labsah al-ahmarwil-akhdar/wil-'uyunyasalam!* Or was it the other way around...Was she wearing red and green, or blue and black?" (48-9). Salti's usage of the traditional wedding song, an integral part of Jordanian *turath*, is a tactic that attempts to deconstruct and dismantle words that have been internalized and absorbed, ideologically formulated to ensure the subjugation of women. Su'ad is, in fact, covered in blue and black bruises, and is not wearing red and green as the song describes. Jane Ussher explains in *Women and Madness* that women are treated as commodities that are to be passed on from one man to another: "Traditionally in marriage, the woman has been passed from the father to the husband...this 'traffic in women' maintains social cohesion, social order, and sustains the continuation of the status quo, the existing patriarchal power structures" (262-63). As such, the traditional Jordanian wedding song exemplifies this passage, this commodification of women, as she departs her father's house only to enter another patriarch's house.

Once Su'ad begins to descend into madness, a certain reclaiming of herself takes place. For instance, she no longer feels the bodily pain inflicted upon her. A realization takes place, when she acknowledges that this is in fact her own doing, and not God's, who has disappointed her endlessly: "It this was a miracle, it was from her own doing, and she was not about to give thanks where none were due" (49). This is the first instance of freedom, where she is able to release herself from the grip of religion. Su'ad then begins to see her husband's face everywhere, he is all around the neighborhood, he is *every man*, the same patriarch, "he was everywhere. He lived next door, he drove every car in the neighborhood, he walked in the street" (49). Upon entering her house, Su'ad no longer recognizes herself nor her husband. As he calls her name, she becomes even more confused, decentered, and does not respond to her name. To the frustration and bewilderment of her husband, Su'ad flatly states: "I beg your pardon...but I seem to have misplaced myself...could you help me? I seem to be lost" (50). After laughing at Su'ad's questions, her husband becomes infuriated with her attitude and threatens to hit her. When Su'ad does not back down and continues to stare at him, he screams: "Have you gone completely mad, woman?" (51). Su'ad calmly and assertively states that it he who appears to be mad. As a result, her husband starts to lose control and shake uncontrollably, labeling her as mad, insane, "just like your family!" This does not bother Su'ad, for at this point, she has understood and accepted that she "had no family" (51). This is yet another form of emancipation.

Su'ad's exclusion from society, her family, and her own self, becomes a site for subversion and power. As her husband experiences an emotional breakdown, Su'ad takes the belt from his hand and into her own. The weapon of abuse is transferred to her. Her husband claims that she has castrated him and "robbed" him of his dignity, asking her who she is to do that, to emasculate him (52). Salti gives Su'ad a lengthy speech, in which she reclaims her identity, her sense of self, and simultaneously the collective 'woman', for she speaks for every woman, rather than just her individual self:

Su'ad, Fatima, Khadija, Mariam, or Georgette, it does not matter. I am in all of them, and there I will remain. You have never known about me, but I have been studying you for centuries...I am Arab, and I am Woman, and both parts make me whole...My choice is not between Woman and Arab; rather, it is being Woman and Arab. My freedom lies within that choice, as does my salvation (52-3).

Undeniably, Salti does attempt to create a positive space that includes, rather than excludes, all women, regardless of class, religion, race, sexuality. Su'ad's polemical speech is extensively passionate for a heightened dramatized effect on the reader, whether a Western or an Eastern reader. Salti attempts to provide a space that no longer marginalizes or excludes, a space that provides salvation and potential for change and reformation.

Su'ad's murderous act reflects all the pain she had suppressed, and it is her only way to assert herself and her womanhood. We are informed that two policemen "dragged a woman through the neighborhood streets by a rope that had been tied around her waist...She would struggle to get back on her feet, and then proceed to walk with her head held high" (53). Su'ad is prosecuted and taken to a mental asylum, for she is labeled as defiant, mad, evil, and blasphemous (53). People fling insults at her, cursing her: "May God save us from all evil...Let us spit in her face for her crime and blasphemy...May God save us from the evil of women...*Kaydihinna 'adhim*, so it is written" (53). Salti takes a stab at misogyny and patriarchal verbalizations of religion, appropriation of religion to subjugate and place women as inferior to men. He does not translate the words that he has quoted from the Quran and this leaves the Western reader confused and excluded from the critique of religion that Salti has formulated against misogynistic readings of the Quran. "*Kaydihinna 'adhim*" may roughly be translated to imply, rather than directly state, that women may harbor resentment and be silent for too long, before an outburst of emotions happens. As Su'ad is taken away by the policemen, children (and subsequently adults) begin chanting the popular wedding song, appropriating it and changing its words to describe the "madwoman's" crime:

Soon everyone was singing a melody whose words they had slightly altered:

*Tal'ah min beit al-jiran/*She's leaving the neighbors' house  
*Rayha al-sjijn al kabir/*and entering the big jail  
*Labsahabayahsudah/* Dressed in a black cloak  
*La maw'idha al-akhir/* for her final meeting (53-4).

The popular wedding song, a part of Jordanian *turath*, is disfigured, deconstructed, and changed, not "slightly" as Salti satirically states, but rather greatly altered. The cynicism that Salti employs is crucial to his critique of a patriarchal society and culture. He states that, "by the end of the day, the song that had achieved such popularity that people had forgotten the original words...By the following night, the woman was no longer everyone's main topic of conversation" (54). Su'ad's story is forgotten as the neighborhood becomes preoccupied with a new wedding that is to take place. Salti concludes his "Wedding Song" by re-writing his own wedding song, by calling for a newer understanding of female identity and salvation, by re-writing *turath* and simultaneously subjecting it to critical scrutiny.

Salti's "Wedding Song" aims to represent the Jordanian woman, to give voice to an otherwise silenced woman, and to create a space for female voicing of oppression and tyranny. Madness is not presented as a dangerous or threatening space; rather, it is a space that reanimates the self and confronts social and ideological injustices that have burdened both the individual and the collective. Salti permits room for female expression, for embracing female solidarity and the potential of their subversive acts, and in this case, madness is a site for, at the very least, providing a potential of subversion and questioning of the hegemonic order.

## Works Cited

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