

Ramzi M. Salti

The Native Informant: And Other Stories

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Reviewed by Asad Al Ghalith

In choosing to write his short story collection in English and not in his native Arabic, Ramzi Salti appears to be targeting a Western audience and not fellow Arabs, the majority of whom do not read English novels. It cannot be argued, therefore, that the intent of his harsh criticism of Arab society is to urge his fellow Arabs to reform by pointing out the weaknesses and deficiencies of their way of life. Instead he seems to be more interested in informing (rather, misinforming) his English-speaking, mostly Western, audience, and reinforcing Western stereotypes of Arabs and their culture, thus giving the West some more reasons to denigrate the Arabs (with the possible exception of the last story, "The Native Informant").

While the stories seem to achieve verisimilitude, they do so in the most superficial details, such as in maintaining names of real places, streets, and foods, and they compromise larger truths by focusing on isolated examples in some stories and stretching the truth in others. In my own long and intimate experience with Arabic culture, I have never seen nor heard of a family that is so callous and unsupportive as Suad's family in "Wedding Song." The example is terribly extreme and unrepresentative of Arab families, which are very protective of daughters, being sufficiently concerned about their well-being both before and after marriage to the point of becoming too meddling. In "Vivian and Her Son," the truth is so stretched that it becomes picaresque; Salti's portrayal of the assault on privacy in Arab society is quite overdone. In "The Taxi Driver," it is hard to suspend disbelief, for the indiscretion of the taxi driver is almost absurd given the strong cultural bias against homosexuality in the Arab world. Even with minor details of surface verisimilitude, Salti has a problem. After a heavy Ramadan Iftar (dinner) which usually lasts up to an hour, Salti tells the reader that Ala's family sat in front of the house watching sunset; Iftar usually commences after sunset.

Ironically, Salti is guilty of the same charge he hurls at Ms. Penn in "The Native Informant," who wishes to record "authentic aspects of Arab life while seeming to have already decided what those aspects will be" (99), but of course the camel cannot see the wrinkles on his own neck. If his purpose is to inform about "authentic" aspects of Arab life, I am afraid he has only succeeded in reinforcing negative stereotypes in the Western reader's mind. And for those voyeurs who would love to see the panoply of weird marginal sexualities of the Arabs promised in his next novel, this collection of stories should excite their curiosity.