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Book Review:

“A Thirst Unquenched: Feminist Resistance and Narrative Silence”
Review of ‘*No Water Quenches Her*,’ Beirut: Difaf Publications, 2017,
by Najat Abdul Samad. ISBN 9789927134456

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From the oral folktales of our city:

“A woman lives seven deaths in her life:

The first takes place on the day of her birth, the day that her parents find out that they have been cursed with the birth of a daughter.

The second death is lived on the day her vagina begins to bleed, a death that she continues to feel for the rest of the coming months.

The third death is on the day her groom penetrates her.

The fourth extends from the day of her pregnancy to the day of her labor when her cervix widens to give birth to a living being and continues throughout the forty days of postpartum. The fifth death takes place each time she weans a child.

The sixth death is on the day her husband dies, or when she is divorced, whether rightfully or undeservingly.

And, the seventh death is general knowledge to all—it is the last death, when she surrenders her soul to her God and finally rests in peace.”

—Najat Abdul Samad, No Water Quenches Her, Chapter One.¹

In *No Water Quenches Her*, Najat Abdul Samad renders an urgent portrayal of gendered violence in Sweida, Syria, and confronts the deeply buried pain of women in Druze society. The novel invites the reader into the intimate, fractured reality of a Druze woman—Hayat—whose desires are policed, denied, and punished. The novel forces us to feel every drop of Hayat’s thirst—for love, for voice, for life—but it does not quench it. It ends where so many stories do: in silence, in erasure; only thirst, no quenching. As Hayat herself confesses in one of her final reflections, “I am pure thirst. I am filtered longing” (Ch. 36), a testament to how longing becomes the very substance of her existence, a refrain that echoes throughout the novel.

By tracing the protagonist Hayat’s self-narration and disintegration, I believe that the novel stands as a compelling transnational-feminist intervention.

No Water Quenches Her takes place in the second half of the twentieth century, in an unnamed Druze village in Sweida, Southern Syria, where its themes of gendered repression resonate across cultures and borders. Abdul Samad weaves in the painful love story of Nasser and Hayat, whose thirsts remain unquenched amid political, economic, environmental, and social drought in Syria, and whose lives are tragically and severely affected as a result. Their story is set against a backdrop of deprivation, where love itself becomes a casualty of societal decay.

¹ In this essay, all translations of Abdul Samad’s narratives are by Dr. Ghada al-Atrash.

In the story, Hayat is forced to marry Khalil, instead of her beloved Nasser. She gives birth to four children, but is later divorced and locked up in the basement of her parents' home, and is separated from her children for what she understands will be the remainder of her life.

Based on real events, this novel serves not only as testimony but as resistance and as a mode of speech when all other forms of expression are denied. Abdul Samad's courage in writing this novel is undeniable; she dares to expose what is often buried: women being denied love, agency, and voice. Her writing carves a space for the unspeakable to be witnessed, even if not resolved.

However, while I join the chorus of feminist readers who celebrate Abdul Samad's boldness in centering a Druze woman's oppression and consequent psychological collapse, I do question her choice to offer no reprieve, no resistance, no alternative future. Hayat, confined to the basement, learns "the art of silence" (Ch. 1) as her body and voice are locked away by familial and societal control. But what if we dreamed of a world where women do speak back and are heard? My question becomes—why does Hayat never fully reclaim her voice? Why does Abdul Samad decide to leave her enclosed in a basement rather than allow her to emerge transformed? And what does this literary entrapment say about the conditions of possibility for feminist resistance in patriarchal contexts—where patriarchy is not simply a structure but also a legacy; a legacy passed down through ritual, obedience, and silence—where a mother locks the basement door; where a son testifies against his own mother; where a father trades daughters as property. I find that in Abdul Samad's work, patriarchal violence is sustained not only by male dominance but by women's inherited complicity.

Indeed, Abdul Samad dares to reveal the intimate violences of a patriarchal Druze society, but why does she stop short of imagining and writing an alternative in her novel? Why does she bear witness but not offer a path beyond the basement walls? Perhaps speaking honestly of women's lives in patriarchal contexts means confronting the limits of resistance—and of fiction. But perhaps it also reflects the intergenerational trauma of silencing: Hayat cannot speak because the structures around her have made it impossible, and Abdul Samad, even as an author, is not exempt from those same constraints. Her act of writing becomes a form of resistance, yes—but it is one marked by loss, by mourning, by a recognition of just how difficult it is to imagine freedom when even storytelling is bound by gendered inheritance. In this way, the novel is not merely literature—it is legacy and lament.

The female figure in Abdul Samad's work then becomes a site of suffering, rather than transformation. Abdul Samad's novel is certainly a disruption to the patriarchal social order—by writing, Abdul Samad is voicing dissent; yet Hayat remains largely voiceless, unrescued, and unheard. In one of the novel's most poignant moments, Hayat throws her words out into the world. But her words go unanswered. Although the narrative gives voice to the struggle of Druze women, Hayat is dispossessed of a voice. The structure itself swallows her voice, illustrating a totalizing nature of patriarchal ownership where the woman is claimed in life, silenced in speech, and buried without memory. The silence, in this case, becomes both a symptom and a verdict.

Hayat—whose name means “life”—ironically lives a life increasingly stripped of vitality. The author's narrative allows Hayat's interior world to bleed into the reader's consciousness. Her hallucinations, delusions, and fragmented memories are not signs of personal weakness but manifestations of systemic violence. Abdul Samad performs an act of resistance: she centers the wounded female self and refuses to make her palatable. Hayat's body becomes not only a site of pain but also a site of buried truth. Image after image in the novel, we witness how the body bears the burden of voicelessness.

Indeed, the novel does offer us a witness account—and in doing so, Abdul Samad also invites us into an ethical relationship with the silence of Hayat. Her writing becomes an added piece to the archive of feminine survival. To write a character like Hayat is, in itself, a cultural rupture. It places Abdul Samad among a small but growing number of Druze and Arab women who have refused silence. Writing itself becomes an act of resistance, and of memory. It is through this commitment to representation that Abdul Samad begins to carve out a literary lineage for the silenced, even if the silence is not overcome. Yet the absence of narrative resolution continues to haunt.

I can understand how the novel's ending can also serve as a means to confront the conditions of oppression without anesthetizing their consequences—in this sense, perhaps the tragic ending becomes not a failure but a refusal to lie. But I insist that this sort of realism is double-edged: while it exposes the depth of patriarchal cruelty, it risks leaving readers with despair rather than resistance. Perhaps Abdul Samad could have reclaimed political charge by giving Hayat a way out, rattling the bars of the window of her basement. Instead, Hayat's internal world becomes a substitute for freedom—a grave in place of a door. We are left peering into her interiority but not witnessing transformation.

I argue that Abdul Samad's work could have acted as a means to—as put by feminist mother-scholar Andrea O'Reilly—"nurture the story, protect truth, and *midwife resistance into language*" (O'Reilly, 2016, 14). The novel could have become not only a door into Hayat's reality but a political intervention, a battleground in which resistance gives birth to language, voice, and freedom. I feel like the novel stops short of deliverance. Hayat does not rebel. She becomes a casualty of both her past and her culture. Her body remains, but her voice fades, echoing only in our memory of the pages. And so, the question becomes: how does one come to voice? As Bell Hooks (1989, p. 12) writes, coming to voice means "moving from silence into speech as a revolutionary gesture." Sara Ahmed (2017, p. 255) reminds us that feminist work demands that "we enact the world we are aiming for. Nothing less will do." In Abdul Samad's novel, Hayat's body bears the full weight of her lived world, yet language never becomes a passage into agency. This unresolved gap between what is embodied and what can be spoken echoes my earlier work, where I argue that silence operates as a feminized condition sustained through the normalization of women's inevitable surrender (Alatrash & Zarif, 2025).

Indeed, there is something unbearably real about *No Water Quenches Her*. Its refusal to offer hope may be its most honest feature. For many women like Hayat, there is no rescue, no revolution, no romance. There is only survival—and when even that fails, collapse. And yet, literature is not journalism. Its job is not only to document but to disturb—and to reimagine, which feels suspended in Abdul Samad's. This is where the novel leaves the feminist reader in a kind of mourning. We mourn Hayat, yes—but also the unwritten version of her life, the one she was denied even in fiction. The wish for flight, for audibility, is there—but is never fulfilled.

This contradiction—of writing bravely but ending in silence—is not a flaw in Abdul Samad's work. It is a mirror of the limitations placed on so many women. It is a call for more stories, braver ones, ones that dare not only to speak but to scream, and to survive. I believe that these stories must go further—not just toward exposure, but toward transformation. Either way, the reader is left holding an absence: a thirst unquenched, a voice silenced too soon. *No Water Quenches Her* is not a tale of triumph. It is a requiem, a lament, a chronicle of what happens when women are left with only their inner world for refuge. But it is also in that silence that we are called not to turn away—but to write, to speak, and to resist anew.

Closing Remarks

It is *not* possible to conclude without situating *No Water Quenches Her* within the brutal and unfolding reality of Sweida today. In July of this year (2025), a massacre was carried out against the Druze people. Druze men and women were both murdered alike. Druze men have been forcibly shaved by extremist militias—an act of humiliation that transcends appearance, and a violent assault on identity, masculinity, and communal dignity; a calculated attempt to erase pride, resistance, and memory. Today, Druze women are not standing in silence. They are rising—shoulder to shoulder with the men—as full participants in a shared struggle, Abdul Samad herself being one of them on the frontlines, where, on Friday, July 18th, 2025, she wrote (Abdul Samad, 2025):

To my friends outside of Sweida, I will recount what the Syrian “General Security” did to my family:

On the morning of July 15, 2025, the day *they* entered Sweida under the pretext of “de-escalation,” my brother—who is a breadmaker and who never carried a weapon—was driving his family in his small truck to the eastern countryside in search of safety. On his way back, he was stopped by General Security soldiers. They took his phone, threw him face-down in the truck; two of them stood on his back while a third drove. The entire way, they kicked him, called him a “pig,” and beat his back—he learned later it was with a knife.

After having gone missing for a while, my family called his phone. *They* answered: “We’ve slaughtered him, from ear to ear.”

But they hadn’t slaughtered him. It was only a tactic to terrorize my mother and father.

One of the young men in the security force felt empathy for my brother and said to his comrades: “Let’s dump him.” It was clear he genuinely wanted to save him. I extend my heartfelt thanks to this kind young man. They threw my brother out and drove off in the truck. He managed to reach a hospital and then stayed for two days in a house near the hospital, unable to return home. Now, alhamdulillah, his body is healing—and he refuses to let his spirit be broken.

On July 16, 2025, they raided houses in our neighborhood, including my parents’ home.

My father said to them: “If you’ve come as guests, our home is your home.”

One of them pointed at my father's beard. My father is a religious man, 85 years old, and walks with a cane. The man said: "It's obvious from your beard that you are sheikh of a tribe." He asked my father about money and gold but didn't wait for an answer. They tore the house apart and stole whatever they found.

As they left, they pointed a gun at my father's back. My sister ran and stood in front of my father, shouting: "Kill me first, then kill him." My 80-year-old mother hurried on her cane and joined, "Kill us first, then kill him."

The commanding soldier said, "Finish him," but the younger one said, "Let's just go," as if his hand refused to pull the trigger. This too was a young man from the security force, surely raised by a kind mother who taught him well.

They departed and left my father alive.

After having left, my family discovered they had stolen money from my brother's house and smashed his son's oud that he had been learning to play.

That evening, once the security men had gone, my family dared to cross to the neighboring homes—only to discover that the "security men" had executed seven young men from the adjacent houses with a single shot to their heads. They had also shaved the mustaches of three elderly religious men—all over sixty, unarmed, while sitting with their families. Two of them were kidnapped. All their money, gold, and phones were taken. You know the rest: the security men began using those stolen phones to lure relatives to unknown locations—to kidnap, terrorize, curse their religion, or spread false rumors.

Perhaps Hayat's silence—when read against the backdrop of Najat's real-world resistance—becomes even more jarring, more urgent. It dares us to imagine what kind of literature might emerge next from the frontlines of survival. If, instead of isolation and silence, Hayat had found herself amid collective resistance and the courage of other Druze women—like Najat, her sister, and her mother—perhaps *No Water Quenches Her* would have ended differently.

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