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***Voicelessness and Gender in Etaf Rum's *A Woman is No Man****

*An Extended Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for a  
Master's Degree in Literature and Civilisation*

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## Declaration

I am humbly writing this declaration to announce that the research paper entitled “Voicelessness and Gender in Etaf Rum’s *A Woman Is No Man*” is completely written by me, Miss Fatna Marwa Bencheriet, under the supervision and the guidance of Dr. Azzeddine Bouhassoun. This original work is to be submitted to the Department of Letters and English Language in partial fulfilment of the requirement for a Master’s Degree in Literature and Civilisation.

The information and the thoughts used in this extended essay are fully authentic to the best of my knowledge. The work in hand has not been submitted before to any other university or faculty for the award of any degree.

Fatna Marwa Bencheriet

## Dedication

*I can barely find the appropriate words to describe and express my overwhelming emotions after going through a long academic journey. I literally cannot believe how time flies. Five years have already passed, yet may this piece of work last. Thereby, I dedicate my work to all those who have stood by me and have been there for me especially in the dark moments.*

*To my king and queen, my parents who never left my hand and who supported me along the way.*

*To my beloved brother and sister, the ones who believed in me and cheered me up when I felt down.*

*To my friends who listened to my complaints without being bored, and to my colleagues with whom I shared loads of memories.*

*To my dear supervisor and to all the teachers who have been my source of inspiration.*

*Thank you all*

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## Epigraph

**Silent scream:**

So much pain

Inside our throats

We are afraid

That if we speak

We'll yell

We'll shriek

We'll moan

We'll scream

We'll cry

And so

We stay

Quiiiiiiiiet.

Maria Herrera-Sobek

## Abstract

While there are certain people who are born with a voice but they remain silent; there are other individuals who think that they are free but their community proves them wrong. Isra has no choice but to leave her homeland Palestine and move with her new family to America, the land of freedom and liberty as she thinks. All her dreams and high hopes fade away, when she recognizes that the real world is different from the realm of fantasy which she encounters through reading stories. The dissertation entailed Voicelessness and Gender in Etaf Rum's *A Woman is No Man* (2019) seeks to further understand the meaning silence symbolizes in the novel as well as the reasons behind choosing it along with its effect on both genders. It also tries to find out the role education and reading literary works play to break the code of silence, raise awareness, and save women's lives from cultural and social pressure.

**Key Words:** Voicelessness- Silence- Gender- Women- Society- Culture- Identity-Reading Stories- Education.

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## General Introduction

## General Introduction

There is no feeling that can be compared to having no voice, not knowing where you belong, or who you truly are. A mixed sensation combines loss, shame, inferiority, and even guilt. This feeling grows out of living in a fake world, where people make one believe that he has no right to speak his mind, to disagree on what is said, or even to seek a change. Sadly, some people live to please other people. They choose to follow traditions and customs blindly simply because they are afraid of what might be said about them. Their essential goal in life is to preserve their reputation, name, and not to let anyone know about their secret stories.

In her debut novel *A Woman Is No Man* (2019), Etaf Rum tries to reveal a ‘truth’ that is unexposed about the conservative Arab-American community. A shocking fact about how both men and women have suffered during the Israeli occupation. Moreover, the novelist tackles trauma of the past that has affected both genders. Actually, each one of them has had his battle to fight. Nevertheless, women have taken the biggest share of suffering not only because of the conflict in their country, Palestine, but due to the thoughts and ideas they have formed about themselves through time. Unfortunately, women, in the novel, try to deny the fact that as female gender can be worthy and have other options in life rather than getting married, raising children, and staying at home.

Reading literary works broadly makes the person think, analyze, and reflect. Seeking to discover more about gender, silence and secrecy, the story *A Woman Is No Man* that includes all that is mentioned before, is overwhelming. The appealing title and the interesting themes Rum has tackled have incited me to work on the novel.

*A Woman Is No Man* is not just a story of courage, strength, and resilience but a story of breaking the code of silence. Themes such as: voicelessness, gender issues, family, along

with culture are not considered as sensitive subjects but as taboos especially in the Arab society. Moreover, in today's world most of the important news are linked to such issues. Indeed, the author has chosen these universal themes to reflect them on her own community. Rum in her literary fiction deals in general with domestic abuse that leaves both physical bruises as well as psychic traumas. Also, the writer focuses a lot on the role of education in changing and saving one's life. In fact, she points out that reading books is a healing remedy for lonely and broken people and this is what makes the story more intriguing.

This research aims to explore the theme of voicelessness and gender. Its purpose is to find out whether silence is considered as an option chosen by the person voluntarily or a compulsion imposed by an individual or a group of people. It also seeks to learn more about the reasons and the causes behind choosing silence and its effect on both genders. Additionally, it tries to figure out solutions to break free from silence's restrictions, and to discover the important role education and reading play in raising awareness among consciousness especially for women to end their suffering.

The novel unveils a strong relationship between trauma and silence. In fact, silence is the ocean of the untold. It is golden when it is chosen voluntarily nonetheless deadly when imposed. When silence is forced, one feels like he is dehumanized and disabled. There are certain people who are obliged to choose silence, to keep their mouth shut, as well as to forget that they even have a voice. Hence, they feel like they have lost their way to seek for freedom and to express their needs plainly. The narration is not related only to feminism but also to the economy, politics, along with culture as it is mentioned in *the Washington Post* (2019). Also, concerning the theme of gender, this research will try to explore the role of both genders and not to focus solely on women since each one of them has a story to tell.

Defining gender, this research will investigate how society, economy, and politics affect gender. The following research questions shall be presented to direct and guide our path to explore the above-mentioned relationship:

- What does silence symbolize in *A Woman is No Man*, and how does the author depict the way it expresses pain?
- In which way lack of love has affected Isra?
- Why reading literature is considered a therapy for broken souls and why does the author focus a lot in her novel on women's education?

In order to check the validity of the research questions, the next hypotheses will be presented:

- Silence may symbolize many different things, but according to the story; it seems as a refuge for the broken and lonely people. Probably, the characters choose to silence themselves because they are either mentally tired or afraid of being misunderstood. The author explains to the reader that the harsh and painful experiences which they have gone through made them believe that adapting to the situation and choosing silence is better than resisting and complaining.
- Humans, as social beings, need to sense love and warmth in order to grow emotionally as psychologically sane. Isra in the story craves for love. The lack of deep affection has a huge impact on her life. Her weakness, emptiness, and hopelessness are presumable results of the absence of tenderness in all her relationships.
- Reading literature likely widens the person's horizons. Stories help the reader to travel to another universe and to forget his pain and issues. Reading simply gives him the comfort and the hope he misses in his real world. Moreover, Etaf Rum focuses a lot on education probably because she believes that education has the power to save

one's life, and that marriage is not the only solution to protect women from the cruelty of the world.

This extended essay entitled *Voicelssness and Gender* in Etaf Rum's *A Woman Is No Man* is divided into three main chapters and each one tackles different subjects. The first chapter deals with the most important concepts of the whole research. The first sub-chapter revolves around the notion of Voicelssness. In fact, in this part one is going to dive deeper in the silent world, while trying to discover more about this term and see the reasons behind choosing it, imposing it, as well as relating it to women. The second sub-chapter focuses more on gender identity. It also tries to see how society and culture play a role in constructing it. Furthermore, it tries to figure out what are the various roles men and women play especially in the Arab world.

The second chapter revolves around love, fairytales, culture, and silence in *A Woman Is No Man*. The first part of this chapter analyzes how the missing love in Isra's life has affected her mental well-being. It also links between Isra's silence along with the pure love she dreams to feel. Last but not least, the third section of the first part tackles the means the main character discovers to find love and escape from the bleak world she has lived in. The second sub-chapter deals more with culture and how traditions as well as customs influence the individual. It shows how finding identity can be considered as a dilemma for those who suffer from cultural pressure. Finally, the crucial role of education will be discussed.

The third chapter is related to the realm of stories. It is concerned with the effect of economic and political issues on people and how they can lead to migration. In the same chapter, one seeks to know more about how words can heal the wounds. Topics like narrative, storytelling, and writing will be discussed in the first sub-chapter. Next, the second sub-chapter analyzes the concepts of migration, Diaspora as well as gender writing.

The conclusion will be about the summary of the ideas that have been mentioned in the three chapters. In addition, the result concerning the study of the themes of voicelessness and gender will be added too.

## **Chapter One: Voicelessness of Gender in Etaf Rum's *A Woman Is No Man***

### A. Voicelessness: the Sound of the Unuttered Words

1. The Concept of Voicelessness
2. Voicelessness a Choice or a Compulsion
3. Women's Silence

### B. Gender Issues in the Arab World

1. Gender Identity
2. Gender Based on Social and Cultural Construction
3. Men's Role vs. Women's Role in the Arabian Culture

## I. Chapter One: Voicelessness of Gender in Etaf Rum's *A Woman Is No Man*

### A. Voicelessness: the Sound of the Unuttered Words

Speech and silence are alike; both of them take a powerful part in language and transmit messages. Nonetheless, silence cannot be understood through verbal, non-verbal, written, or visual communication, and that what makes it so catchy. It is a complex concept which has been a major subject of study that attracts scholars for many years. Silence is so ambiguous and mysterious. It often perplexes the individual who might interpret it wrongly due to the fact that the person does not understand this particular means of communication. Sometimes silence can be meaningless, empty, and can say nothing at all. While in other times it can be full of answers which carry deep meanings and send strong messages. In reality, this muteness signifies a lot of different significations depending on the various contexts and social situations along with distinct cultures, for example, collective cultures value or force, it depends, silence more than individual cultures, and people who prefer to keep quiet have multiple reasons as well as stories behind their choice.

Moreover, there are various types of quiet people. Individuals experience silence differently. Most of these people are considered deep thinker who tend to have arguments, dialogues, and conversations more internally than externally. Many feelings and emotions can be hidden behind the unsaid. There are times when the person likes to be silent because he struggles to find the appropriate words that describe the situations, he is in. He simply finds difficulty to communicate even with members of his family, community, or people with whom he shares the same culture, language, and background. Indeed, silence is just like a treasure. If anybody wants to know the concealed jewels behind voicelessness, then he will need to search for the right key in order to unlock the individual's heart and to unleash its



secrets. If someone becomes silent, it does not mean he can no longer produce words or he has become totally mute. However, he might be aware that his words would not change his reality and would not reach the other's ears.

### 1. The Concept of Voicelessness

Words bring us together while silence tears us apart. Every living creature on this earth must have a way of communication to express his needs. In fact, man as a social being likes to use his voice within his community or society so that it can be heard and he can be seen. It is very important for an honorable individual to speak his mind, share his opinion, and show his emotion as any free person with rights. Nevertheless, not everyone is lucky to sense this kind of freedom. There are certain people who are obliged to choose silence, to keep their mouth shut, as well as to forget that they even have a voice.

In reality, silence is known to be the ocean of the untold where people dare to throw all that they wish to say. Furthermore, it is golden when it is chosen with contentment and deadly when imposed. When silence is forced it makes the individual feel disabled and paralyzed because it stops him from freeing his suppressed feelings. Additionally, both the chosen silence and the imposed one are acoustically similar since both of them refer to quietness. However, they differ in various sides such as in the psychological one.

Silence does not come from nowhere; numerous reasons and factors help in constructing it like trauma as well as torture. Silence, the unsaid, and trauma are interrelated with one another. Trauma is a shock which has developed as a result of a disturbing and distressing incident. It has generally happened in the past and has not been known as well as not been treated in the first instance: "..., trauma resides in paradox, defined by the way it is both known and not-known – and by what can and cannot be said. Much of what surrounds trauma is also bound up with silence" (Richardson, Allison 01; ch. 13). Besides, it causes

difficulty for the person to interpret and cope with his overwhelmed emotions and dispersed thoughts. Thus, it is hard for traumatized people to transform their hidden ideas into clear as well as organized words. That is why certain persons choose either to stay mute or show uncontrollable acts like screaming, yelling, and crying. When people are not aware or conscious that they are hurt from the inside, they do not act like themselves. In effect, silence takes many shapes and forms that can represent:

**Resistance:** when the silent person refuses to open his mouth no matter what happens as a way of challenging his surroundings.

**Obedience and submissiveness:** when the person is oppressed and silence is imposed on him, then here he has no option rather than to keep quiet and follow the commands of the oppressor; because he knows that if he does not do that he will be punished.

**Shame:** When a person goes through a painful journey which breaks, traumatizes and makes him feel ashamed. He can develop a complex afterward. Therefore, silence may seem a way of escapism.

**Anger:** there are times when silence symbolizes anger. When the angry individual does not find the words that express his emotional state, silence would be his response.

**Fear:** whenever a person is scared to say something wrong, to upset or deceive the other, to make mistakes. Thus, he stays still in order not to regret it later.

Silence is simply defined as the absence of noise or sound, yet it is more than that. Silence is a way of communication, used by individuals for many purposes as Montoya explains:

One linguist has listed the following typical meanings of silence: 1) lack of information; 2) no pressure to talk; 3) thinking about what to say; 4) speed of

thinking; 5) avoid argument; 6) agreement; 7) disagreement; 8) doubt; 9) boredom; 10) uncertainty; 11) wondering; 12) impoliteness; 13) punishment; 14) disturbance; 15) inarticulateness; 16) concern; 17) preoccupation; 18) isolation; 19) anger; and 20) empathic exchange. (276, 277)

Next, it speaks more than words do because if one puts the latter into its correct context the meaning behind the word is present and clear. Yet, in order to understand silence one needs to listen to its sound.

## 2. Voicelessness a Choice or a Compulsion

Voicelessness can be chosen voluntarily with pleasure, or it can be imposed and forced. Someone may choose silence because he probably wants to go on a long, healing journey to discover himself. He may also choose it because he wishes to reconcile with his inner soul like moving from the conscious mind into the unconscious, or he might choose silence because someone obliges him to do so. Likewise, he may prefer to keep quiet because his painful experience prevents him from speaking up. Some believe that silence is a sign of surrender. While others think that it is a source of power. In fact, silence is known to have a positive impact on human's life but it can also be damaging and hurtful. In feminist conceptualization of voice and silence; feminists strongly believe that women's ability to make a choice and speak their minds by challenging others and use their voices is an evidence for their empowerment and agency. Whereas choosing silence is seen as a sign of weakness since it can lead to the loss of power and even the self. Nevertheless, it might be very dangerous and risky for women to speak their truths and share their stories in a conflict and post-conflict zones or in patriarchal societies which are characterized by masculine practices and male dominance over female, or in societies where criminal activities, gender violence, misogyny, along with sexism are widely spread.

When silence is mandatory causing the individual to lose his sound, his identity, and his only way to seek freedom, then the person, in this case is, considered voiceless.

Voicelessness means the condition of being voiceless. It is a term that describes the person who is unable to speak or to produce a sound by his vocal cords, basically he is mute.

Nonetheless, it can also be a metaphor which depicts the hopeless situation the individual lives and the issues he is facing such as the inability to speak up and defend his opinion without being afraid or ashamed.

Unfortunately, secret societies and communities or totalitarian regimes impose silence for both genders. Consequently, oppressed individuals choose silence and secrecy by policing their voices and body as a strategy to avoid falling into troubles and to stay alive.

Additionally, when a person is tortured, tormented, and threatened, then in this case silence is imposed. Torture and language go hand in hand. In fact, in *The Body in Pain* (1985), Scarry believes that torture and language are relatable since “[T]orture’s “pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it” (qtd in Allison 06; ch. 13). Speaking about torture, the victim sometimes finds it hard to talk about the soreness and the scares of such journey that marks him well. Indeed, the act of tormenting someone has the ability to erase the words as to make the voice fade away.

There are important factors that control human life like place of birth, historical time, and culture. Moreover, there are other aspects like: gender, race, along with class which can shape the person’s life and determine the kind of experience he/she should go through. Part of such experiences is being silenced by people of authority or dominant groups: here one may elucidate that these forces are muting certain aspect of the reality by silencing marginalized groups and victims of a particular system or oppressed culture. Hence, silence is conceptualized as negative when it is forced, used as a toll for oppression or as a mean of marginalization.

Next, silence and silencing are two practices constructed by culture which can be used as means to control and to punish others; by letting the submissive group witness how the dominant individuals are powerful and superior to them, and making them believe it in their subconscious that it is an absolute truth. Additionally, silence is just like words, it is taught to children at a young age. They learn it just like they learn to acquire a language:

Silence is also communicative in the sense that it is learned in the same way that voiced communication is learned. The study of the acquisition of speech patterns by children reveals that in learning how to make the appropriate sounds for words, children also learn how to use silence appropriately, by being shushed at various times and places. (Montoya 277)

Thus, the person sometimes stays silent because of his upbringing: his education influences his character. In developing these ideas, one may conclude that silence is a social construction based on the cultural instructions of a given society or community.

Next, silence is not always a bad experience especially when it is chosen voluntarily since that allows the individual to encounter with his true soul. The world of silence calls for reflection and reasoning. It also provides the person with a sense of calm as tranquility.

Moreover, it helps to create a world far from noise as Fivush state:

Silence can also be conceptualized as quiet, restful, reflective, that of being silent. Silence can be a form of intimacy, being silent together, or a form of privacy, being silent alone. Silence can be a form of respect. One can even be silent in the midst of speaking; by voicing some aspects of experience, one may be silencing other aspects of experience; talk does not always imply voice. Moreover, silence can be intentional or unintentional, momentary or enduring. (90, 91)

### 3. Women's Silence

To talk is to be defined unlike keeping silence which leads to the denial of the self. In order to know someone, one needs to listen to the language he uses and to hear the sound of his words which will allow the person to know what the other likes, dislikes, what makes him happy and what terrifies him. However, if the individual rarely speaks, he might be misunderstood or misjudged for not using his voice and speaking up to define who he is. Women experience silence differently than men. The long history of silence in women's lives is often seen as a symbol of passivity and surrender. The silence of those females, who are forced to become speechless and voiceless, might be the result of a cultural hegemony along with pressure, patriarchal system, as well as wrong traditional beliefs. In fact, the society where the individual lives plays a major role in shaping the thoughts of its citizens concerning gender's way of expression as Smith-Rosenberg says: "...It has become clear that gender relations are created not only by sexual division of labor and a set of symbolic images, but also through contrasting possibilities of expression for men and women" (qtd. in Gal 175). In some societies, women are mostly required to keep quiet and speak only when necessary. Furthermore, Women, who go through hurtful journeys which consist of domestic violence, sexual harassment, as well as emotional abuse, are often the quietest victims. So instead of using their voices, they are forced to keep silent.

From ancient times, women have formed a psychological issue and a complex to men because of their mysterious attraction. Consequently, people have developed some wrong concepts, ideas, myths and stories about women that have crushed them later on. In reality, the females are considered as a source of evil and a threat because of their seductive body and manipulative mind. This representation can be depicted in the picture of the Medusa a woman with a body of a mermaid and snakes in her hair. It is thought that their charms along with

their beauty mislead and bewitch men. They are even thought to spread chaos in the society. Also, it is believed that women bring shame and fear from their acts since female gender means the honor of the family in some societies especially in Arab community. Therefore, men neglect women to protect themselves from their wickedness and obscure power. Next, in patriarchal societies men subdued women and made them feel inferior, and convicted them that their position is under the males'. It is society which determines their main tasks in life that being faithful to their husbands, following men's orders be it her father, brother, or husband, making babies and accepting their roles along with keeping silence. If they think of revolting and breaking the rules, then they would be hit or punished in order to tame and control them.

In such societies, women are supposed to mute all parts of their bodies even their dangerous eyes because they are expressive organs. In reality, eyes talk and uncover the hidden secrets which the mouth does not dare to utter. Indeed, it is a way of communication that takes part of the body language. Eyes are just like mirrors; they reflect what the person is feeling, thinking, and aiming i.e. they show the individual's pain and the struggles he is facing, as they reveal the persons states of happiness, anger, love and all human's deep emotions which he keeps them to himself.

## B. Gender Issues in the Arab World

### 1. Gender Identity

It is clear to everyone that women and men are created differently. They think, feel, and perceive things not in a similar manner. Hence, they are treated and educated from the time they are born to behave in a distinct way so that they can manage to recognize their gender identity later on easily. Gender is a social as well as cultural concept consists of stereotypical list of behaviors and attitudes. They determine the masculinity and the

femininity of the person that will play a role in defining who he/she is according to the social category the individual belongs to. When gender role is accepted by the individual normally, the notion of it will be rooted in the subconscious so the person will act like he/she has been thought and that will allow him/her to be self-identified and self-constructed in the social group:

What individual differences in gender are important to study? Because gender refers to the cultural meaning ascribed to male and female social categories in societies, psychologists have focused on whether individuals define themselves in terms of these cultural meanings. We use the term *gender identity* to refer to these masculine *and* feminine self-definitions. Individuals differ in gender identity within each sex, and men and women differ on the average. Gender identity is only one of many possible social identities, with each identity representing one's psychological relationship to a particular social category in which one has membership (e.g., race, social class, religion; see Frable, 1997; Sherif, 1982). (Wood, Eagly 109; ch. 8)

What does it really mean to be a masculine or feminine, and how can a person identify himself or herself as a man or a woman? Despite the fact that there are many definitions about manliness and womanliness be it cultural, religious, social, political or even biological since gender has a biological origin as well. It is hard to know the true meaning of them. It seems that most societies agree on a particular concept that is masculinity is about having male-typical virtues and principles like playing the role of the protector or the savior. Whereas, femininity is about having female-typical relationship with others like nurturing children and having characteristics such as kindness, naivety, gentleness and tenderness. In addition, according to the social norms, the roles of the duality of sexes rely on their capacities and abilities. On the one hand, men as the stronger creatures, are supposed to work



in the outside world, stand to its cruelty and cope with its harsh environment. On the other hand, women, as the fragile creatures, are given the responsibility of taking care of their houses where they can be safe, sound, and protected.

## 2. Gender Based on Social and Cultural Construction

When sociologists started studying **gender**, the inequalities between men and women have become their main concern. In fact, the first distinction that they have made is between sex and gender. These are two concepts used interchangeably. However, they hold different meanings. While sex is essentially associated with the physical along with the physiological features and is concerned with the biological difference between male and female; gender is socially constructed which demonstrates the variation between **woman** and **man**. It emphasizes on the distinct roles they should play in their given society:

Understanding the term "gender roles" requires an understanding of the term "gender." "Gender" is a social term that is often confused with the term "sex." Sex and gender are different concepts. Sex is a biological concept, determined on the basis of individuals' primary sex characteristics. Gender, on the other hand, refers to the meanings, values, and characteristics that people ascribe to different sexes. (Blackstone 335)

In addition to that, the focus on gender differences between men and women help in creating **patriarchy**; a social system or a practice which gives the priority to men to be leaders and dominants in relation to women. Moreover, the world is going into a constant change whilst affecting the economy and politics. Therefore, it is the society's function to structure as well as to organize people's life and to determine their behaviors along with the roles which should be played by each gender. Indeed, women are given limited and restricted

parts since they are seen as subordinated creature in comparison to men and for them it is something natural like Sydie mentions:

Classic sociology and other social theory contain little attention to the social differences between women and men. Marx, Weber and Durkheim are not noted for their insights into 'sex' inequality (the word gender was not known to them in its present usage) and in fact tended mostly to consider women's subordinate social role as a natural 'given'. (qtd.in Holmes 03)

It is very important to understand that although time is changing and societies are developing, yet the position women are holding in most societies is still the same. Despite the fact that the notion of manhood and womanhood vary from a culture to another, but in most nations in the world, people consider women as inferior, dependent, as well as weak. Men are frequently seen as self-confident, independent, and powerful.

Additionally, many societies view men only as a source that brings money or comfort to the family. Nonetheless, women are often seen as creatures that are created for the sake of beauty and procreation. On the one hand, there is the traditional view of the feminine gender which sees woman as a caretaker of her children as well as her household. On the other hand, there is the traditional view of masculine gender that sees man as the head of the household, the leader whose main role is taking decisions, along with providing financial support. In fact, these stereotypes or thoughts create unbalanced societies because they suffocate men and restrict women by limiting both genders and by not giving them other options in life.

Furthermore, the construction of gender is connected with many aspects such as culture, politics, religion, social class, race as well as material conditions which are related to economy in general. All the mentioned aspects play a specific role in shaping the expected parts performed by men, women, boy and girl in any given society. Next, the environment where people live, their work, or even their education shape and mold their feelings and

thoughts. Thus, the ideas and meanings held by individuals concerning gender play a major role in building the concept of femininity and masculinity of men and women.

Indeed, practicing gender takes part in the individual's daily life. These distinct roles direct women and men and show them how they are supposed to act, talk, and dress in certain way according to the society they live in and to the culture they follow. Nonetheless, the construction of gender begins with which sex category the person belongs to. Furthermore, sex category turns into gender status through naming, choosing color, choosing games and so on and everything starts from birth. In order to understand why gender begins from birth, one does not need to focus only on the experience of individual towards gender. But, one has to focus on gender as a **social institution** which consists of a group of people who come to achieve one big goal and who in reality control the individual's behaviors and expectations. Moreover, the social intuition is made of the family institution, economic institution, religious organization, and mass media. Besides, the function of these institutions is to form standards and norms to create gender role.

Gender works according to what people decide: which role a man or woman should play in the society. Therefore, the meaning of gender changes according to people's decisions and the latter are based on both mass media and what individuals learn from their families as well as from school. The media is considered as a tool in shaping the individual's reality. Many people get information and images of masculinity and femininity along with gender role from characters of movies, music videos, and games. There are times when the representation of woman and man in some shows affect the vision and the behavior of people. So, the media influences individuals as it changes their way of seeing the part they are supposed to play in the world. Furthermore, people draw ideas about gender from their families and school. What children learn in their educational institutions and what their parents teach them at home will have an impact on them later. Hence, they will create their

own ideas concerning the role of gender, the value of man and women, the experience they should go through in their given nation are all based on what they have learned and apprehended. Sometimes, gender roles are created because of the influence of gender stereotypes. There are some individuals who are forced to act in a certain way just because there is a repeated idea that supports that action. Thus, being born as a male or female can mean a lot of different things depending on which society and environment the individual is born into as Mills expresses: “understanding the life of a woman or man involves understanding the history of the society in which they live” (qtd. in Holmes 19). Every individual is doing gender while following the standards and practicing the norms of his/her society willingly or unwillingly. However, people may feel restricted by following the rules since they are the product of society and do not come naturally. For example, men and women in the Arab world are not expected to behave like men and women in the western world. Each society is expecting its individuals to act in a certain way based first on the sex category and second on its beliefs, traditions, along with its values.

### 3. Men’s Role vs. Women’s Role in the Arabian Culture

In the past life, educational institutions and parents have taught young girls from their early ages to spend more time at home after coming back from school to help their mothers, learn how to cook and clean, and take care of their siblings. They have also learned to be obedient to their families as they are supposed to act like quite dolls while maintaining their voices. Additionally, beings weak, fragile, and dependent are part of their characters. Seeking to have education along with learning new skills, expanding their horizons, and opening their minds by reading various books are not the most essential things that they need to focus on. There are other necessary objects in life girls have to take care of. In fact, they are not even supported by their families to take care of school because the important lesson that they have to acquire is: they are just guests in their houses and one day they shall leave it in order to

join their husbands and stay at home like their mothers and grandmothers did before. Most young ladies will reach a stage in their lives where they accept the idea of marriage.

Nonetheless, it should be their choice; the word YES should be uttered by them and not somebody else. Indeed, inserting fears concerning this topic in the little heads of the young girls is exaggerating.

Women in general know their places in their patriarchal society. Some of them truly believe that they are inferior to men. Unfortunately, their identities are similar because each mother transmits the traditional thoughts and beliefs to her younger daughter. She also makes sure that the latter honestly approve her words and would follow her steps in order to secure her life, avoid falling into troubles and please her in laws. Yet, not all women are victims of the system be it in the ancient civilization of the Arab world or in the present time: there are active women and who dare challenge all false ideas that are related to them. There are females who lead, join armies, study, work, get married, succeed in life, and raise children. In reality, nothing is impossible unless the individual believes that.

Nevertheless, men have perceived information concerning their roles in the community, where they lived, differently than women. They have learned to be strong, bold, as well as powerful. Family for a man usually comes first no matter what happens he needs to fulfill their aims and make sure that they are satisfied. A man is the dominant person and the head of the household, his voice should be heard and accepted. He is the one who brings food and provides shelter to his family. Next, he is taught from a young age that he is and will always be superior to a woman. His masculinity is his pride and he will do anything to protect it from shame and disgrace.

Moreover, the idea of practicing violence over woman is allowed especially if she dares to revolt, break the rules, or does not listen to her man whether her father, brother, or husband. However, it is not accepted in all houses and areas since the relationship between a

male and a female gender differs according to the status, the social class, the education of the person and how he is raised along with the way he has built his thoughts.

Furthermore, the beliefs and the thoughts Arab people have constructed around the values of men and women are not recent. In reality, their roots go back in early history. In addition, such concepts are agreed on by most people worldwide, and many cultures share the same beliefs concerning the roles of genders in society. In the western world too people are being forced to follow the instructions of the community because this how things have been done and they should keep walking on the same road. The social institutions which are responsible of determining the roles shape them and mold them to adapt with their political, cultural, and economic system while in reality everything is in men's favor. However, these kinds of practices give birth to some problems like oppression on women, Injustice, discrimination, psychological issues, division in society, and finally pressure on both genders because not only women suffer from the imposed system but so do men who have to carry heavy burdens and fight with the outside world.

On a symbolic level, according to this worldview, women were culturally associated with concepts such as nature, matter, body, immanence, darkness, emotion, instinct, impurity, deficiency, dependency and weakness, and men were invested with the opposite: authority, spirituality, reason, transcendence, culture, light, intellect, purity, completeness, autonomy, power.<sup>8</sup> Such views of masculinity and femininity were in the modern era further justified on the basis of arguments couched in the logic of biological determinism, which uses biological differences between men and women to legitimise rigid gender/sex roles and norms in the socio-political, cultural and legal realms of human endeavour<sup>9</sup>. ( Duderjia et all, 7)

## **Chapter Two: Voicelessness and the Realm of Fantasy**

### A. Isra's World of Love and Romance

1. The Lack of love in Isra's life
2. The Notion of Love and Isra's Voicelessness in *A Woman is No Man*
3. Books and Fairytales Tools to Escape from Reality and Find the Illusional Love

### B. Voicelessness and the Echoes of Culture: Who I am vs. Who They Want Me to Be

1. The Impact of Traditions and Customs on the Individual in *A Woman Is No Man*
2. Voicelessness, Identity, and Expectation
3. Education Is Power

## II. Chapter Two: Voicelessness and the Realm of Fantasy

### A. Isra's World of Love and Romance

*Once upon a time*, in a small town called Beirzeit lived a lady named Isra who dreamed of finding love in the heart of her future brave knight. Her family was poor, conservative, and severe. Hence, they were ready to marry her off to an American-Palestinian Suitor. Yet, she was not sure about taking this serious step. In effect, she was afraid of not finding what she had been longing for her whole life. Isra's life was messed up to a certain extent. However, she managed to discover a way to amuse herself, to teach herself, and most importantly to escape to an enchanted and utopian world through reading secretly.

#### 1. The Lack of love in Isra's Life

Every child needs love and affection in his life especially in the early ages to grow emotionally, socially, mentally, and psychologically sane. The absence of parental warmth, tenderness, and security can create a complex as well as can lower the self-esteem of the person. It would even lack his self-confidence. Moreover, the loss of such feelings will have a deep impact on the child's identity. The lack of parental love will shape the way he will see himself when he grows older. Unfortunately, this might force him to search for anything that either replaces the feeling he lacks in the outside world or escapes from it totally by ignoring his inner sentiments. In *A Woman is No Man*, Isra feels the same. She spends most of her entire life eager to sense the missing love and to know its meaning. Indeed, she wishes to feel it in the hearts of her parents or with the presence of her husband, but her wishes do not come true. Sadly, Isra is tired from fighting alone. Therefore, she imagines that her future husband would be able to rescue her from the harsh reality and live with her the life she reads in books and fairy tales. In reality, Isra wishes to find a savior; someone who would help her to see the world differently.



Next, man is by nature a social being. He likes to sense others' touch so that he feels them, and they feel him back. Parents need to hold their children's hands when they are afraid, or hug them when they feel insecure, and even caress them to show them love. Studies have shown that physical touch plays an important role in improving the mental well-being of the person. It also strengthens the relationship between the individuals. Nevertheless, Isra Haddid the main character in the story never experiences this kind of affection. The only time she has sensed a skin-to-skin contact is when she prays beside her mother "Isra had been praying since she was seven years old, kneeling beside Mama five times a day between sunrise and sunset. Lately she had begun to look forward to prayer, standing together with Mama, shoulders joined, feet slightly grazing, the only time Isra ever felt human touch" (Rum 10).

Isra is a passive and submissive character. She does everything her parents ask her to do without complaining since she knows as Rum states, in *A Woman Is No Man*, obedience is her single way to reach for her parents' love (15). Furthermore, in her community most men along with women believe that a woman's place is her home. Hence, a girl must know her place and duties from an early age. Even though Isra is only seventeen years old, her parents are in haste to marry her off to a suitor who comes from America looking for a bride. Every time Isra has a suitor, she makes a mistake on purpose so that they would reject her later. Nevertheless, her parents are not willing to forgive her if she does anything wrong with the American one. The man whom they consider as her chance to leave misery like Rum states: "What were you thinking, serving them coffee first?" Mama yelled when the guests had left and she and Isra returned to the kitchen to finish cooking. "You're not young anymore—almost eighteen! Do you want to sit in my house forever?" (14). She is clearly aware of their entire situation. However, this is not how Isra wishes to get married. Thus, she feels as if she is a burden to her family instead of a precious daughter.

Furthermore, Isra witnesses how her father treats her mother by yelling, shouting, and beating her. Even Isra is punished, beaten, and called a whore “sharmouta” because of her defiance and a burden “balwa” for being a girl. Consequently, she does not learn from her father good habits that would teach her how a man should show her love and respect. She only sees an unbalanced relationship between her parents i.e. a powerful man who determines everything in the house and who controls his weak wife and punishes her if she does any wrong action.

On many occasions, Isra thinks about her future and wonders if she would ever find a man who would cherish her, and together create and raise a loving family, different from hers. In this very respect, Rum states:

She had often stayed up all night thinking about the future, eager to know how her life would turn out when she left Yacob's house. Would a man ever love her? How many children would she have? What would she name them? Some nights she had dreamed she'd marry the love of her life and that they'd live together in a small hilltop house with wide windows and a red-tiled roof. (12)

Adam’s proposal is accepted immediately by Yacob. The latter does not consult his daughter's opinion as if her answer does not matter. However, Isra is unsure of leaving her house in Palestine to travel to a liberal place like America. It is hard for her to be gone from the beautiful nature that surrounds her, and go to a place she knows nothing about. In reality, what scares her most is that she is already feeling abandoned and lonely while being among her people. The ones with whom she shares the same culture, background, and language. So, she finds it difficult to imagine herself coping with a strange family whom she barely knows. However, that is not her only issue because what occupies and troubles Isra's mind is finding love:

“But Mama, what about love?”

Mama glared at her through the steam. “What about it?”

“I’ve always wanted to fall in love.”

“Fall in love? What are you saying? Did I raise a sharmouta?”

“No . . . no . . .” Isra hesitated. “But what if the suitor and I don’t love each other?”

“Love each other? What does love have to do with marriage? You think your father and I love each other?” (Rum 15)

Apparently, no one in her family cares about such a feeling. No one truly believes in it except for herself. Indeed, Haddid is certain that love is a beautiful emotion that makes the person fly from joy as well as it illuminates and brightens his way. Therefore, she hopes one day this dream of finding the missing love will turn into a reality.

The major character in the story does not ask for something impossible. All that she wishes to find is someone who would understand her fears, listen to her wild thoughts, and calm her weary soul. In other words, she wishes to find someone with whom she can talk freely, share her secrets without being scared, someone who would accept her the way she is. In fact, she longs to be in a stable relationship where a man and a woman can understand each other, help one another, as well as take care of one another.

After thinking again about moving to America, she finds out that this country is the land of freedom and its culture is not as rigid as her own. This idea fills her soul with excitement because women might have different lives there not like in Palestine. Isra wonders maybe in America men respect women more as they may give them their natural rights. However, her mother does not agree with her. She strongly believes according to her

experiences in life that no matter where a woman goes, she will always be a woman be it in Palestine or America, and her place will remain the same. Yet, Isra refuses to accept her mother's words. For the first time, she feels determined in her opinion. She promises herself to find the happiness, her mother could not feel.

Isra feels nervous the first time she encounters her future husband. When Adam is gazing at her she feels terrified that he would not like or admire her appearance which she finds quite reasonable because "After all, she had never been called beautiful. Her eyes were small and dark, her jaw angular. More than once, Mama had mocked her sharp features, saying her nose was long and pointed, her forehead too large" (Rum 18). Thus, she cannot build her self-confidence when her parents never support her or tell her kind words that may make her feel good about herself.

Isra is a silent girl, but she has her own secret ways of taking revenge for those who treat her unfairly and say words that hurt her feelings; like her neighbours, brothers, and even her father. Nevertheless, things change when she starts living with her in-laws. She could not resist admiring her mother-in-law who fears nothing especially men and due to the fact that Isra craves for love she makes sure that she does the necessary not to upset Fareeda:

Yet even as she strove to please, she remembered all the times she'd overspiced her brothers' falafel sandwiches, when they yelled at her for not ironing their school uniforms properly, the time she'd murmured "I hate you" under her breath when Yacob beat her. But Isra would spend her life with Fareeda. She needed her love, and she would do what was necessary to earn it.  
(Rum 79)

## 2. The Notion of Love and Isra's Voicelessness in *A Woman is No Man*

Etaf Rum points to an important, noble, and refined feeling "Love" which most women lack in her fictional story *A Woman is No Man*. Their toughness, firmness, and intolerance come as a consequence of growing up in a very harsh environment that is empty of any sort of deep affection or compassion. Love sometimes can be indescribable and because of its complexity no words can depict its true meaning. However, one may see it as a powerful set of emotions that can blossom and soften the heart, mature the mind, besides pure the soul.

Love has many types such as romantic, unconditional, familiar, and self-love. It can be presented in warm hugs and cuddles which parents can give to their children or husbands to their wives. Also, it may be about saying nice words to each other when one feels down or lonely because the goal behind saying such words is to cheer the person up. It can be too about family gathering when sharing food and talks. In fact, love is all about small details. It is about a wife who feels secure and safe when she stands beside her husband, or a husband whose wife understands his message just from reading as well as decoding his eyes. It might be about a daughter who feels joyful with the presence of her parents. Love is about the tenderness which fills the house so it makes it cozy and comfortable.

The lack of love leads to the creation of silence which can be portrayed in Isra's life. Actually, Haddid does not develop her silent character naturally; she is raised to be one. Back home, she does not dare to open her mouth and speak her truth because otherwise she would be punished and beaten by her father. Fear from upsetting others has grown up with her gradually. Her personality is not strong and powerful enough to defend herself against those who harm her physically or emotionally. Unfortunately, she has never experienced love which would reinforce her confidence. So, she builds an idea that to gain some affection she

needs to subdue her frustration, shame, as well as anger. Next, she tries her best to satisfy them all especially her husband and Fareeda. Hence, pleasing them becomes her priority.

One of the other reasons that push Isra to listen quietly and agree without having any discussion is: knowing that her thoughts and ideas she has built through reading and reflecting can never fit with the intellect of her community. She is certain that she will be misunderstood and misjudged. If she speaks, her words would not make any echo, and no one would listen to her. Consequently, she decides to swallow them. Yet, she waits patiently for meeting someone who would understand her silent speech and listen to her voicelessness as Rum says: “That to understand someone, you had to listen to the words they didn't say, had to watch them closely” (31).

### 3. Books and Fairytales Tools to Escape from Reality and Find the Illusional Love

Myth, legend, fable, and fairytale are all folklore genres. They can be defined as oral and literary traditional narratives that have existed since the early ages. All these traditional stories are old, famous, and widely spread. However, the fairytale is the one that has received more attention because:

..., almost every reader of fairy tales, young and old, is curious about their magic. What is it that endows fairy tales with such enchantment? Where do these tales come from? Why do they have such a grip on us? Why do we always seem to need them? We want to fathom their mysterious hold on us. Perhaps this is why there are literary hundreds of scholarly books and essays about the tales, and why the more serious studies insist on making a distinction between the oral folk tale and the literary fairy tale. (Zipes xv)

Fairy tales are known too as fairy stories, magic tales, or “*contes de fées* in French”. They are short stories which use mythical entities, imaginary creature, and enchantment. At first, they are supposed to be read and analyzed by the upper-class adults in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Nevertheless, later such stories became part of children literature. Fairy stories are not necessarily related only to the world of magic, fantasy, heroes along with villains; as they are not merely meant to teach valuable life lessons solely. Magic tales play another role which is teaching young people more about society, culture, masculinity, femininity, and even sexuality.

Isra wishes to utter the word NO to her parent and express herself. Yet, she is afraid of the consequences. Moreover, her education and upbringing influence her personality. Luckily, she finds a way to defy them all in secret and mostly with her books seeing that she is a bibliophile. Haddid through time develops a passion for reading stories and fairytales. They allow her to travel to places far away from her home, escape time, and go through different journeys. Reading becomes a therapy for her broken soul as it heals her pain as well as her agony. A beautiful sensation arises in her heart when she opens her book. Though Isra's mother forbids her from reading because she finds it useless, Isra never listens due to the fact that the more books she reads the more places she goes and the more pages she flips the more knowledge she gains.

Actually, Isra's mother is not the only one who believes that books have no use and are a waste of time but most traditional women do. For them, girls have to learn how to cook and clean and raise children which are more essential than reading and learning. Furthermore, they think that stories corrupt their minds and mislead their girls. Thus, they try to stop them from doing it.

Isra likes reading fairytales because they give her a notion about what love feels like. Such kind of stories shapes her perspective towards life and reality. Haddid is enchanted with love stories which charm her and take her to a beautiful realm full of fantasy. In fact, she dreams of having a loving husband with whom she can share her interests like reading. A person who would be able to show her the real meaning of love like the one she reads in fairytales:

They would read by the window every night—Rumi, Hafez, and Gibran. She would tell him about her dreams, and he would listen. She would brew mint chai for him in the mornings and simmer homemade soups in the evenings.

They would take walks in the mountains, hand in hand, and she would feel, for the first time in her life, worthy of another person's love. *Look at Isra and her husband*, people would say. *A love you only see in fairy tales.* (Rum 15)

Reading is one of the tools Isra uses to run away from the drastic environment, the complicated customs and tradition which she could not cope with. Her isolation, loneliness, as her empty soul have led her to the discovery of a new world. The latter is the realm of books and fairytales. Unluckily, she mixes reality with fiction; therefore, she loses herself. Isra is not quite sure if love of characters in fairytales stories would resemble the one she might sense if she ever falls in love:

...Surely he should speak first! She thought about the interactions between men and women she'd read about in books. Small introductions first, personal tales next, then affection grew. That was how two people fell in love. Or at least how Sinbad the Sailor fell in love with Princess Shera in *A Thousand and One Nights*. Except Shera was a bird for most of the story. Isra decided to be more realistic. (Rum 18)



Isra finally moves to America the country where all dreams come true. Yet, sadly hers do not. Once she arrives in New York City, a day after her marriage ceremony, she does not feel just amazed but bewitched by the magnificent view of the place. She even thinks that this might be the love that she is searching for. The beauty of the Manhattan skyline widens her eyes and fills them with tears of joy. Isra finally feels free by getting the chance to discover a new place that might bring delight to her. Reading about something and experiencing it are two distinct actions. She for the first time feels extremely joyful and as claimed by Rum the feeling the view gave her no other book had ever given as such (40).

Everything is charming and exciting until Isra and her new family reach the plain Brooklyn the place where she will reside in. The buildings, the streets, and the house suffocate her. There is no greenery, no mountains, and no fruit trees like back home and that is not only problem because the house in particular is dark, and the sunlight barely comes in. When she reaches her bedroom Isra discovers that her room has no windows from where she can breathe the fresh air. In reality, everything seems different and dull as if something is missing. Unluckily, she does not find what she expects because nothing looks like the image she draws in her head. Whilst growing up this young lady has often thought about other areas outside her homeland. she has believed they would be beautiful just like the ones she reads in books, yet now she fears that her books have betrayed her and mislead her as well: “she wondered if her books had gotten it wrong, whether Mama had been right all along when she'd said the world would be disappointing regardless of where she stood” (Rum 45).

Isra is fascinated by many different narratives, but her favourite one is the Arabian folk tale of *One Thousand and One Night*. The latter is a collection of set of stories most of them are fairy *tales* that are related to her language, background, and culture. They are told by a witty woman named Scheherazade who uses the technique of storytelling to stay alive

and charm the sultan Shahriyar. In fact, fairy tales are considered as women's literature:

“Writers like Robert Graves have seen them as survivals of an older, matriarchal culture and faith; but whether they are right or not, it is women who most often are the central characters in many of these stories, and women who have the supernatural power” (Lurie 35). Next, Isra finds out that this story is more about the strength and resistance of women who can achieve their purposes by using their voices and their only weapon. Haddid discovers out through reading this tale, how women can truly be powerful, which is a thing she does not usually come across in her real life.

#### B. Voicelessness and the Echoes of Culture: Who I am vs. Who They Want Me to Be

The concept of identity for the individual changes over the years. Indeed, many factors can shape who the person is depending on the time, the place, the people he spends most of his time with, along with the experiences he goes through. When the child starts growing up, he gradually begins to question things about the self and the others. In addition, the more the individual gets older the more he learns about himself. He develops and strengthens his personality while going through many trials and tests in life which will open his eyes to the real world. Only, one of the main factors that influences the person's character and identity is Culture. The latter is an umbrella term that encompasses tradition, beliefs, language, cuisine, religion, as well as social habits of a certain society. It can deeply affect how the person sees himself and those around him. The role culture plays is: directing the individual and show him what kind of life example he needs to follow to be accepted by the members of his social group. Thus, culture determines how an individual should be raised and how he should interact. On the one hand some societies support individualism i.e. this philosophy believes that every person has the right to follow what his heart and mind tell him, his self is his priority. On the other hand, other societies support collectivism rather than personal independence i.e. people who follow this stream recognize themselves while being

with other people and whilst doing what the society expects them to do. Moreover, Western culture is known for its individualism whereas eastern culture is known for following a collectivist philosophy.

### 1. The Impact of Traditions and Customs on the Individual in *A Woman Is No Man*

In *A Woman Is No Man*, Etaf Rum creates three different types of young female characters who hope for a better future. These characters are: Isra a personage who develops a mindset which varies from the ones of her people. In reality, she seeks to find liberty. When Isra goes after her objective she faces many challenges and obstacles in the middle of the way. Such issues came into existence due to the cultural pressure. They are the cause behind her physical and emotional breakdown. Nevertheless, Sara her sister-in-law and Deya her daughter could break the code of silence after going through many fights. Though they are supposed to follow the same strict rules Fareeda orders, yet they manage to find their voices. Fareeda is a character who is obsessed with preserving culture more than anything else. Deya has many arguments with her grandmother concerning the subject of marriage, as Rum states:

...

“This isn't Palestine, Teta. We live in America. There are other options for women here.”

“Nonsense." Fareeda had squinted at the Turkish coffee grounds staining the bottom of her cup. "It doesn't matter where we live. Preserving our culture is what's most important. All you need to worry about is finding a good man to provide for you.” (26)

Isra does her best to get free from the restrictions of the complicated traditions and old customs set by her society. The latter values secrecy and silence more than anything else as

rum illustrates: “Where I come from, we keep these stories to ourselves. To tell them to the outside world is unheard of, dangerous, the ultimate shame” (8). Nevertheless, she could not do it all alone. Although she faces issues with her family back home in Palestine, she has a different story in America. The more Isra gets older the more depressed and miserable she becomes. In her culture, there is an idea that the problems she faces with her husband should never come out of their bedroom even if they are too serious. So, she has to endure her pain and do not seek for help as Rum says:

“You think anyone wants to see this?”

Isra opened her mouth, but nothing came out. What was there to say? A husband hitting his wife was normal. How many times had Yacob hit Mama? She wondered if Khaled had ever hit Fareeda. She had never seen it, but that meant nothing.

“There are things in this life no one should see,” Fareeda said. “When I was your age, I never let anyone see my shame.” (151)

The main character learns to stay calm even in such situations when she is beaten. She could never speak about her suffering to any person. In effect, she believes as she is thought that it is her role to cover her shame. Isra’s mental health is deteriorating because of the family problems. Nonetheless, she knows that this how things were done in the past, and they will remain the same in the present moment. Hence, there is no need for drama. Haddid is aware also that as a young woman in a foreign country who does not have any diploma that can help her, or a family to support her, cannot do anything except for learning to be patient as her mother advised her.

In the Arab culture, people follow the principle of collectivism in which an individual has to follow his group mainly his family. Thus, he needs to satisfy them and go after their wishes to please them. Moreover, men in such culture are supposed to be the head of the family by protecting women, bringing money, and providing shelters and the most essential matter is preserving their name by giving birth to a male child. Nonetheless, such ideas and thoughts put pressure on men like the case of Adam Ra'aad in the story, the eldest son who is the responsible character for his parents, brothers, wife, and children. He does everything he can to make his parents happy since they are his priority. But, no one sees except for his wife, whom he pours all his anger on, the stressful and sorrowful life he is living:

“Happy?” He met her eyes. “What's there to be happy about?” Isra stiffened.

“All I do is work day and night like a donkey! 'Do this, Adam! Do that, Adam! More money! We need a grandson!' I'm doing everything I can to please my parents, but no matter what I do, I fall short. And now I've given them another thing to complain about.” (Rum 119)

Because the Ra'ad family lives in America, Fareeda as a Palestinian conservative, old, and traditional woman makes sure that her family would never forget who they truly are and from where they come from. She is extremely afraid of anything that touches their reputation. In their culture the latter can never be acceptable. Hence, she does everything she can so that her children will not turn into Americans or be influenced by their culture.

Fareeda as any other uneducated, old lady is brainwashed. All the rules she makes her children follow and the principles she stands up for are based on customs and not on religion. She let the young boys act as they please since they are males, yet she always try to watch the girls closely.

In reality, Fareeda's harsh ways of passing the traditions has led to losing her children. Adam's melancholy, which comes as a result of ignoring his priority and following his mother's commands, makes him uncontrollable. He pours all his frustration and anger on his wife where he reached a point of killing her then committing suicide. Omar and his wife Nadine leave because of his mother's complexity. Sara also escapes from home at an early age because of the troubles she has fallen into.

Being the wife of the eldest son in the family, Isra has been forced to bring a male baby to carry their name. Nevertheless, she gives birth to four daughters. Isra's melancholy develops through time where she reaches a point of hating herself and all those around her. Although, she tries her best to share with her babies the love she has, she gets tired because of the pressure her mother-in-law puts her under.

## 2. Voicelessness, Identity, and Expectation

Knowing one's identity means being able to answer the question: "Who am I?" Through it one can recognize his true authentic self. Identity is based on the values and principles the person stands up for as well as the choices he makes. Furthermore, one is able to build too his identity out of gender, ethnicity, religion, self-image, self-feeling, along with the assumption of other people. Identity is a way which helps the person to make sense of his life. It actually changes over time like what matters or is considered as truth to an individual in the past time is not the same as what matters now in the present moment, or in the near future:

...Self and identity theories assume that people care about themselves, want to know who they are, and can use this self-knowledge to make sense of the world. Self and identity are predicted to influence what people are motivated to do, how they think and make sense of themselves and others, the actions

they take, and their feelings and ability to control or regulate themselves.

(Oyserman et al 70; ch. 4)

Moreover, when the person knows himself, he will raise his awareness about who he is. Then this individual will know more about his likes, abilities, disabilities, and goals. Nonetheless, not everyone is free to identify himself as he wishes to do. In reality, there are times when the person loses control over his life along with the decisions he makes. Instead, it becomes the society's and the people's role to choose for him. Parents or the dominant culture may even force the person to lead a life that does represent him.

Isra knows that her character differs from others for the reason that she looks for things other females in her society do not even know that should exist in a woman's life. However, she never dares to fight to get her rights back. Regrettably, she is oppressed and traumatized from a young age. Hence, whenever she opens her mouth to express her thoughts, words barely come out of it.

Haddid lives in a place where women are sure that they are not worthy enough and they let others treat them as such. Yet, she wishes to be enhanced and honored. Isra wants to feel like a normal human being instead of a slave. Deep inside Haddid is aware that she deserves love and as a young lady she should be treated as a woman and not as a servant or maid. Isra once had a conversation with her mother about such a topic which goes as the following:

She considered her words again. "Do you think maybe women have more respect in America?"

Mama fixed her with a glare. "Respect?"

"Or maybe worth? I don't know."

Mama set the stirring spoon down. "Listen to me, daughter. No matter how far away from Palestine you go, a woman will always be a woman. Here or there. Location will not change her naseeb, her destiny."

"But that's not fair." (Rum 16)

Women in her community are expected to have limited roles like getting married, raising children, cooking, cleaning, and pleasing men. They have to accept the parts they are given as their total reality without complaining or even saying a word. Moreover, the female gender should all neglect their rights while respecting their tradition. Haddid could never show her real personality just to fit in with her family, her husband, and her in-laws.

Many times, Isra wishes to speak her mind, to scream, and to show to which degree she is under pressure. However, she has no other option than to be obedient as she is taught to be:

She studied her reflection in the mirror. Her face looked dull and gray in the fluorescent light, and she stared at her small, weak frame. She saw a girl who should've kicked and screamed as her mother tightened her wedding gown, should've begged and hollered as her father secured her in the taxicab to the airport. But she was a coward. She turned away. This is the only familiar face I'll ever see again, Isra thought. And she couldn't stand the sight of it. (Rum 47)

Unluckily, the only way to fill the void in her heart is by being silent. First, Isra back home did not have the chance to know herself or what her capacities seeing that she spent most of her entire time in the kitchen after coming from school. She was not allowed to experience other activities. Second, this young lady was forced to get married through an arranged



marriage with someone she barely knows. Third, she changed the style of her life just to cope with her new family.

Next, Deya could not see the point or understand what marriage can do for her in a young age. She is aware of her situation. She has no clue of how the world functions, what life means, and even who she is. Thus, she hopes to explore the world, get an education first, have a career, and most importantly be independent. She also wishes to have a choice over her life since freedom is what she cares about the most. Furthermore, Deya does not want to end her life doing what other women did in the past generations particularly after witnessing her mother's suffering. She does not also like being occupied with the home chores only which they consider as their essential duties. She also rejects the idea that her life should go around one object that is getting a man. In reality, she craves for more. She hopes to escape from where and with whom she lives to go on an adventure, to find peace, also to forget her pain, and sorrow. In fact, there are thoughts Deya could not share with anyone even with her sisters like:

If it were up to her, she'd postpone marriage for another decade. She'd enroll in a study-abroad program, pick up and move to Europe, perhaps Oxford, spending her days in cafés and libraries with a book in one hand and a pen in the other. She'd be a writer, helping people understand the world through stories. But it wasn't up to her. (Rum 31)

A person would never discover his real identity besides the place where feels safe overnight. He needs to go on a long journey and have many trials sometimes he wins other times he fails. Thus, through these tests he learns more about his personality. Another tool that can bring him closer to find out himself and his way in life is reading. Deya could not understand the meaning of her existence especially as a child who has no parents, no friends,

or family except for her three sisters and grandparents who have raised them. She is trapped between two cultures and two different lifestyles the American and Palestinian. Deya is not allowed to talk, act, and behave like true American because she has to keep her Palestinian identity alive. Nevertheless, she could not find herself belonging to any of them or understand her relationship with either. Thus, she sees herself as nobody:

Deya recalled the last suitor who had withdrawn his marriage proposal. He had told her grandparents that she was too insolent, too questioning. That she wasn't Arab enough. But what had her grandparents expected when they came to this country? That their children and grandchildren would be fully Arab, too? That their culture would remain untouched? It wasn't her fault she wasn't Arab enough. She had lived her entire life straddled between two cultures. She was neither Arab nor American. She belonged nowhere. She didn't know who she was. (Rum 28)

### 3. Education Is Power

Education is a vigorous weapon that destroys ignorance and old beliefs. It is through learning, reading, and searching one reaches a level of awareness that enables him to differentiate between right from wrong. When a person gets to a point of intellectual and rational maturity, he will automatically make a shield that will protect him from any negative opinion or misleading thought as it is mentioned in the story “Books were my armor. Everything I'd ever learned growing up, all my thoughts, dreams, goals, experiences, it all came from the books I read. It was like I went around collecting knowledge, plucking it from pages and storing it up, waiting for a chance to use it” (Rum 143). Education breaks down the barriers and opens the closed doors for the learner. In addition, it aids to know more about his rights and duties. It also makes the learner believe in the existence of a better life.

Reading stories of various people and understanding the thoughts between the lines as well as deeply analyzing the plot, the choice of words, and the ideas behind the tale make the person a seeker for truth rather than just a reader. In the case of Sara Ra'ad, she spends most of her free time when she finds any in reading different stories so that she can make sense of her life. However, that is not her only reason because what pushes her to choose the vast realm of literature and reading distinct genres of literary works is to escape from the gloomy world that is full of unreasonable customs. Sara never considers herself as voiceless, helpless, or even a victim of her society. She develops a strong personality and builds a bold character due to her readings along with the experiences she has gone through in life. Before escaping from her house, she has dared to break the rules and fight for what she wants. Sara likes to do things for herself. She does not accept the idea of going after the wishes of her people and neglecting her own. Now, and after going through the ups and downs of life, she feels brave to stand to for herself and express her opinions clearly, as it is stated in the story:

“Courage will get you everywhere, so long as you believe in yourself and what you stand for,” said Sarah. “You don't know what your life will be like, and neither do I. The only thing I know for sure is that you alone are in control of your destiny. No one else. You have the power to make your life whatever you want it to be, and in order to do that, you have to find the courage to stand up for yourself, even if you're standing alone.” (Rum 146)

Moreover, getting the right knowledge gives the person a chance to understand more about someone or something. Besides, through reading one will gain new information about different topics, widen his horizons, welcome different ideas, get to know more about himself, question things, and develop critical thinking. All that is previously mentioned train the mind to analyze the words of others before accepting them as true reality. Hence,

knowledge is a source of wisdom. It enlightens the person's way as it shapes his perspective towards life. It also helps him to recognize his choices and gives him courage to go after what he wants.

## **Chapter Three: Gender and Writing**

### A. Narrative, Writing, and Storytelling

#### 1. Narrative

#### 2. The Importance of Storytelling

#### 3. Writing as a Means to Finding the Missing Voice

### B. Women Writers and Diaspora

#### 1. Migration and Diaspora

#### 2. Etaf Rum and Writing

### III. Chapter Three: Gender and Writing

#### A. Narrative, Writing, and Storytelling

What are words? Words are gifts and blessings. In them, there is a huge power that can bring life or death. Words have the ability to create wars or to end them. They are the tool human beings use to express their needs and sentiments. They are the important medium people utilize to transmit their messages and ideas. Words can be written down in papers or said orally. What matter is that they live on even when people are gone.

Words are like arrows; they can either build the person or destroy him. Indeed, understanding the meaning behind the uttered words give worth to the individual's speech. They play a major role in defining the speaker as they reveal his attitude and character. Words allow stories to unfold and written works to come into existence.

##### 1. Narrative

It is widely known that it is quite impossible for people to live without narratives. For some like, Deya in the novel, the latter deems as a lifesaver. Narrative in its simple definition is a story or a tale that accounts connected events and experiences. It is the description of characters, plots, and details. The narrative is presented through written or spoken words. Actually, tales are considered as a way of communication and it is through them human beings interact with each other. Stories can take the form of a fictional work (imaginary) or nonfictional work (actual). Furthermore, the important part they play is they give the individual a sense of comprehending his identity while relating it to other characters of the tales:

For Barthes and his fellow theorists, it is inconceivable that humans could exist without narrative: it is, he claimed ‘transhistorical, transcultural’, found in every human culture across the globe, and in all the historical and archaeological records we have of human societies. Narrative here is perceived as basic to who we are as human beings, fundamental to explaining how we process time, how memory works and how we come to conceive of our own identities. It is also crucial to how we make sense of our random things and experiences we encounter in our daily lives, helping us give shape and meaning to the. (Thomas 3, 4)

In *A Woman Is No Man* the personage Deya, who is enchanted by words, cannot imagine her life without the presence of books. Stories help her to connect with her ambiguous past which she barely remembers “She often wondered how many people felt this way, spellbound by words, wishing to be tucked inside a book and forgotten there. How many people were hoping to find their story inside, desperate to understand” (Rum 37). They too aid her to make sense over her existence along with the random trials she confronts. Sadly, in her real-life she feels lost. Nonetheless, she feels in control when reading, hearing, and telling narratives.

It is out of narratives one experiences the different range of emotions like sadness, joy, hardship, and misery. They, in effect, display the common things humans share with each other. Moreover, one of the narratives Deya likes to hear whenever she feels uncomfortable or unhappy is music. Deya particularly listens to Eminem’s songs. It is his tone, voice, rhythm, and words that captivate her:

She identified with the rapper’s tension, admired his defiant attitude and courageous voice. If only Deya had that voice. Some nights, whenever she had

a bad day at school or Fareeda had upset her, Deya would slip her headphones on and fall asleep listening to Eminem's words, knowing that somewhere out there was another person who felt trapped by the confines of his world— comforted by the fact that you didn't have to be a woman or even an immigrant to understand what it felt like to not belong. (Rum 73)

## 2. The Importance of Storytelling

Storytelling is a universal performance and human beings especially women have always been storytellers. Almost everyone has his own share of experiences, journeys, or daily life actions he wishes to share with the outside world. Societies too have used the technique of storytelling in the past to teach people the values and morals of their culture, as to pass on their traditions and customs. In effect, its crucial role helps in creating a strong bond between the teller and the listener. Next, through telling and hearing stories one understands how the world functions:

STORYTELLING HAS BEEN CALLED the oldest and the newest of the arts. Though its purpose and conditions change from century to century, and from culture to culture, storytelling continues to fulfill the same basic social and individual needs. Human beings seem to have an innate impulse to communicate their feelings and experiences through storying. We tell stories in order to make sense of our world. We express our beliefs, desires, and hopes in stories, in an attempt to explain ourselves and to understand others. In *The Completed Gesture*, a book about the importance of story in our lives, John Rouse writes, "Stories are told as spells for binding the world together." (Greene 1)



The technique of storytelling has existed from early history and it still exists in the present moment. At the beginning it has taken the oral form in which different generations have shared their stories orally through using voices and gestures. The oral tradition can take many forms like: epic poems, songs and dances, chants along many others. In ancient times, they even have used graphics and pictures to narrate a story too. Then things start to change. Indeed, the process of telling stories remains the same. Yet, the oral tradition has become a written one. One now can find narratives in books, newspapers, and even online.

Storytelling brings people of all ages closer together. It allows these same people to lose themselves in the story. It helps too in building a happy relationship between the narrator and the hearer. Isra has been depressed most of her time due to the issues she has faced. However, sharing stories with her children has brought joy to her. Moreover, the art of storytelling is very important in the life of a child. It helps him to acquire the language as to enhance his literacy skill. Next, when an infant learns to hear stories with an open mind and heart, he will develop his curiosity and inquisitiveness. He will as well evolve his imagination along with his sense of awareness from an early age:

“How much she missed Palestine.” He poured the ground marjoram on top of the sesame seeds. “How impressed she was by your curiosity.”

“She said that?”

He nodded. “She used to read to you and your sisters daily. Do you remember? Sometimes I used to hear her on the front stoop, making funny noises as she read. You all used to laugh so hard. I rarely heard Isra laugh throughout the years, but in those moments she sounded like a child.” (Rum 233)

Deya, Isra’s eldest daughter, has inherited the love of literature from her mother. Storytelling has taught her the art of listening. She then becomes fond of words since they

please her ears and even her eyes. They in reality nurture her spirit and soul. Deya enjoys reading, hearing, and telling stories. The latter give her an opportunity to discover the world beyond the four walls of her bedroom. When hearing stories about Palestine from her grandfather she feels connected to their history. Deya in fact has never put a foot in that country. Nonetheless, imagining the scenes makes her feel the homesickness “Deya looked forward to these nights, when Khaled would tell them stories of Palestine, even if many of them were sad. It helped her feel connected to their history, which felt so far away most of the time” (Rum 57). Stories play an important role in linking between people, places and time. In the case of Etaf Rum’s story, most characters miss their motherland Palestine as they miss being around their people. But, they could not return back to live again because of political issues. Hence, the only things they have been allowed to take with them to America are the stories related to their history, culture, tradition, and lifestyle.

In addition, to tell means to share information about someone or something. It means being open and being ready to expose what is hidden inside, and as Green mentions: “Storytelling is a sharing experience. When we tell, we show our will-ingness to be vulnerable, to expose our deepest feelings, our values” (33). Many people are passionate about storytelling for multiple reasons like they can be a means of entertainment, fill people with emotions, order their thoughts, as they can give them a chance to find meaning for their lives. Even Isra used to enjoy hearing stories from Fareeda because she feels that they can break the barriers between people:

Fareeda would tell Isra stories about life in America, the things she did to pass time when she wasn’t cooking and cleaning, like visiting her friend Umm Ahmed, who lived a few blocks away, or accompanying Khaled to the market on Sundays, or, when she was in a particular mood, attending the mosque on

Fridays to catch up on the latest community gossip. Isra leaned forward, wide-eyed, inhaling Fareeda's words. (Rum 66)

Besides, one can know a lot about the inner-self of the teller from his choice of the story and how he tells it. Stories enlighten humans' insights as they help them to keep on living.

Next, in *A Woman Is No Man*, Rum has used the character Scheherazade to emphasize on the significance of storytelling. Her name is repeated several times in the story.

Scheherazade the storyteller is a symbol of determination and power. Indeed, Isra considers her as a role model, she wishes to emulate her

“...No one asks Scheherazade to marry the king. She volunteers on behalf of all women to save the daughters of Muslims everywhere. For a thousand and one nights, Scheherazade's stories were resistance. Her voice was a weapon—a reminder of the extraordinary power of stories, and even more, the strength of a single woman.” (Rum 84)

### 3. Writing as a Means to Finding the Missing Voice

Writing or journaling is a fine art which allows the person to express himself freely. It is an act of showing imperfections without feeling guilty, ashamed, or afraid of others' reactions about what has been written down in paper. It does not resemble speech at all because once an individual holds a pen and puts it down on paper, he may say things that he is not willing to tell to the outside world. He may be too poetic, too emotional, too aggressive, too joyful, or too broken: which are feelings rarely people like to show to others. Writing is considered as an important tool that saves lives and heals wounds. Through it one can achieve many purposes, like telling stories, sharing information, finding themselves, and fighting loneliness.

It is easy to understand other people, yet hard to understand oneself especially when the person chooses to keep silent rather than shares his pain like Isra does. She tries to understand her husband's condition and hard situation as she tries to please her parents and parents-in-law. Nevertheless, no one could see the pain behind her voicelessness. It seems simple for some people to fake an emotion rather than facing it. While an individual is suffering alone, he feels lost as if he were fighting in a battle against himself and the whole world at the same time. In effect, the problem resides in his inapprehensible as well as complicated thoughts he develops through his painful journey along with the whispers and the voices filling his mind. Unfortunately, the latter can prevent him from seeing the plain reality. Isra's sadness has been increasing every single day which has led to depression. Nothing can make her feel happy anymore as if she has entered a dark and dim cave, yet no one could help her to come out of it:

Dear Mama,

I feel very depressed today. I don't know what's happening to me. Every morning I wake up with a strange sensation. I lie beneath the sheets and I don't want to get up. I don't want to see anyone. All I think of is dying. I know God doesn't approve of taking a life, be it mine or someone else's, but I can't get the thought out of my mind. My brain is spinning on its own, out of my control. What's happening to me, Mama? I'm so scared of what's happening inside me. (Rum 59)

Nevertheless, one of the effective ways that breaks the silence and helps the person to decode what is turning in his mind is writing. Writing is communicating both with the self as well as with the other. One writes to feel alive, to breathe, and to sense his inner thoughts. The essence of writing lies in revealing the mystery. Furthermore, the nice thing about it is

that it gives an opportunity to the voiceless to use his voice. This act can be a reflecting mirror of what goes inside the human's head and heart. The most crucial thing about it is that it expresses what the individual could not say by his mouth. Etaf Rum uses the case of Isra Haddid the main character in the story *A Woman Is No Man* to pass such idea. Haddid is voiceless and she does not dare to let her anger comes out by screaming in the faces of those who hurt her or speak to them directly and tell them what bothers her. However, when she feels suffocated, she writes letters to her mother as if she were sitting next to her, listening to her issue:

The next thing she knew, she was on her feet, darting to the bedroom. She pulled open Adam's drawer, grabbed the composition notebook and pen, and returned to the windowsill, where she ripped out a few empty pages from the back and began to write.

*Dear Mama,*

*Life here isn't so different from life back home, with all the cooking, cleaning, folding, and ironing. And the women here—they live no better. They still scrub floors and raise children and wait on men to order them around. A part of me hoped that women would be liberated in this country. But you were right, Mama. A woman will always be a woman.*

She was gritting her teeth in anger and despair. She crumpled the letter, started again, then crumpled the next as well, then the next and the one after it, until she had rewritten her letter a dozen times, and all of them lay balled at her feet.

(Rum, 138)

Isra has no one to share her struggles with. The worst part is that even if she speaks no one would listen or understand what she is going through. Hence, she starts writing unconsciously

to liberate the emotions that make her tired as well as to release some of the burdens she is carrying on all alone.

Basically, a writer be it a professional or a hobbyist writes to find meaning: a signification behind what is going on in his life. Furthermore, he writes to discover deeply himself, finds his way, and helps others to find theirs too. There are a time when the individual goes through crises and obstacles in life which will definitely affect his mindset as well as his psychology. Deya, for example, feels most of her days bewildered, stray, and even alone because of the sad memories she has built in her childhood. Her thoughts are never clear. In fact, there is chaos in her subconscious mind “If Deya was a subject, she thought she would be art—dark, messy, emotional” (Rum 38).

Indeed, her sensitivity comes as a result of what she has lived in her youth. Her household has been full of troubles, and she has rarely seen her parents together smiling, talking, or even being around one another, as rum states:

In Deya’s memories, they rarely spoke to each other, and she couldn’t remember ever seeing them touch. She used to think they were being modest, that perhaps they loved each other when they were alone. But even when she watched them in secret, she never saw them show affection. Deya couldn’t remember why, but that day in the park, staring at her parents at opposite ends of the blanket, she’d felt as though she understood the meaning of the word sorrow for the first time. (41)

Yet, if the individual goes deep in writing and puts down all that bothers him and scares him, he can understand his situation plainly. Through writing he allows himself to look at the problem through his eyes and face it instead of running from it. In fact, writing is one of the healthy ways in which the individual can express his overwhelming sentiments or

thoughts. It helps him to reduce stress, overcome his anxiety, and see clearly through words what is happening inside his brain.

Also, if he dares to open the dark, secret rooms in his subconscious and conscious mind and treat those issues through writing, he will certainly find his stability and inner peace. In order to find his missing voice, he needs to be honest and sincere about what he writes. The process may seem long and take a lot of time. However, finding the way is what matters most. Indeed, writing is a tool to speak about the unspeakable. It actually means giving the hand a chance to free what is captivated in the mind and soul. Besides, no one would judge or punish a person for confessing his private life to a piece of paper.

The novel *A Woman Is No Man* is written as a sort of a reflection of Etaf Rum's past life. It is like narrative therapy. In reality, the story represents her. She is a Palestinian-American writer and has grown up in an immigrant household. Thus, she knows the feeling of being under pressure which comes as a result of preserving the culture and keeping the tradition alive. Writing the novel was an accident as Rum claims in one of her interviews. The tough experiences as well as the lonely moments she has gone through have affected her. Therefore, she has chosen to write inside her journal all the negative emotions that have kept her unhappy. She ultimately has found out that what she has written has been so powerful and has had a message in it. Hence, she first thought about writing an autobiography, but then she decided to write about an Arab American fictional story. In an autobiography, she feels restricted. All that she needs to write is her life experience. Whereas in fiction she is free. She has included many topics concerning her background like arranged marriage, oppression, patriarchal system, motherhood, gender expectation, domestic violence, nostalgia, Arab culture, beautiful traditions of her country Palestine, customs, and many others. Writing is an instrument that has helped Rum to fight her voicelessness and powerlessness as well. It has aid her to overcome her fear that has hunted her most of her life. The author has used it to

speak on the behalf of Arab- American mute women. All in all, to share this kind of story is to let the world hear the shouts of those of are in pain.

## B. Women Writers and Diaspora

### 1. Migration and Diaspora

Many people around the world are facing challenges daily. These obstacles can be related to religion, economy, or politics. Hence, they often feel forced to flee their countries and leave their families behind. They run away from the danger which surrounds them while hoping to keep their souls alive. This act is called migration. The latter means the movement of citizens from one place to another. It is in effect a universal characteristic of human history that has started millions of years ago. When individuals sense that their lives are threatened by a range of reasons like starvation, deadly conflicts, poverty, natural disasters, insecurity, or injustice, they see no other option but escaping and traveling to a new land. In such cases, individuals of different ages decide to abandon their homeland. They go to an unknown destination aiming to find peace as well as a better future.

Migration and Diaspora are two interrelated yet different concepts. On the one hand, Migration refers to individuals moving from their homeland to another land in search for settlement. On the other hand, Diaspora means a group of scattered or dispersed people in various parts of the world who share a common heritage. The term Diaspora is used to describe people who identify themselves with their motherland but live far from it. Those who want to keep their identity alive. Whilst traveling the essential stuff that these people carry with them are their tradition, past, and cultural heritage. They in fact maintain a strong tie to their origins like it is mentioned in the story:

Our three square- mile neighborhood is the melting pot of Brooklyn. On our streets you'll find Latinos, Middle Easterners, Italians, Russians, Greeks, and



Asians, all speaking their native tongues, keeping their traditions and cultures alive. Murals and graffiti cover the buildings. Colorful flags hang from windows and balconies. The sweet smell of churros, shish kebabs, and potpourri fills the air—a stew of humanity converging. Get out at the corner of Seventy- Second and Fifth Avenue, where you'll find yourself surrounded by bakeries, hookah bars, and halal meat markets. (Rum 9)

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has always been and is still until nowadays considered as a special case that attracts many people around the world. Palestinians have endured a lot as they are enduring till the present moment because of the war as well as the injustice of the invaders in their country:

The checkpoints were the reason Isra had never been to Jerusalem, which, along with most Palestinian cities, was under Israeli control and couldn't be entered without a permit. The permits were required at each of the hundreds of checkpoints and roadblocks Israel had constructed on Palestinian land, restricting travel between, and sometimes within, their own cities and towns. Some checkpoints were manned by heavily armed Israeli soldiers and guarded with tanks; others were made up of gates, which were locked when soldiers were not on duty. (Rum 19, 20)

Palestinian people have suffered from the dispossession of their country in 1948. Through using force and violence, Zionists along with the help of the British have established the new state of Israel. Jews around Europe have witnessed the anti-Semitism movement. Thus, they have been determined to find a land where they can live. However, they could not think about any other place rather than the land they claim as their ancestral homeland which is Palestine. Next, they have even worked on expelling the Palestinian citizens from their

territory. This tragedy is known as The Catastrophe or The Nakba in Arabic. The latter means the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. The merciless Israeli soldiers have attacked many rural areas and cities. The action has led to the dispersal of the Palestinian families: some of them have gone to refugee camps, some have tried to look for safer places, and others have fled the country. In effect, the traumatic experience has affected almost everyone so deeply. These individuals have found themselves suddenly exiled and homeless. All their hopes have faded away as they have turned to be people with different characters. In *A Woman Is No Man*, Etaf Rum mentions such an issue, and she discusses how the nakba has had its impact on the characters of the story. She also points at the things that they have been forced to do because of not having any other choice or option:

The wounds of her childhood— poverty, hunger, abuse—had taught her that the traumas of the world were inseparably connected. She was not surprised when her father came home and beat them mercilessly, the tragedy of the Nakba bulging in his veins. Nor was she surprised when he married her off to a man who beat her, too. How could he not, when they were so poor that their lives were filled with continuous shame? ( Rum 98)

Whenever someone goes, his heart and mind will always be attached to where he is born. In *A Woman Is No Man*, Rum discusses this issue through creating characters like Fareeda, Adam, and Khaled whose culture, name, and tradition are their valuable assets. Even though, Adem has lived most of his entire life and has built a career in America, he still misses home “There was something in his voice, and Isra found herself thinking of the day on the balcony, the way his eyes had chased the grapevines, taking in the open scenery. She wondered whether he longed to return to Palestine, whether he wanted to move back home one day” (Rum 46).

The United States of America, the land of the free as many people claim, is an ethnically diverse country. The reason that makes it culturally rich is due to the immigrants who come from all over the world with their various backgrounds, beliefs, religions, and races to look for a new place to settle. Nevertheless, these people face many obstacles while trying to adapt with the unfamiliar environment. In *A Woman Is No Man*, the Ra'ad family has lived a tough and miserable life before reaching American soil because of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. These colonizers have turned their lives upside down. Hence, in order to survive and live a dignified life they have had to migrate. For Fareeda and Khaled it has been hard for them at the beginning to start a fresh life when they first have moved. They have had to leave the refugee camps and their families behind and come to a nation they know neither its language nor its lifestyle. Then, Khaled has to deal with the Job problems and has to start working days and nights without resting just to put food in his family's mouths and a roof upon their heads.

Even though their dream becomes true through the following years, they somehow regret abandoning their land and coming to a place whose standards and values do not match with their own. Fareeda lives in a nightmare because of her overthinking. She fears that her children will lose their way, name, and reputation especially her daughters and granddaughters:

The atmosphere shifted. Khaled shook his head. "That's the price of coming to this country," he said. "Abandoning our land and running away. Not a moment goes by when I don't think of what we've done. Maybe we should've stayed and fought for our home. So what if the soldiers had killed us? So what if we had starved? Better than coming here and losing ourselves, our culture . . ."

His words faded out. (Rum 59)

## 2. Etaf Rum and Writing

Etaf Rum has taught English literature in a community college. Her classes have been related mainly to American and British Literature. However, whenever she has searched for Arab American writers and specifically for Arab American women writers, Rum has often found any. Hence, she has witnessed that voices like her own rarely exist in the vast world of literature. Therefore, she has decided to transform the notes she has in her journal into a fictional debut novel which people can relate to or find meaning through it.

In reality, stories about the eastern world in general and about the Arabs in particular are either ignored, misjudged or misrepresented. Most westerners do not know what is really happening in the Arab world. Thus, it becomes easy for them to build negative perspectives. Etaf Rum has found it hard to write a tale about her people, her land, and herself especially that Islamophobia, stereotypes, racism, as well as the notion of terrorism are growing sharply and widely spreading in America as across the world. Actually, it is not easy to open up and share the dark and gloomy aspect that is connected with Arab American immigrants. Rum tries to talk about universal themes in her story. She studies the cause and the consequence behind each action has been made by her characters.

In *A Woman is No Man*, the author emphasizes on women and how they are represented in the Arab culture. She in essence focuses on their struggles with themselves, families, along with men. She also talks about how immigrants suffer to discover their identities after finding themselves straddling between two different cultures. Moreover, Rum points out to crucial beliefs that are very familiar in the Arab world which are reputation and shame. The writer has used the previous terms repeatedly in the story in order to show their ability to create issues, paralyze and destroy the person not only mentally but even emotionally.

The author of the novel tries to raise questions and find convincing answers that will allow her to analyze the characters' psychology. These personages are struggling to express their individual needs and desires clearly while being bound up with their cultural rules. Next, Etaf Rum through building her complex personalities, who has been born in two different places, tries to find a meaning behind being Arab, being American, and being both:

What does it mean to be a hyphenated American or hyphenated Arab? What does it mean to be an Arab American in a post-9/11 world? How can an Arab American women-when her physical appearance, distinct traditions, body language, and style of dressing signal her as Other- be American? Will an Arab American woman be considered Arab even if her self-definition contradicts traditional or familial bonds? What challenges do these Arab American woman face in the United States as Arab and more importantly as Arab *women*? Can an Arab woman mean anything other than pitiful creature who follows her husband like a dark shadow remaining silent and obeying him at all times, granted a body only to deliver more children, perhaps even in competition with her husband's other wives? (Abdelrazek, 1)

## General Conclusion

## General Conclusion

This research paper is made to better understand both themes of voicelessness and gender in Etaf's *Rum A Woman Is No Man*. In reality, its main purpose is to shed light on the most crucial troubles the world has witnessed from the beginning of life until the present moment such as domestic abuse, cultural pressure, secrecy and silence, gender issues, conflicts, and migration. It argues that Voicelessness is just a metaphor that describes the condition of the individual. It can either be chosen by the person freely or it can be imposed due to various reasons. The dissertation also speaks about gender, identity, and the main difference between men as well as women in the Arab community. It debates that society along with culture interfere in the construction of gender roles. The powerful part education and reading play in building strong characters and changing the mindsets of people particularly women is highlighted too in this research.

Silence often seems scary and frightening for some people because of its ambiguity as well as obscurity. However, individuals, who have gone through painful experiences, prefer to keep quiet and live by following one rule which is never making a sound if they want to be safe. They are certain that if they speak, they will cry, scream, or yell. In fact, silent people are deeply aware that they might explode due to external pressure which leads to internal quarrel. The story in hand demonstrates that voicelessness is not always vigorous. It is harmful too. Indeed, silence is considered as a language that sends messages depending on the situation. Nonetheless, not everyone is able to listen to its sound or comprehend its meaning. Generally, people who think that holding their stories to themselves, whilst preventing others to know about their secrets; will be protected. They choose to be silent so that to avoid falling into troubles. Yet, these individuals are not conscious that they are damaging both themselves as their surroundings. This study shows that there are certain times

where people are obliged to use their voices, speak up, and fight for what they want to achieve. Otherwise, they will get hurt.

The Novel *A Woman Is No Man* is written to depict the condition of certain traditional Arab women, as to describe the agonizing journey of those who wish to live a different life. Moreover, through using the ideas of the novel, the extended essay points out how culture and society help in defining the masculinity and femininity of the person. It also argues that implanting unreasonable thoughts in the minds of both men and women helps in molding their lives. It talks too about how imposing rules on the younger generation who hope to live a simple life, will suffocate and depress them. In effect, the research paper analyzes the impact of customs and traditions of the individuals in *A Woman Is No Man*.

Some characters in the story suffer from a lack of tenderness and love in their lives such as Isra. This emptiness makes her feel lonely and isolated. Hence, she longs to sense it. While waiting for her parents and husband to give her what her heart desires, she starts to read. She reads so that to escape, to be entertained, and to see the world differently. Most of her books are about fairytales because they give her an idea about what love feels like. It is through them that she could find what she misses. Indeed, reading Fairytales can profoundly affect the fresh minds of children and even young adults. It makes them wonder, imagine, and travel to a magical realm where people live happily ever after. It pushes them to believe in happy endings as well as to search for hope in their lives. Actually, that is a great thing to insert into the minds and souls of young people. However, they still play another role which is brainwashing the young readers. So what if their imagination will no longer know limits? What will happen to them if they mix fiction with reality? They will simply lose track in real life.



The story tackles a sensitive subject which is migration. The Palestinian- Israeli conflict started decades ago and it is still going. In reality, this fight has taken many Palestinians innocent lives and many others have found themselves homeless, hopeless, and traumatized. Therefore, leaving the country has been one of the solutions to survive from the Zionist despotism as well as its brutal occupation. There are hundreds of individuals, across the globe, who are facing challenges every single day. Problems related to politics, economy, along with religion can often be very complicated and difficult to solve. Hence, people in such cases find themselves obliged to leave their nation and their beloved ones to look for a better future and to find peace. However, some individuals, like the personages in the story, cannot find the absolute tranquillity they are looking for even when they have traveled to the US, the land of liberty. Such characters are so attached to their motherland. They cannot adapt with the lifestyle of the Americans or cope with the new environment. In fact, the thing that makes them very anxious is their fear of losing their identity in the new land. However, there is a way that aids them to feel connected with their history which is narratives. Indeed, the technique of storytelling has been a useful tool that connects people with their history. Societies in the past have used stories to pass on their traditions and customs to their new generations, as they have used it to give morals and lessons.

All in all, living in a traditional and patriarchal society which values reputation more than anything else can be very challenging particularly to women. Next, forcing someone to be mute and to shut his mouth is just like depriving him of one of his human qualities. A person's voice is his sword. Through it, he can express his feeling, thoughts, and needs. Therefore, taking it away from him makes him feel disabled or paralyzed. Nonetheless, writing can be a tool to release what is suppressed inside the individual's soul, mind, and heart.

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