

## How To Teach Feminism as an Arab-American Woman: Rum's *A Woman is No Man* (2019)

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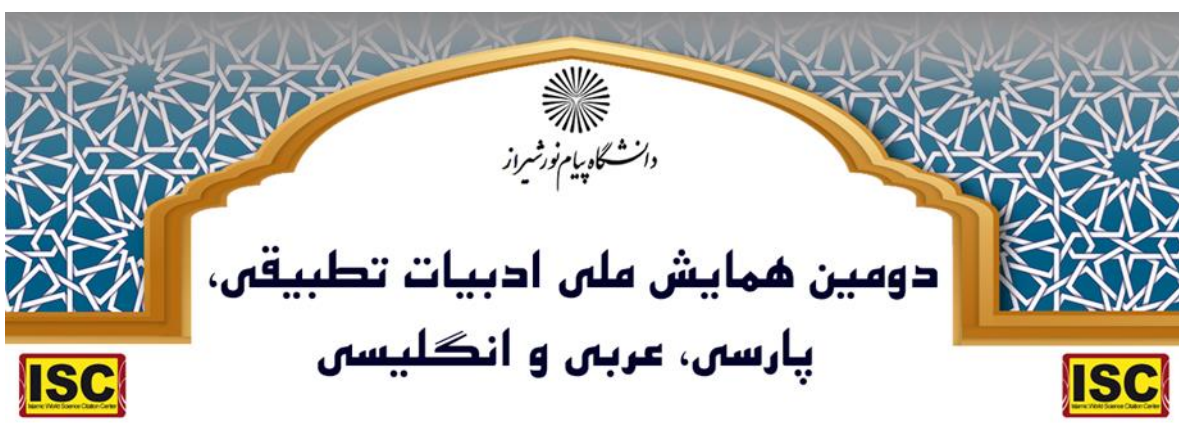
### Abstract

The present study is a feminist reading that concentrates on the fictional novel *A Woman is No Man* (2019) by the Arab-American novelist Etaf Rum. With the consideration of women's marginalization as the "second sex" proposed by Simone De Beauvoir, the current study aims to emphasize how the society restricts women with boundaries like honor and tradition. Rum depicts a society where religion is a cover for men's claims for ownership. The novelist's biography, her social and political background including the Arab diaspora that influenced her writing are surveyed. Since Rum is oppressed and suffered from the restrictions of her patriarchal society that threatened revolutionary women, she portrayed oppression against diaspora women who live in America. It is concluded that patriarchy is not related to any geographical location. Whether Arab-American women reside in the Arab countries or diaspora, still they are oppressed. Even in the land of freedom, they are controlled by the traditions of their homeland and are under the dominance of patriarchy which forces them to obey the rules written by men and for men and dictated to women.

**Keywords:** Rum's *A Woman is No Man*, Arab diaspora, Oppression, Other, Patriarchy

### 1. Introduction

The primary goal of this article is to analyze a fictional work, *A Woman is No Man* (2019), written by Etaf Rum, an Arab-American novelist. The novel is about three generations of women who are all affected by patriarchal surrounding and Arab-American cultural traditions. In her thesis, Yaiche (2020) has focused on colonialism in Etaf Rum's *A Woman is No Man* and finds out that the writer has tried to convey the suffering of Palestinian women in houses and the refugees in Palestinian camps during the Palestinian *Nakba* or catastrophe under the patriarchal society's dominance (p.11). Furthermore, Bao (2019) states that *A Woman is No Man* is a novel about the trauma of a family oppressed by patriarchy, the purpose of which is to convey a story about voiceless women through four narrators in two balanced timelines (para. 1). *A Woman is No Man* discusses three Arab-American generations of women who experienced patriarchal oppression at different ages (Bao, 2019, para. 1). Sari (2020) also states that



patriarchal society is organized into four phases: masculine aggression, patriarchal state, patriarchal mode of production, and patriarchal culture (p. 26). Sari's (2020) thesis is concerned with the patriarchal oppression of the main characters in Etaf Rum's *A Woman is No Man*.

Few critics and researchers have expanded on the suffering and oppression of the novel's heroines, including Isra, Deya, Sarah, and Fareeda. Thus, the article attempts to fill this gap. By focusing on the novel's main characters, we reveal how women are oppressed by patriarchy, a system that tries to control and prevent women from accessing higher education and connection with the opposite sex. This fortuitous study reveals how an Arab woman is doomed to oppression, despite the fact that she travels to America, the land of freedom, where she expects to have equal rights. It appears that the woman cannot achieve freedom and must face the same injustice and male dominance in the U.S.

This study will benefit from Simone De Beauvoir's notion of "the second sex" and sex/gender distinction. De Beauvoir's theory sheds light on the protagonists' dilemmas and suffering caused by patriarchal oppression. This can be explained by examining how Israa and her daughter Deya are beleaguered by their Arab-American society. Patriarchal society tries to limit women by the boundaries like reputation, honor and isolations from the outside world. Patriarchal society attempts to exploit religion as a cover for its false claims, as the patriarchy uses Qur'anic verses against women in order to deny them of their rights. The patriarchal oppression affect both men and women especially those who try to retain the Arab ethnicities even when the traditions are false or cause pain to their families. For example, Fareeda, Adam's mother, tries to prevent Israa, Sarah, and her granddaughters from being free, the experience of living their lives without boundaries. As a result, the women in Rum's *A Woman is No Man* (2019) are oppressed and suffer. The restrictions of their patriarchal societies threaten to label them as 'woman of a bad reputation' simply because they want to finish their education or leave the house. If these women disobey, patriarchal society will severely punish them. The religion is blamed in patriarchal society because it states that the woman is responsible for taking care of the house and raising the children. However, Islam promotes peace and equality. Thus, as concerns the society, patriarchy is not limited to any specific geographical place, whether the women are positioned in the Arab countries or diasporas, still they suffer from oppression.

## 2. De Beauvoir's the Second Sex ad Arab Feminism

Simone De Beauvoir, a feminist, political activist, and social theorist, emphasizes the importance of researching women's roles in patriarchal societies and providing them with a foundation to reject patriarchal society's regulations. In her book *The Second Sex* (1949), de Beauvoir claims that a woman is not born, but rather becomes a woman as a result of her society's treatment. Dini (2017) focuses on the sex/gender distinction, which distinguishes biological sex from the social and historical construction of gender, as well as the typecasts that go with it (p. 11). Many feminist academics have chastised De Beauvoir, but she insists that "an important source of women's oppression is their historical and social construction as the quintessential other;" Some gender differences, according to De Beauvoir, are innate (Dini, 2017, p. 11).

Beauvoir asserts that women have the same freedom as men and can thus choose to raise themselves, transcending the "immanence" to which they had previously been reconciled and achieving perfection, a state in which one cares about oneself and the world, choosing his/her freedom (Dini, 2017, p. 11). De Beauvoir explains how men created a false sense of mystery around women, making them the social "Other" (Dini, 2017, p. 11). Feminism encourages women to write feminist books that expose women's conditions and revolt against the stereotypes, inspiring others to do the same; according to Beauvoir, a woman is a human being with physiology, but that physiology does not make her inferior or explain mistreatment against her (Card, 2003, p. 203).



Beauvoir values women's labor because it allows them to be financially independent within an economically oppressed class (p. 641). If a woman could choose between forty hours of weekly industrial work and forty hours at home, she would gladly choose both (p. 641). Women who work will be happy and proud to have contributed to the development of the world, and most working women will be able to escape the traditional feminine world; however, neither society nor their husbands will provide them with the support they need to be equal to men because they are perceived as 'Other' (p. 641). Many fortunate women have achieved economic and social independence in their careers; these are the women who are in this position (De Beauvoir, 1953, p. 641).

Golly (2003) maintains that feminism has an impact on Arab women. The feminist consciousness in the Arab world advanced alongside the development of national consciousness at the beginning of the 19th century; both movements arose in response to imperialism in the West. Feminism can be defined as an illegal movement that first appeared in the Arab world in the 20th century. Arab feminism fights against veil issues, so the veil is associated with the oppression of Arab women, but it has now become a symbol of empowerment for Arabic women who wear it according to their own preferences (Golly, 2003, pp. 24-25).

According to Golly (2003), the conflict of Arab women is the same as the complexity of Arab feminism in modern times. Men who advocate women's liberation and equality point out that under oppressive regimes, women cannot be liberated because even men are not free under the same conditions; moreover, the equality between men and women can be understood to convey that men should be superior to women because of their ability to do anything. For the Arab society, Feminism is associated with the Western world, which can be described as a socially sick world plagued by rape and family disintegration. As a result, different trends can define Arab feminism, the first of which is the call for the right of women to change Islamic practices (Golly, 2003, p. 27).

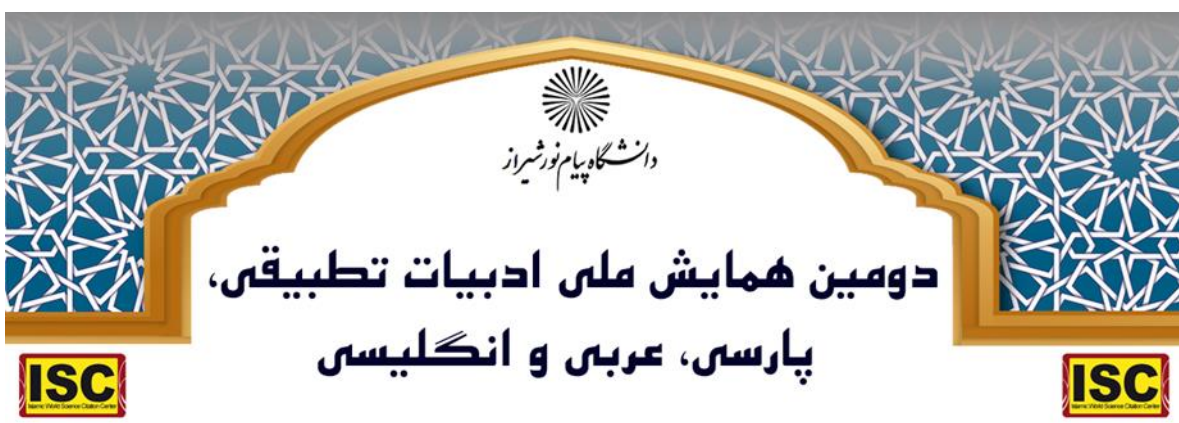
"Discrimination Against Muslim Women" (2008) examines the experiences of Muslim women who have immigrated to the United States and have had to wear a hijab or head cover and loose-fitting garments when they want to go out or meet a man (American Civil Liberties Union, para. 1). These women, it is argued, should be free to practice their religion and expect to be treated equally with other women. (American Civil Liberties Union, para.2). Numerous laws exist to protect Muslim women from various forms of oppression and to prevent them from being fired from jobs, schools, and other public places. (American Civil Liberties Union, para. 3).

### **3. Shifting from Palestine to Diaspora**

According to Faist (2021), diaspora is an old concept whose meaning has changed dramatically. Historically, it refers to the experience of specific groups such as Jews, but it has since expanded to include religious minorities in Europe, and it has seen variable inflation of applications since 1970. Diaspora has three characteristics: the first is related to the cause of migration and is rooted in Palestinian experience, the second is related to cross-border experiences of the homeland with destination, and the third is related to the integration of migrants or minorities into the countries of settlement (Faist, 2021, p. 12).

Diaspora refers to all Palestinians who live outside of their homeland, and it differs significantly from the community of Palestinians in exile. Furthermore, the term "refugee" refers to all Palestinians who were forced to flee their homeland against their will as a result of the conflict between Arabs and Israel (Dane & Knocha, 2012, p. 29). Rum who born in the refugee's camps, brought her experience in theme and style. Her novel depicts how seemingly powerless women revolute against their weaknesses trying to act more powerfully in their surroundings. While diaspora people themselves, the Jews, discovered their national homeland in Palestine in 1948, a trauma known as *Al Nakba*, took place for the Muslims in Palestine.

Diaspora arose from the shifting of territories through individuals who were isolated from their nations by political frontiers (Schulz & Hammer, 2003, p. 8). Therefore, diaspora is used as a symbol for the global migration, mobility or refugees; in addition to that, it demands transnational life and dispersion across the globe (Schulz & Hammer, 2003, p. 8). There have been three diasporic tendencies in the writing of Anglophone Arabs over the



previous centuries: *Al Mahjar*, Europeanized aspirants of the mid-1950s, and diasporic writers of the last four decades who have scattered around the world. (Al-Maleh, 2009, p. 12). The Arab diaspora includes not only Anglophone Arab writers, but also Arab-speaking emigrants in the West who have fled dictatorships such as the occupied Palestinian territories or the entire Arab world (p. 14). Diasporic space requires expansion because it allows the Arab intellectual, regardless of the linguistic tools at his/ her disposal, to raise the voice in protest or clarification (Al-Maleh, 2009, p. 14). A special emphasis is placed on Arab-American literature, which is intended to raise the political consciousness of the Arab-American community and to strengthen ties with the original country (Al-Maleh, 2009, p. 24). It has a lot to do with their collaborative efforts to combat denigration, particularly in the media. (Al-Maleh, 2009, p. 25). It is claimed that Arab-American writers are part of global mass population migrations following their exodus from their homelands, such as the Palestinian exodus from their homeland during Israel's wars in 1967, 1947 and 1973 (Al-Maleh, 2009, p. 12).

Gannam and Sciarcon (2020) discuss Arab-American women who play various roles in their society as generations' teachers and leaders; however, social constraints prevent them from experiencing their important roles in the community. Gannam and Sciarcon (2020) explain how Arab-American women can fulfill their roles as immigrants living in diaspora in American society (p. 31).

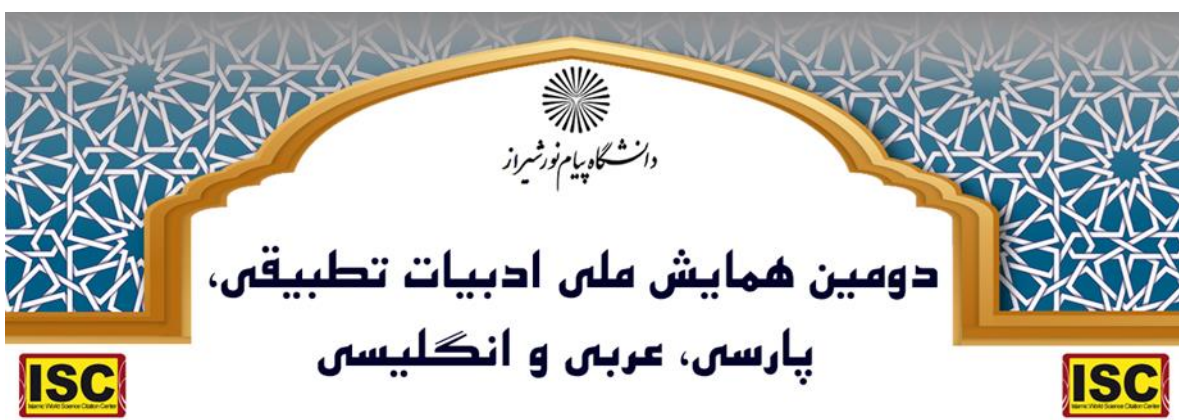
#### 4. Rum's *A Woman is No Man*

Etaf Rum was born in 1989 and raised in Brooklyn by Palestinian immigrant parents. To begin with, Rum aspired to be a lawyer but recognized that her family and community did not support her decision. Instead, she was expected to marry young, have children, and live her life as previous generations of women had. Rum's community desired to restrict her to a domestic display with little to no contact with the diverse outside world. Rum later married, had children, and then went to university. Rum studied philosophy and English literature before going on to earn a master's degree in American and British literature (Bader, 2019, para.1-2).

Rum wrote and published her first novel, *A Woman Is No Man*, in 2019. It was one of her most audacious endeavors, dealing with issues such as family loyalty, gender expectations, domestic violence, assimilation, honor, dishonor, and cultural continuity (Bader, 2019, para. 2). *A Woman Is No Man* expresses a viewpoint on the American immigrant experience that is not represented in the mainstream media: women are forbidden from leaving their homes alone or participating in American culture. Arranged marriage and having sons to carry on the name of the husband's family have been the most important issues in these women's lives in America. Their community is governed by Arab traditions and shaming, and women have no power. (Bao, 2019, para. 3).

*A Woman is No Man* is a novel about Isra Hadid, a member of one of the novel's three generations who wished to experience love, adventure, and not be bound by her family's traditions (Rum, 2019, p. 9). Rum's novel attempts to criticize the fictitious case of free life in America, as well as all the stories about women who live in America and enjoy freedom and choice and civil rights. The truth is that these protagonists who suffer from silence have no right nor freedom, and Rum attempts to give voice to their silence (Mikić, 2022, p. 4). Mikić (2022) explains how a woman who seeks a divorce and chooses the man she loves not only challenges men's authority by criticizing her husband, but is also considered a source of shame to her family (p. 3). Rum's *A Woman is No Man* is divided into three generations: the first generation adheres to the motherland's traditional roles, while the other two generations attempt to rebel against these roles; however, they are silenced (Mikić, 2022, p. 3)

Sari (2020) focuses on the patriarchal oppression of the main characters in Etaf Rum's *A Woman is No Man*, arguing that these women are placed behind the man in a patriarchal society, which affects their social stature (p. 3). The woman's place in *A Woman is No Man* is inside her house; she cannot leave her house alone; she should only



marry the man chosen by her family and raise their children; there is no education (Sari, 2020, p. 3). Such a woman believes she must remain silent in order to save herself; patriarchy has tortured her with its unjust roles (Sari, 2020, p. 3). Some of these women are fighting patriarchal rules in order to receive education and read books without the permission of their families, as well as to refuse proposals from men chosen by their families. (Sari, 2020, p. 4).

One of the four types of patriarchal tyranny is domestic violence, in which women are beaten by their husbands. They pass from the trauma caused by their fathers to that of their spouses (Sari, 2020, pp. 30-35). Some women have experienced domestic violence, but they are unable to report it to the authorities because they have been told to remain silent if they want to survive. In the patriarchal mode of production, women are expected to perform domestic tasks such as cooking and to rely on the family's head to meet their financial needs; additionally, arranged marriages are common at a young age in the patriarchal culture, and higher education is forbidden (Sari, 2020, pp. 26-36).

According to Yaiche (2020), many Palestinian writers in the diaspora try to convey their suffering and tragedies of their homeland by translating their works into different languages in order to strengthen their feelings and sense of belonging to their lands (p. 11). Rum transports her audience to the heart of Palestinian life in *A Woman is No Man*. The story is based on her own life and her family's history. Rum shifts the timeline between two ordinary Palestinian lives, conveying to readers the experience of Palestinian refugees in camps during the *Nakba*, or catastrophe (Yaiche, 2020, p. 11). Rum tries to point to the influence of patriarchal ideas on the life of women. She highlights the results of the disaster on Palestinian women who are changed because of this trauma.

*A Woman is No Man* is narrated from the perspectives of many women who try to project how the man is the center of their culture and how they struggle to obtain an independent life with freedom from patriarchal dominance. Rum's novel conveys those issues related to the society such as domestic violence, the preference of sons, arranged marriage, and cultural patriarchy. Thus, *A Woman is No Man* explains the difficulty of the Palestinian society which suffers from the lack of financial security, colonial oppression, and the domestic violence in poor families (Yaiche, 2020, p. 29).

## 5. A Glance at the Arab-American Woman

Both Rum and the first generation in *A Woman is No Man* (2019), are forced to leave their homeland, live a Spartan life in an over-populated family with parents, brothers and sisters, suffer from all types of oppression and deficiencies, like hunger, thirst, sickness and then immigrate to America. Rum wrote about her own life in a memoir to refer to every diasporic woman suffering from subjugation encouraging her to be strong and fight against gender inequality. Gannam and Sciarcon's "'Don't Forget:' The Life and Role of Arab-American Women in the Early 20th Century" (2020), discusses the circumstances of Arab-American writers. Arab-American women became an important figure in the American society contributing in the schools as teachers, in the hospitals, even in the space as an astronaut. This evidence reveals how Arab-American women contribute to the American identity. To study the historical evidences in Salhi's "Defining the Arab Diaspora" (2006), it will be understood that socio-political circumstances have a great influence on the writers' style and greatly affect their heroes and protagonists just like *A Woman is No Man*. In terms of the sex/gender distinction, we can benefit from Beauvoir's theories on the otherness of women, as discussed in Dini's *An Analysis of Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex* (2017) and Hengehold and Bauer's *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir* (2017). They claim that veiling and isolating women from the surrounding world means considering women as objects for the needs and pleasure of the men' men try to control women's life by assigning domestic responsibilities to them and threatening women because they have no financial independence, minimum education and social skills or societal experience.

This problem arises for Isra in *A Woman Is No Man*. Isra works at home and raises her four daughters, which consume all of her time and prevents her from reading her favorite novels, expressing her genuine desires, or sharing



her thoughts with others. Women of the novel are punished when they disobey patriarchal orders. For example, Deya and her sisters are prevented from finishing their studies or from leaving their house so that they would not meet any strange men. Thus, within the frame of patriarchal oppression, the protagonists' identities are obscured by the patriarchy's dominance, which seeks to subjugate women and ignore their active roles in the world.

De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1953) can illuminate how the female protagonists of Rum's novel try to regain their self-dependence and how they make serious efforts to be respected by gaining college education. For instance, Sarah escapes from her house to be free from the omniscient male dominance in her house. De Beauvoir believes that it is essential for women to use education as a weapon to fight the oppression of the patriarchal society and to be free from the patriarchy by a revolution against its rules.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

The current article provided a brief review of the theoretical outline related to some preparatory points about Beauvoir's 'second sex' with a focus on the Arab diaspora's impact on Rum's life as depicted in her novel, *A Woman is No Man*. Rum, a Palestinian writer, was born and raised in Brooklyn to a refugee family, but her life was hampered by the Arabic traditions and culture. Her plight was explained through her protagonists, who faced similar oppression from their families and their Arab society.

Rum tries to demonstrate that education is an important weapon for women to fight against all forms of patriarchal oppression, and that a woman with a job and source of income is stronger than other women. The protagonists in *A Woman is No Man* resist the borders imposed by their patriarchal societies; these patriarchal societies regard them as "other," in order to fulfill their desires of having respectful roles in social formation. In the case of Rum, women undergo diasporic dilemmas to accomplish their dreams. Thus, Arab-American women are oppressed even when they are in the land of freedom because they are controlled by the traditions of their homeland. They are subject to patriarchy, which forces them to obey unwritten rules. As a result, patriarchy is not limited to any specific geographical location; whether positioned in Arab countries or diasporas, women face subjugation. Through education and creative work, they can fight oppression.

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