

“A Woman of Few Words”

Etaf Rum’s Feminist Perspectives: A Characteristic Analysis

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Abstract

This paper dwells on the dealings of the primary characters from Etaf Rum’s novel A Woman is No Man. In Rum's novel, the experiences of three generations of women are alternated, and their family history is woven together across time and viewpoints. The primary focus of the book is on the experiences of Arab women who move abroad and settle in a society that values patriarchy and conservatism. In discussing gender inequality and social consciousness in contemporary culture, the paper emphasises the persistence of predisposition. The constant fear and insecurity of getting surpassed is not limited to men. The expectations from society and family are unbearable and have nothing to do with the opposite gender. The novel depicts the reality of womanhood and its sufferings. The search for self-realisation and identifying one’s potential has evolved tremendously. The liberty of women from diverse cultural backgrounds is gaining firm ground in modern times. Women have begun to recognise their own distinctiveness and consciousness in the wider community. The paper revolves around the importance of education. The only way to balance the scales and give everyone their proper place in the world is to be bold and aware. The main objective is to use writing and artistic endeavours to render her protagonist conscious of their true identities. Women are given self-reliance by feminism, which aids them in their continuous journey towards emancipation. Thus, Etaf's novelistic output provides a useful tool for identifying and confirming one's individuality and place in contemporary culture.

Keywords: Individuality, Consciousness, Womanhood, Acceptance, Patriarchy.

The modern era has revealed a great deal of restlessness in women's psyches, and this reverberation has been seen often, not just in India but also outside its borders. Women, now and then, have been looked down upon by not just society but their partners as well. The constant fear and insecurity of getting surpassed is not limited to men. The expectations from society and family are unbearable and have nothing to do with the opposite gender. An abundance of resources and intellectual contexts provide a clear definition of the obligation of living as a human being and genuinely understanding oneself. Despite this, it's essential to understand a woman's self-perception. This brings up the subject of subjectivity among women. For a very long time, female characters' goals and experiences with their bodies and minds have been shaped by the perspectives of men. There has been a radical shift in the way women think and

perceive how they live today. This study dwells upon the dealings of the primary characters from *Etaf Rum's* novel *A Woman is No Man*. The novel depicts the reality of womanhood and its sufferings. Striving for equal respect and hunger for establishing their own identity becomes a never-ending search. The core elements of feminism don't blend with society's notions. It's constantly evolving with time. The search for self-realisation and identifying one's potential has evolved tremendously. Women have realised the importance of enforcing their opinions in every sphere be it right or wrong. Being modern and being vicious are entirely different. To prove your identity, one need not break the institution of marriage or the social patterns. Feminism must proclaim reality. *"Women writers have been enthusiastically engaged in bringing about radical social change and demanding recognition of the woman's position and potentiality in the development of the human society"* (L.Sonia Ningthoujam).

Rum's novel hops between the experiences of three generations of women, weaving their family story over years and perspectives. The book mainly deals with what happens to Arab women who go to a foreign country and live in a culture characterised by patriarchy and a conservative mindset. The paper discusses the problem of gender inequality and social consciousness in modern society, stressing the predisposition that still remains. The controlling carer figure in the book, *Fareeda*, upholds the morals and ideologies she was taught as a child with her daughter and daughters-in-law. She mentions in one of the chapters that *"a woman would always be a woman"* (Rum, p-87). *Fareeda* insists that a woman should not read, be educated, or work; furthermore, that a wife's husband's physical and verbal abuse should be silently accepted; that women should never be seen in public without a male family member; that families will arrange marriages for their children at a very young age, and that women should have children until they have sons because daughters are useless, *"soon you'll learn that there's no room for love in a woman's life. There's only one thing you'll need, and that's sabr, patience"* (*Etaf Rum*). Rum's novel, *A Woman is No Man*, transgresses a vow of silence in the close-knit and frequently gated *Brooklyn* neighbourhood where she was raised by Palestinian Americans before moving away. Her protagonist, *Isra*, was born in *Palestine*, but shifts to *Brooklyn* when her family arranges a marriage to *Adam*, who runs a deli across the river in *Manhattan*. Finally, the plot shifts to *Deya*, the eldest of their four children, who recounts her mother *Isra's* story, which also begins with Rum's own arranged marriage and ultimately represents the stories of generations of women in that village. *"There weren't many choices for me as a kid growing up, and so marriage and motherhood were the paths that were prescribed for me,"* she explains. As it depicts the pain and disappointments of its protagonists as well as other unspoken themes, the novel draws criticism from the feminist movement. Psychological tensions are always present in the characters' psyches. The character's ethos is found in the coherence and comprehension of modernity and belonging. Through her protagonist, *Isra*, the author depicts the need to prove one's existence in current circumstances while also making a valiant effort to preserve the past. Only when knowledge is freely acquired can an individual maintain their sense of self and originality. Acknowledging that the giver and the receiver work together to form the perfect whole also signifies the awareness that there is always a way out of unhappy matters. None of them would be complete without each other. When there is a need to recognise and affirm this significant tie, every interaction becomes uncomfortable and unsatisfying. Therefore, one moves from consonance to discord, from affirmation to estrangement. A sense of progress gives way to disbelief. The intolerable distress that *Isra* undergoes on a daily basis is reflected in the hostility produced by deeply rooted societal prejudices and the unwillingness to accept changes through *Fareeda*. *"The boys are twice as needed, and the girls are twice as hard to raise,"* said one of them in the doctor's chamber. *Fareeda*

laughed and added, “*Exactly! I only have Sarah, and raising her in this country gives me nightmares. God help any woman who has to raise a daughter in America*” (Rum, p-90). The house is quite unsettling and claustrophobic since it never changes. Additionally, *Isra's* colourless outlook bothers her husband and progressively erodes their marriage. “*He was nothing like the men she'd read about in books. No faris, or prince charming*” (Rum, p-1193). The readers also found *Adam's* continual absence from home and his merciless demands at night to be stale and frustrating. *Isra's* character is tragic. She makes unthinkable sacrifices at the altar of her family, but all she receives in return is bitterness and contempt. *Isra* longs for her family to show her affection and admiration for all the wonderful things she does for them, but her hopes are dashed when she finds out that her mother-in-law and husband don't really care for her as “*love is realistic! Not for us*” (Rum, p-1193). She always feels alone and hopeless as she tries to find her own soul because of everyone else's apathy. *Etaf* portrays *Sarah* as a courageous individual who can meet her own needs. *Fareeda's* daughter, *Sarah*, fled the house to pursue her own goals and complete her further studies. *Sarah* resolves to set herself free and travel to America independently after realising how typical her mother is. Even from the perspective of a man, *Rum* eloquently captures the oppressive loop within the family's periphery. It's clear that both men and women struggle to uphold the traditional and cultural expectations of society while also meeting the requirements of the family. Even though *Isra* loved to read, she was no longer permitted to fulfil her most fundamental desire after getting married. “*A Thousand and One Nights. It's my favorite*” (Rum, p-1193). *Isra* admired the “*idea of a woman telling stories for her life*” (Rum, p-1194).

As *Isra's* daughter *Deya* leaves *Brooklyn* to find out more about her parents' reality in *Manhattan*, the narrative's state of transition evokes the reader's inherent shift in curiosity. *Deya* felt completely out of place among the other people.; “*she could see the judgement brewing in their eyes*” (Rum. p. 1193). *Deya* began to question her upbringing and beliefs because she was afraid of appearing strange among the other passengers from various walks of life. The inquisition about establishing her individuality and existence seemed futile. “*Surely she was the victim of an oppressive culture, or the enforcer of a barbaric tradition. She was likely uneducated, uncivilised, a nobody. Perhaps she was even a extremist, a terrorist. An entire race of culture and experience diluted into a single story*” (Rum. p-1291). Feminist readers are immensely drawn to the plot because it captures *Deya's* inner struggles and conflicts. Every now and then, *Deya* gets struck by compulsive thoughts of her restrictive and stifling future. *Deya's* existence is constrained by her grandmother's oppressive social context and patriarchal system. Her distinctive personality and identity surfaced to be distorted and vanished, “*A predictable life of duty*” (Rum. p-1311). The protagonist's inner perceptions are the focal point of a sensitive and inaccurate dramatization of marriage. Marriage seems to be a completely deformed, painful portrayal of life by *Deya*. In reality, the idea of marriage has changed completely. The relationship initiates the process of self-discovery and results in a new outlook on life. The root phrase “institution” connotes warmth and togetherness. As a reader, it aches to comprehend that *Deya's* thoughts are confined and obnoxious simply because of her grandmother's illiteracy and perverted outlook. In a conversation with *Deya*, *Sarah* mentions that there are “*families who firmly believe in educating their women, and I've met some who graduated from college and have good jobs*” (Rum.p-2029).

It is a well-known reality that women, who are mentally and physically capable of participating on par with society, are not only denied the liberty to exist, but they are also denied the right to express their feelings, thoughts, and pain. *Deya's* grandmother, *Fareeda* comes from the same school of thought, which

reflects the hardships and misery that she might have experienced, “*but this country is not safe for girls like you. I only want your protection*” (Rum. p-1888). *Sarah's* conversation with *Deya* helps us to comprehend the importance and potency of education. Wisdom imparts tremendous courage, “*courage will get you everywhere, so long as you believe in yourself and what you stand for. The only thing I know for sure is that you alone are in control of your destiny. No one else*” (Rum. p-2035).

The liberty of women from diverse cultural backgrounds is gaining firm ground in modern times. Women have begun to recognise their own distinctiveness and consciousness in the wider community. Women of the present day, like *Sarah*, are more opinionated as, “*it was one thing to read theoretical advice and another thing entirely to listen to the words come out of someone's mouth*” (Rum. p-2042). The artificially constructed gap between men and women, as well as the prejudice that follows from society's stereotypes, affect all individuals.

The plot also gradually turns to the main subject of education. The only way to balance the scales and give everyone their proper place in the world is to be bold and aware. Through her novel, *Etaf*, in her characteristic manner, conveys an array of feminine concerns, marital disharmony, and the miserable state of society. Education, resilience, and inner strength are necessary to overcome challenges, discover one's voice, and establish one's identity. The idea that every man-woman relationship should be viewed with suspicion and distrust is not the main focus of *Etaf*. Not every man abuses a woman, and not every woman is a sufferer. But, “*Sometimes I wish I could've been born a man, just to see how it feels. Men huff and puff about all the work they do to support their families. They have no idea what it means to be a woman in this world*” (Rum. p-917). While women have excelled for ages in a wide range of roles and areas of conduct, it is evident that women like *Sarah* and *Deya* have not yet reached the position of paramount significance in the prejudiced society. Regardless of society's level of progression, taboos will always be present. *Etaf's* novel is significant for its ability to illustrate to readers a state of becoming or advancement over the course of the journey. In the end, it's all about the journey, the sense of anticipation, and the need to adapt with time. Absolutely nothing in this society has an appropriate conclusion or closure. The journey never comes to an end. The story ends without any satisfactory conclusion or sense of closure. She doesn't come across as an unrestrained optimist or an outright pessimist. Her greatest goal has always been to hold up a mirror to life and reveal the silenced impulses of society in the process.

Etaf, does not envision a goal or strive for unceasing, unending stagnation. Her evolution and that of her protagonists are not yet accomplished, realising that they covered half the distance between conservatism and radicalism. Women are given self-reliance by feminism, which aids them in their continuous journey towards emancipation. Thus, *Etaf's* novelistic output provides a useful tool for identifying and confirming one's individuality and place in contemporary culture. She disagrees that a disrespected woman should relentlessly leave her spouse and home just to prove her ability. It is not necessary to force a woman to take on the roles of wife and mother. *Etaf* disagrees with unconventional conduct outside of the institution of marriage, especially breaking the rules of society. Her sense of wholesomeness and completion as a woman comes from her own acceptance. Her objective is to use writing and artistic endeavours to render her protagonist's conscious of their true identities. As a result, the characters obtain the courage to confront themselves and the people associated with them. They recognise their flaws and weaknesses, count their blessings and strengths, seize the chance to put together the pieces of who they are, and reform themselves into wholesome beings.

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