

A Critique of Etaf Rum's *A Woman Is No Man*

Andaleen H. Al-Khateeb
Jordan University, Jordan

Mahmoud F. Al-Shetawi
Jordan University, Jordan

Abstract—Literature of diaspora has lately been widely acknowledged since the diasporic generation embraces Homi Bhabha's belief that "nations are narrations". For them, displacement combines the notions of de- and re-inhabitation that are often regarded as related yet distinguishable processes of memory and identity formation. Not surprisingly, the displacement experience has given rise to their consciousness of the importance of constructing a counter-narrative. Most of the displaced resort to writing about their experience of migration or about the hardships they face in their new destination, especially in challenging the stereotypical image that has been "consciously" formed in the West. Arab- American diasporic women, in particular, have given rise to their voices in an attempt to overdue the injustice caused by the Western gaze to their cases. Literature has been their arena to call for presenting themselves and their own narratives to overdue the injustice caused by both the patriarchal and the Western discourse. Etaf Rum, an Arab- American writer, wrote a novel in 2019 depicting the lives of three generations of a diasporic family. She zoomed in the lives of the female characters while she was representing her own experience. The purpose of this paper is to examine whether Etaf Rum, in her 2019 – novel *A Woman is No Man*, corrected or reinforced the stereotypical image of Arab women constructed in the Western minds.

Index Terms—diaspora experience, Arab-American feminism, stereotypes

I. INTRODUCTION

Arab American women have occupied a controversial position in the mainstream literary discourse. They have ardently and passionately maintained to make their presence visible and their voices heard through their arts. Undoubtedly, their struggle has been intertwined with political, social, gender and ethnic discourses. In their attempts to foreground their presence, they have articulated their aims of breaking the dichotomy of male/female, Arab/American, Muslim/ non-Muslim and all of the other dichotomies that may restrain them. Also, they aim at negating the stereotypical image associated with Arab women as compliant, mediocre and inferior who are easily lumped.

Noticeably, the struggle of Arab American women intensified in their diasporic sphere where they found themselves also labeled by American Feminists as the ones who need to be "saved" from the oppression practiced on them. Though, ironically enough American feminists have long been suffering from similar imperial, patriarchal system that operates their movement and causes it to "be". Arab-American women found themselves excluded from the Feminist movements in America under the claim that their problems and demands are far from the American's. Okin (1997) believes in the imperfection of any other feminist movement than the American feminist. She justifies this by claiming that "the liberal Western culture had departed far from its patriarchal past than others" which causes its superiority to other minor, inferior cultures (p. 82). Okin's belief suggests that discrimination is also practiced among American feminism, as they believe of their superiority over any "Others". Not surprisingly then that American feminists have limited the problems of Arab and Arab American women to being "Harem", "covered" and "passive creatures"; their flaw is that they fall in what they stand against: categorization, limitations and exclusions. To provide a counter narrative, Arab- American feminists comment that the "main problems according to American feminists are - the veil, the harem and the female circumcises - [that] don't represent the only important issues for Arab and Arab- American women" (Abdelrazik, 2007, p. 3). While for Arab-American and Arab feminists, the concerns are larger and wider; they look forward to having "writing- woman" not "written- woman", to getting the right of education, equality, self- representation and freedom of thoughts. Hatem (1998) in her essay "The Invisible American Half: Arab American" states that the core of Arab American feminism is "to increase public awareness of issues affecting Arab American feminists and to eliminate negative stereotypes of Arabs" (p. 19).

Following this statement, many of Arab American women found themselves responsible to confront the proliferated and wide-spread prejudices and presuppositions "created" and curved in the Western mind; This has been done by correcting the image and representing a better understanding of Arab and Arab American women's pride of their culture, religion and the homes they belong to, while showing their loyalty to the land they migrate to, too.

Etaf Rum, an Arab American writer, published her novel *A Woman is no Man* in 2019 depicting the life of three generations of diasporic Arab American females. She explored the agonies and the turbulent experiences of being an Arab, Muslim woman in the United States. Hence, the aim of this paper is to investigate whether Etaf Rum, in her novel, negates or asserts the stereotypical image of Arab American women.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

American literature of the late 21st century has witnessed and undergone various changes by being more culturally inclusive; it starts to be written by writers of different cultures, ethnic groups and genders. This is largely due to the rising consciousness of the importance of knowing "the other". This understanding enriches the American literature and makes it more marketable. Not surprisingly, one of the profound influences on the literature in the USA traced back to women's movement of the 1970s which called for being invisible and accredited through entering the public sphere and stopping the "silencing" of women's voice. Women started to increase their publications because their writings can be critically studied as "intersections" between gender, race, gender, ethnicity and the notion of hyphenated, fluid identities. Thus, women produced literary texts that address crucial issues defining their existence and presence in culture. A reader notices that the question of identity, especially in the writings of the diasporic female, becomes a key arena of exploration. Abdelrazik (2007) elaborates, that "the issue of identity is further complicated in that gendered constructions of women differs among cultures and sub-cultures, thus, acquiring additional negotiations". However, she notes that, in spite of all the complications, the writings of Arab-American women "become the norm rather than the exception or the effaced" (p. X).

In a larger and wider scale, the experience of diaspora has revealed many navigated difficulties for the Muslim and Arab American writers. This tension and difficulty intensify in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks where they become visible and under the radar – as if they hadn't previously been part of the American cultural fabric. The attacks have urged the diaspora to construct "distinct identities" marked by being dynamic, fluid and hybrid. The state of in-between cultures is doubled when addressing Muslim Arab- American women, where women's writing should take a stand and be committed to the issues of women in the new sphere.

Many questions, concerning identities, arose and haunted the writings of Arab American female writers. These questions investigate what it means to be an Arab- American woman, who is not totally Arab neither fully American? What does it also mean to hold a hyphenated identity and not to belong? And what does it mean to "appear" as an Arab as lensed by the West? Some writers have furthered their writings to question their restricting Arab culture compared to the "seemingly" promising American culture, only to find out that women are culturally in- structured and whenever women go, they have to meet the expectations of their cultures in terms of appearance, duties, behavior and opportunities allowed. It is worth mentioning that Muslim Arab- American women's identity-definition is rather complicated in the Western culture due to their attempts to defy the stereotypical image of Muslim Arab women, who are seen as "veiled, uncivilized, uncultured, abused" creatures. These writers have asserted that cultural practices – worldwide- and the dominating imperial patriarchal gaze are the reasons for cultivating and nourishing such images, and not religious doctrines. It appears that the burden of Muslim Arab-American writers is a heavy one due to the intersections of the issue – as mentioned previously.

Arab- American women resort to writing as a form of resistance, Abdelrazik (2007) clarifies that "[women] use their writings to resist the East, with its fundamental, oppressive regimes as well as the West, which sees them as domesticated, and/or unenlightened other" (p. 2). Therefore, writing is seen as a double- resisting method. Moreover, their writing is a way to define what it means to "be" and to depict their "being" journey by creating what Homi Bhabha called a "third- space"; a place where "the negotiation of the incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existence" (p. 218). Bhabha envisages a cultural space in which cultures clash and differences are respected and advocated without any attempt to homogenize. Trinh T Min-ha (2005), whose work defies national borders and resists singular definitions, has developed Bhabha's concept of the "third-space" in her essay "Other Than Myself / My Other Self". She defines it as "not merely derivative of first and second [space]. It is a space of its own that allows the emergence of new subjectivities that resist letting themselves being settled ... It gives a rise to an elsewhere- within- here- there ... which is impossible to contain (p. 19). For her, the diasporic space is definitely a call to go beyond the fabricated cliché

Feminists, as many other right-callers, in their third space refuse categorizing, fixity and limitations. They prefer living in a fluid- third space where the dichotomies of (male/ female – Arab/ non-Arab – Muslim – Non- Muslim) are broken and structures are deconstructed. They celebrate difference and diaspora rather than roots which are rigid, static and fixating. They draw upon what Edward Said (2000), in his memoir *Out of the place*, described saying "I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of *flowing clusters*. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so many significance. These currents, like the themes of one's life, flow among during the waking hours, and at their best, *they require no reconciling, no harmonizing*. They are "off" and maybe out of the place, but at least they are always *in motion*, sometimes against each other *contrapuntally*. Yet, without any central theme... a form of freedom" (p. 245).

Feminism finds their third-space "a healing process" since they recognize that you can live as an Arab or as an American without losing your true self to one culture. Here, they resonate with Said's (1998) argument in *Culture and Imperialism* that "no one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian or woman or Muslim, or American are not more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment, are quickly left behind... just as human beings make their own history; they also make their culture and ethnic identities" (p. 330) and "the rendezvous" of the meeting culture would spring into a more distinct, powerful and fluid identity.

However, Arab Feminism in its way to establish a best understanding of what it means to be a feminist, has not neglected the fact that they are misrepresented not only by the phallogocentric discourse but rather by the American feminists who consider Arab and Arab-American women as "passive victims of patriarchal oppression who need saving" (Abdelrazik, 2007, p. 2).

The writings of Arab American women are means of resistance. Most of them have geared their efforts mainly to negate the stereotypical images of Arab women as passive, silent and unwilling. Arab American women have gained their position in the literary world especially in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks. It is felt that most female Arab writers wrote to build bridges with other cultures by telling their agonies which are "intensified with the ethnic profiling and the rising xenophobia towards Arabs and Muslims in the post 9/11/2001 United States" (p. xxxv). They have voiced their rejection of the "either- or" formula by showing pride of their own culture and their respect to the American society, which they have been for a long time part of its fabric. Among these writers is Leila Ahmed, who sets herself the goal to dismantle negative stereotypes associated with Arab Muslim women as submissive, negative and unwilling. Her writings show that women are in an active resistance to alter the "frozen misconceptions" and biased American lens. Alike, Diana Abu Jabir uses her pen to uncover the particularities of diasporic Arab women's own history; she shows pride in her own culture and enhances a positive image of Arab American women who are able to assert their own identities and negate the stereotypical negative image. She has also questioned some practices of people of her culture and of the American's culture as well. The writings of Zeina Zaatari, describe her own experience and her "eagerness not to fit the stereotype can translate into naïve attempt to make the other see you as a human being, a willingness to be the token Arab or the token Muslim" (Abdelhadi et al., 2014, p. 62). She feels the "brunt" of marginalizing and labeling their issues of concerns as well as the burden of defending one's identity. Hence, these Arab American writers and activists contribute to the project of humanizing Arab and Arab American women. However, some other female writers find it easier to assert and stress the stereotypical image of Arab women and to blame culture and religion for "the passive positions" women are put in. These writers resort to satisfying the Western taste in order to promote their writings despite the shortcomings of adopting the Orientalists' discourse. It is true that each community has its "questioned" cultural practices, but one cannot argue that these "minor" practices are representative and all-inclusive of the whole culture.

In short, Arab Feminists repudiate both the Western and the Eastern male constructions of controlling because they "know" better. Thus, Feminists embrace Spivak's (2008) urge for the subaltern to speak as an intellectual who has "circumscribed task which is must not disown with a flourish" (p. 104). Etaf Rum follows this urge and represents her own experience as an Arab American woman. She explores the territories of representing, voicing and owning one's narrative. In so doing, has Rum asserted or negated the stereotypical image of Arab American women?

III. A CRITIQUE OF A WOMAN IS NO MAN

The prologue opens with Deya, a third generation Arab- American diasporic female, who "was born without a voice, ... [she] didn't know [she] was mute until years later when [she] opened her mouth to ask for what [she] wanted and realized no one could hear [her]". This realization of Deya's own state has empowered her to tell what is used to be thought as an "ultimate shame". The novel is divided into three parts with different chapters and each chapter is entitled with a name of one of the three main female characters – each one of the characters stands for a generation: Fareeda, the grandmother, represents the first generation of the diasporic family, Isra represents the second generation and Deya stands for the third generation. In doing so, Rum has prioritized the female view points and geared her narratives towards the narratives of women.

As readers, we expect that Rum is reinforcing the stereotypical image of the Arab culture that oppresses and silences women. However, in an interview with the CGCC Amman, Rum clarifies that she intends to represent the three generations of only one family to assert that the life of this family doesn't necessarily represent the whole Arab community and culture. In so doing, Rum attempts to "voice" the unvoiced and to zoom in one of the practices of the Arab patriarchal system that she hopes her novel will put an end to by raising awareness of the sufferings of some women and men, too. This patriarchal system has not only bred Khalid and Adam, who used to beat their wives and submit to the societal expectations, but also it bred Fareeda, whose "shame of her gender is engraved in her bones". She is practicing power over the other members of her family – mainly Adam, Isra and Sarah to meet the expectations of her culture and to preserve it.

After Experiencing the trauma of Nakbah, which uprooted her from her homeland in Palestine, Fareeda survived the frustrations of the displacement by trying to keep her culture alive. She expects that all what she experienced back in her homeland is to be practiced in the Arab community in Brooklyn. Thus, she overloads her eldest son with responsibilities to run the family's firm neglecting his dream of becoming Imam. Also, she expects her daughters - in-law to be obedient and submissive. Moreover, she advocates arranged marriage and supports the male gaze of valuing women by appearance. However, since no one is purely one thing, Fareeda sometimes reconsiders her own understanding of culture, she "knew that no matter what any woman said, culture could not be escaped. Even if it meant tragedy... it took more than woman to do things differently. It took a world of them" (p. 88). This awakening, that Fareeda has experienced, is the hope to aspire women to stand up for their own rights. Fareeda's recognition of her "wrong" practices of culture shows her resilience and this made her "a true warrior". For a better understanding of

Fareeda's character, the reader has to link her behaviors to what she has been through in the refugee camp in Palestine where the "tragedy of Nakba bulging in her veins... She knew that the suffering of women started in the suffering of men... and it was this awareness of the hurt behind the hurt that had enabled her to see past Khaled's violence over the years and not let it destroy her" (p. 41). Fareeda, is by definition, a considerate character because she understands well the powerlessness, the weakness men felt after the Nakbah. She believes that what redeems Khaled's past actions is the setbacks he has undergone during the Nakbah. No wonder then that Rum depicts two parallel characters of Khaled. One in the memories of Fareeda, where he is presented as an abuser, a stereotypical male who favored sons to daughters and who believed that the only duty of a woman is to care for a family. Whereas, Khaled of the present time is someone who thinks that reading books can enlighten a girl's mind and that "what is wrong is forbidding books" not reading them. He also believes that there is no difference between sons and daughters. He even regrets failing his daughter earlier in her life. I think that Rum has had the responsibility of bringing all the dimensions of the characters, despite the difficulty of this mission, to assert that diasporic are fluid characters and that they are not easily categorized. Accordingly, one cannot label Fareeda or Khaled because women sometimes are oppressors and men are victims and vice versa.

Rum, in an attempt to reinforce her intention of shedding the light on one family not the whole community, has introduced the character of Umm Ahmed. Umm Ahmed, an Arab American Muslim woman, appreciates her daughters and values their presence in life. "What would we have done without our daughters? Fatima and Hannah do everything for me. I wouldn't trade them for thousand sons" (p. 64). She is also a considerate, helpful and a friendly mother-in-law. She helps her daughter-in-law and gets her served. She sympathizes with her because she is alone in America "you all remember how it felt coming to America? We came without a mother or a father. Just a husband and a handful of kids. Do you remember how it felt when our husbands went off to work in the morning leaving us alone? My daughter-in-law is here alone. The same way I was. The least I can do is help her" (p. 65). Moreover, when her eldest daughter Fatimah was getting divorced because of the ill-treatment she received, the whole family supported her decision and the only thing they cared about was their daughter's safety and her peace of mind. They didn't pay much attention to "reputation" in a cultural sense.

The difficulties that Arab- American women face are variant, starting from confronting both the private and the public spheres, to telling their stories of this confrontation. Telling one's story is definitely the power of female writers. Thus, they employ the iconic, symbolic figure of Scheherazade in their own writings and Etaf Rum is no exception. In the novel, Scheherazade is the role model for Isra; she likes the notion that this female character was capable of narrating stories for her life because this shows "strength and resilience of women. 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 (p. 44). By definition, "Scheherazade represents one of the strongest and cleverest heroines in world literature. Scheherazade triumphs because she owns endlessly inventive and artistically creative talent... the spirit of Scheherazade persists in Arab-American women who use their art and storytelling as a powerful means of resistance, naming their experience and teaching others how to heal and to kill the beast of doubt in them" (Abdelrazik, 2007, p. 104). This has empowered Isra, towards the end, to sacrifice herself in order to save her daughters' future and to open the door for them to pursue their dreams. Her eldest daughter, Deya, learns the lesson of the importance of self-love and telling one's story. Deya who describes herself as voiceless and mute, ends up telling her own story and owning the narratives of the three generations. Not only does Deya function as a transitional, and a voiced character but also as a character to defend Arab Feminism against American Feminism. She alludes to "The Yellow Paper", written by Alice Walker, to clarify that not only Arab women suffer from cultural expectations and discrimination, but American women as well. Rum, in her novel, allows Deya to read "The Yellow Paper"; one of the most influential, radical stories in the archive of American feminism. In her reading of "The Yellow Paper", Deema Ammari (2015) examines the "Bed Rest" as "an oppressive psychological method which carried negative connotations ... being exclusively practiced on women" (p. 2). In "The Yellow Paper", the protagonist is in the status of "awakening" as she realized being imprisoned within the patriarchal patterns and this awakening is "abnormal" according to the social norms as this indicates a rebel against and a question of who is to determine what is normal and what is not, what is accepted and what is not, what is "feminine" and what is "masculine". A threat that would shake the solidity of the ground on which the patriarchal system stands. Hence, a treatment should be offered to "mad" women, who attempt at scrambling the image of women as "Angels of the House" "to enter the public sphere. This treatment is known as "The Bed Rest" for women. In *A Woman is No Man*, Fareeda accused Isra of being possessed and of suffering from mental disorder only because she started to question her status in the world. It seems that Rum wants, by allowing Deya to read "The Yellow Paper", to stress that the concepts of mental health and normality are part of the constructed norms and values which are read in the light of culture. For centuries, madness and instability have been gendered and have been metaphorically considered a female attribute. Throughout history, images of mental illness in women send the message that women are weak, dangerous, and require containment. These images are destabilized by women represented in cinema, visual arts and literature for better understanding of "madness" as a state of in-between that women want to overcome. Doing so, Rum writes back to the American Feminists as well as to the patriarchal system that confines Arab American women.

Being a Muslim has intensified the agonies of Arab American women, and Rum has depicted the inconvenience Isra and Deya have gone through because of their veils. For instance, Isra has been advised not to wear her hijab in a public

sphere because she would be easily recognized as an outsider and this would cause her problems. Years later, her daughter Deya confronts the public sphere and the American society wearing hijab and she was easily pointed. Definitely, Rum was writing in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks that have escalated the difficulties that minorities have endured.

Finally, the doctrines of Islam have been long accused of motivating the sufferings of Arab American women and Rum finds it necessary to defend Islam and to provide others with a better authentic image of Islam. She presented Brother Hakeem, the teacher of Islamic studies, who asserts that "mothers carry the entire family- arguably the entire world – on their shoulders. That's why heaven lies under their feet. That is how we are told to treat women in the Quran" (p. 141). Rum, undeniably, reminds us of the important position women have in Islam and how the doctrines of Islam are more respectful to women everywhere. She even hints to the idea that daughters are means of salvation.

IV. CONCLUSION

Though Etaf Rum has presented a stereotypical image of Arab women, she has successfully maintained to enter the dark territory and to make her female characters speak up their minds and decide on their future. She has not presented a black- white story because no culture or nation is purely one thing. She has made the transition in the first generation's attitude an opening door for the third generation to search for their own identity and to narrate their own stories. A female character at last owned the narration and was able to tell her own story and this is definitely the value of self-representation.

REFERENCES

- [1] Adulhadi, Rabab. , Alsultany and NAber (Eds.) (2014). *Arab and Arab American Feminism*. Syracuse University Press.
- [2] Amal T. Abdelrazek. (2007). *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossing*. Cambria Press
- [3] Ammari, Deema. (2015). "Bed Rest' Challenged: A Liberating Treatment in "The Yellow Wallpaper"". In *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies*. Vol.15, 2014, (28-30).
- [4] Bhabha, H.K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.
- [5] Bhabha, H.K. (1990). *Nation and Narration*. Routledge.
- [6] Foucault, Michel. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Alan Sheridan (trans.). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- [7] Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. (2010). *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Stories*. Washington: Pacific Publishing Studio.
- [8] Hatem, Mervat. (1998). "The Invisible American Half: Arab American (1) Hybridity and Feminist Discourse in the 1990s." in <http://www.haussite.net>. November, 2022.
- [9] Kahf, Mohja. (2003). *E-mails From Scheherazade*. University Press of Florida.
- [10] Okin, Susan. (1999). *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*. Princeton University Press. (7-14).
- [11] Rum, Etaf. (2019). *A Woman is No Man*. Harper Collins Publisher.
- [12] Safran, William. (1991). 'Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return'. *Diaspora*, 1(1), 83-99.
- [13] Said, Edward. (2000). *Out of Place: A Memoir*. New York: Vintage Books.
- [14] Said, Edward. (2000). *Reflections on Exile and other literary and cultural essays*. Granata Publications.
- [15] Salvianny, Frisky and Eka Nurcahyani. (2020). Women's Resistance Towards Opression in Etaf Rum's A Woman is no Man. In *OKARA*. Vol.14, No.2. (239).
- [16] Shehabat, Abdullah. (2011). "Contemporary Arab- American and Middle Eastern Women's Voices". Dissertations. <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertation.464>. October, 2022.
- [17] Spivak, G. C. (1988). "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.) Chicago.
- [18] Steven, Slaita. (2007). *Arab American Literary Fiction, Culture and Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [19] Zaatari, Zeina. (2014). "In the Belly of the Beast: Struggling for Nonviolent Belonging". In *Arab and Arab American Feminism*. Syracuse University Press, (60- 77).

Andaleen H. Al-Khateeb: was born in UAE in 1985. She is a PhD student of English Language and Literature in the School of Foreign Languages, Jordan University. She received her MA. degree in English Literature from Jordan University in 2011.

She is currently an English Language teacher in Jordan and she worked as a lecturer and coordinator at Najran University in KSA. She is interested in Postcolonial studies, Literature of Diaspora and Arab Feminism.

Mahmoud F. Al-Shetawi: was born in Jordan in 1954. H received his PhD from The University of Illinois, UrbanaChampaign in 1983.

He is currently a full professor in the School of Foreign Languages, Jordan University, Jordan. His research interests include Modern Literature, Drama and Poetry, Post-colonial studies.

He has held many memberships in a number of editorial boards and academic societies like Member of the editorial board of Jordan Journal for Modern Languages and Literature, 2007-2011, and 2016 until now Associate editor, International Journal of Arabic-English Studies (IJAES), 2014- until now Member of the editorial board of Jordan Journal of the Arts, 2007-2011 Member of the editorial board of Abhath al-Yarmouk (Literature and Linguistics), 2004-2006 International Shakespeare Association (ex-member) Member of Committee of Correspondents/ World Shakespeare Bibliography Member of Jordanian Translators' Association International Comparative Literature Association (ex- member).