

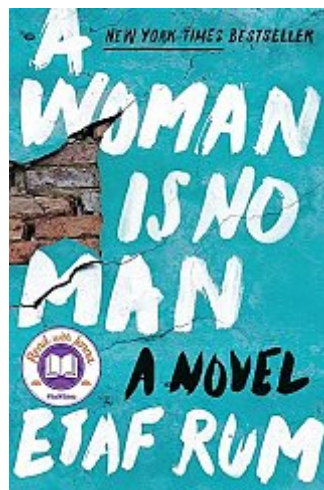
# In Which Language Do Palestinian Women Live?

Thursday 2 January 2025, by [SAMANTA Samiparna](#) (Date first published: 20 December 2024).

***Re-reading Etaf Rum's 'A Woman is No Man' in the current context reminds us that Arab-Palestinians have lived with painful, disfiguring histories of displacement for generations now.***

Etaf Rum's story begins in the 1990s in the hilly countryside of Birzeit – flocked by olive trees and mulberry bushes, the hometown of the Hadids. We follow the life of Isra Hadid, a young Arab-Palestinian girl, who is married off at 17 and travels from Birzeit to Brooklyn to live with her husband and his parents.

We are led into the book with an emphatic confession: “I was born without a voice, one cold, overcast day in Brooklyn, New York.” The innate ‘condition’ of voicelessness of the women of Palestine is assiduously developed throughout the novel, as Rum takes it upon herself to voice her silence, and that of countless other women. In hearing Rum speak, we are faced with troubling realities of patriarchy, of traumas of wars and ‘refugees’, of lives in ‘exile’, of states and borderlessness, of ‘homes’ free of occupation and blood.



Etaf Rum's  
A Woman is No Man,  
Harper (2019)

Yacob's family was forced to evacuate their seaside home when he was 10 years old, as Israel invaded Palestine. Yacob's daughter, Isra, a brooding young lady in love with folktales and the idea of love, grew up in Birzeit, close to a cemetery, on a plot of land that no one laid claim to.

At a very young age, Isra's optimism that accompanied her migration to America- “land of the free” was promptly overtaken by a quiet resignation. We meet her husband, Adam, who runs a deli in Brooklyn and comes home drunk most nights, only to violate her. The burden of loveless marriages,

relentless chores, and a near-captivity express themselves in fiercely diverse ways among the women of the household.

Fareeda, Adam's mother, chooses to look away at Isra's wounds as she sends silent prayers for the arrival of ample grandsons, while Sarah, Adam's rebel sister, brings her Kafka and *Lolita*.

We are faced with a world wherein marriage, shame and motherhood reign supreme. With a haphazard timeline alternating between Birzeit and Brooklyn, the book reverberates with an aching feeling of anguish, but also, of wisps of hope, dreams of an unlived life, of secret ambitions and longing for freedom.

In sketching three generations of Arab-Palestinian women, refugees and immigrants from an undefined land, we learn that the book is partly autobiographical. A feisty Sarah's life closely mirrors that of Rum's, who, like Isra, migrated to New York from a small village in Palestine.

The women in Rum's narrative are complex and layered, while the men seem linear; broken as they are by the *Nakbah*, poverty and dogmatism. The women – caught up in the banality of domesticity, motherhood and chores – are lonely, joyless and tired beings.

As they silently suffer through multiple childbirths, taunts of the fastidious mother-in-law, and abuses of their husbands, one is left wondering: Why are all the Arab women in Rum's narrative uniformly powerless? Why do we witness recurring horrors of deep-seated internalised patriarchy? Can there not be women like Scheherazade – the captivating storyteller of *One Thousand and One Nights*, that Isra so fondly treasures, who seamlessly weaves story after story to save Muslim women from the evil king Shahriyar? In a world that feeds off typecasting Arabs as bigots, conservatives and extremists, how do we escape the stereotype of violence and victimhood? And more dangerously, what if the reality is sometimes indeed a single story? What if there are no possibilities of defiance, even if our Western-educated, feminist-self desperately seeks to find signs of resistance and choices?

Rum masterfully takes us through these questions as she complicates the narrative. Towards the end, the women break their oppressive anatomy of silence that held them captive for generations. Here, we are confronted with runaway mothers, young women-rebels, who turn down potential suitors and marriage offers, as they make their way into colleges. Eighteen-year-old Deya, Isra's first-born, is an outlier. Just like Sarah who runs a bookstore and lives alone without a "male protector" in the crowded city of Brooklyn, Deya loves to read, stalls marriage plans and dreams of a life unlike her mother's. And herein, the single-story breaks down.

Arab-Palestinians have lived with painful, disfiguring histories of displacement for generations now. Historians have dwelled on the fateful consequences of the 1917 Balfour Declaration and the eventual *Nakba* as Palestinians saw themselves inexorably turning into strangers in their own land. In Rum's story, Adam craves a 'return' to his homeland. However, 'return' is fraught with a deep emotional turmoil.

### **An all-encompassing captivity**

As Peter Gatrell writes in his book, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, the persecution and displacement of European Jews and Palestinians after the World War II can only be understood as a struggle between two memories – through the shared sense of being victimised, and their dual aspiration to seek restitution through 'return.' Rum paints an evocative pastoral landscape of grape vines and hill-lined terraces to remind us of a 'home' that is no more; of an "absentee love" that wells up within.

One cannot help but reflect on how an all-encompassing captivity framed the lives of most Arab-Palestinian women. Their territorial captivity, marked by the historical reality of Occupation in Palestine; their domestic captivity of shame and silence that defined their immigrant experience in Brooklyn. And I wondered: How important is it for one to belong? To a land, to a loved one, or yourself.

As the violence of the *Nakbah* resonated with the conjugal and emotional violence that scarred these women, I hoped to wish away the rootlessness of countless Arab-Palestinian women abandoned by the world and possessed (a haunting reference to ‘possession’ by *djins* that hangs loosely) by the dominant power of Israeli military and Arab masculinity. And yet, like Scheherazade’s extraordinary stories, these women, stuck in a muzzled existence, puncture the single narrative of oppression, war, and inequality with their uncatalogued acts of rebellion.

In his memoir, *Out of Place*, Edward Said, one of the most eloquent proponents of Palestinian self-determination, writes, “everyone lives life in a given language.” What is the language that the women of Rum’s narrative, and the innumerable displaced women of Palestine, live their lives in?

If we look beyond the binary of agency and victimhood, a whole new world emerges. In this world of liminality, there is no performative resistance. This is no outright act of revolution. Yet, through their emotive spaces, dreams, desires and defiance, the women craft their language. By emphasising everyday acts of resistance and the depths of silence, Rum’s novel participates in the construction of a new Arab-Palestinian female identity. As Bashar-al-Assad’s regime comes to a historic end in Syria and displaced refugees pledge to return home, one wonders if we are perpetually defined by the desire to *belong* across anxious borders and identities.

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