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Re-thinking Arab Female Gender Identity in Etaf Rum's *A Woman Is No Man*

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Abstract

This paper explores the theme of Arab female gender identity in A Woman Is No Man by Etaf Rum, a contemporary Palestinian American author whose thought line is still in progress. It investigates the author's call to re-think and redefine this identity by breaking the walls of silence and liberating females from male-dominated patriarchal practices. She launches a critique against the reductionist view that sees women in terms of their bodies and marginalizes their brains. She considers this reductionist act pure objectification. Gender fairness, according to her, requires taking into account their intellectual abilities. The key question this study addresses is how Arab females' gender identities are established, maintained and transformed in terms of physical appearance, thinking modes, behavior patterns, gender roles, family responsibilities and life styles. This study is theoretically inscribed within the feminist framework. The feminist ideas of Simone De Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Denis Diderot and Helene Cixous have been of great relevance to the analysis of the novel. In terms of methodology of analysis, this paper is primarily based on a close examination of the text, taking into account the author's socio-cultural, ethnic and historical background and the geo-political, cultural and economic transformations of the world where she lives.

Keywords: gender identity, Arabs, female muteness, objectification, re-thinking, reductionist

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1. Introduction

A Woman Is No Man by Etaf Rum represents literature written on the experiences of Arabs and Arab-Americans, namely females. As an author descendant of Palestinian origins, she presents a female perspective on one of these experiences. This novel can be considered a fictionalized autobiography, given that it mirrors a huge part of her life as a woman. She provides a picture about the cycle of oppression and injustice from which females suffer. This novel represents her voice against subjecting these females to gender bias and discrimination. She lets out a cry of rebuff and resistance against the subjugation of women. She considers gender fairness an essential prerequisite to the redefinition of Arab female gender identity.

In one of her interviews conducted by Scott Simon on March 2nd, 2019, she talks about her suffering in an environment that limits women's role to the house chores and children education: "I maintained my education despite the pressures around me to stay home and take care of my kids, and slowly, as I educated myself… I began to realize my place in the community and the cycle of trauma and oppression that I [would] be giving my daughter—if I don't speak up for what I want to accomplish with my life, if I don't stand up for myself." (Simon) In this interview, she makes a clear reference to her life as a Palestinian female restricted by people around her. She plucks up the courage to challenge all the gender-based constraints and pressures around her to abstain from studying and learning.

This novel can be considered a fictionalized autobiography as it reflects important aspects of Etaf's own life. she questions the burden of tradition on Arab female gender identities in general and hers in particular. *A Woman Is No Man* can be seen as an invitation to re-think the gender identity of Arab and Arab-American females and to stop looking at them in terms of their bodies. Their ideas and views should also count. The implication of this is that reconsidering this issue of Arab female gender identity necessitates striking a balance between their physical appearance and mental abilities. Reducing their existence and worth to their bodies is mere objectification and mechanization.

Etaf castigates the male-oriented patriarchal mindsets in the Orient for marginalizing and silencing women just because of their gender. An acceptable female gender identity, according to her, should regard women as intellectually productive members in their society and not as machines that produce children, look after them and do the housework. She

introduces reading as an important instrument to empower women and enable them to see their worth inward and not outward. With reading, they can better understand what it really means to be a female, and it's this understanding which can help them formulate their identities far away from the dictates of their male counterparts.

2. Female muteness

In *A Woman Is No Man*, as opposed to Arab men who seem to cherish a sort of unchained liberty, the main Arab female characters are silenced and sidelined. They are presented as obedient and subaltern. The major character of the story, Isra, is muted, just like her mother. They are both presented as laborious females who cook dinner, roll grape leaves, stuff spaghetti squash, simmer pots of lentil soup, wear hijab and thobe to hide their bodies and pray five times a day (*A Woman Is No Man* 11). This is what the society expects of them. They are socio-culturally required to silently accept these roles. Etaf rejects this kind of expectations and roles.

Isra never verbalizes her inner feelings and thoughts. Even when it comes to her marriage, she does not have a say. She has to turn into a stone. She is petrified by the gaze of those around her. Her parents, namely her father, Yacob, treat her as though she were merely a lifeless and speechless object. Without taking her opinion into consideration, he compels her to marry a man she does not know. Aware of her father's aggressive nature, she does not perform any act of resistance. She simply succumbs to such oppressive and patriarchal norms. She cannot go beyond the barriers set by these norms and conventions. She lives within a socio-cultural system that puts her on hiatus because of her gender identity.

Etaf provides an image about how girls like Isra in the Arab world are denied the right to use their voices and speak out their minds. They have to suffer psychologically and socially because they are females. They have to abide by a certain patriarchy-based logic that sees the relationship between sex and gender as a matter of determinism. A biologically designated female is determined to perform the roles of a traditional woman as assigned by the socio-cultural systems of the place where she lives. Isra's biological sex governs her gender identity as a woman. She is muted basically because of her sex and then gender. Once her sex is known, her roles as a woman, wife and mother are also known before she even grows up. The author is critical of such a view because it's devoid of justice, equality and free will.

The image held about seventeen-year-old girls like Isra is that their role is to stay at home, pin their hijab properly and wait for a husband to come (Etaf 12). Their life is pre-determined. They have no free choice or will. There is a sort of determinism set by a bunch of traditions and customs that females have to abide by. The main role is summed up in the words of Isra's mother: "A woman belongs at home" (12). This makes women go through mixed feelings of longing and fear. They want to look beyond the geographical boundaries of their homes and villages, but they are afraid of what they might find there. They are afraid of losing the security they have under the custody of their fathers. They have to learn their roles by heart: to serve and entertain men and their guests. They have to act just like their mothers. These roles are generational; they are inherited from one generation to another. Etaf's novel is a revolt against these roles.

This biological view of women is reminiscent of Denis Diderot who uses the architectural metaphor of the convent to describe women as prisoners of their sex and of a cruel biological determinism (qtd. in Guiragossian 71). Nature controls the destiny of women and determines their social position. Etaf launches a critique against this fatalist conception of the female gender. Her message is that it's high time to break with it and give women the chance to build their own gender identities, using their own commonsense, logic and free will far away from the dictates of males. Identity, as Frith puts it, is "mobile, a process and not a thing, a becoming and not a being" (109). It's not something that is exclusively given, but socio-culturally constructed.

Etaf builds on the story of Isra to criticize what De Beauvoir calls "a world of men" (qtd. in Bauer 46). They both stand up against looking at females as the second sex and males as the first one. Etaf's novel is thus a call for gender equality which cannot be achieved without lending females the right to voice out their thoughts and make their own free choices. Men and women should be regarded as equal partners. They should not be conceived in hierarchical terms as it is the case with Isra, her mother and Yacob in their Palestinian society. He has the upper hand and they are weak and helpless creatures. Etaf speaks up against this kind of patriarchal hierarchy.

Etaf considers the issue of female muteness in relation to gender identity which is not only a biological product but a socio-cultural construct as Judith Butler asserts in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Thus, the gender identity of females like Isra is not

related only to their biological and physical structure but also to the patriarchal nature of the system that dominates the society where they live. They are hushed because of this system. If the Palestinian society were matriarchal, Isra would have a different social position and her voice could be heard. This is to imply that one's own understanding of gender is closely tied up to the existing system and interests of the dominant power, which is, in this case, men. Etaf criticizes this patriarchal system which seeks to silence and sideline females because of their gender.

Female muteness can be considered in relation to Michel Foucault's definition of power: "anything that tends to render immobile and untouchable those things that are offered to us as real, as true, as good" (Foucault and Michael Bess 1). Females like Isra and her mother are required to be conformists who regard what is offered to them by men like Yacob as indisputable because patriarchal systems give power to men. Any revolt against these systems is a dereliction of social duty and a call for anarchy for males who are the infallible and strong superiors. Etaf, through the story of Isra, calls for this revolt and implies the necessity to break silence.

Female silence can be seen as a discursive strategy to maintain gender inequality which disparages women and relegates them to a subordinate position and, in the meantime, ensure the continuity of male-dominance. They should not say a word even when their husbands yell at them. Yacob shouts at his wife and got "furious that she hadn't served the chai in the antique set of teacups they saved for special occasions," afraid that his guests would think that they "are poor!" (Etaf 13). She does not utter a word and shows any reaction, "quietly retreating to the kitchen" (13). If she reacts to him, it means that he is no longer powerful. He gets his power from her silence. While she is busy preparing the food with Isra, he chuckles with his male guests in "the sala" (13). The "sala" or living room is for males and the kitchen is for females. In other words, cooking is for women and eating is for men. Etaf expresses her rejection of this kind of role distribution and considers it unfair.

Female silence is highly required even when it comes to such important personal events as marriage. Girls like Isra are just guests in their parents' homes, waiting for their turns to get married: "A daughter [is] only a temporary guest, quietly awaiting another man to scoop her away, along with all her financial burden" (13). The word

burden is very significant as it shows how females are regarded in the Palestinian society according to Etaf. They are likened to something heavy, hard to bear and better get rid of. The best way to do away with it is marriage. They are made to accept their destiny in silence. Marriage as a moment of love, happiness and family construction turns into an occasion to hush women, treat them as voiceless entities and expel them from their parental home.

Females have to voicelessly cook and wash their brothers' clothes (14). Their defiance results in their punishment. They are more servants than daughters and sisters. They are prepared for their marital life to serve their husbands silently. They should be ready for any kind of treatment from their husbands. They can be whipped. If they disobey their fathers or husbands, they can be described as "sharmoutas" (whores) (14). Speaking out for their rights is unwanted, and one of the strategies to stop it is the association of any female tendency to lead a free life with prostitution. Breaking the walls of silence can turn them into morally bad girls. According to the dominant patriarchal system, their silence means that they are well-behaved. Educating them on silence is a socio-cultural requirement.

Etaf is trying to draw attention to how women in oriental societies are not allowed to express their feelings, including the bad ones like disappointment, anger and frustration. They have to be patient and keep silent even when they get beaten. Isra talks about her father being the boss who determines everything in the house and who beats his wife when she displeases him (Etaf 17). She remembers the sight of her mother being beaten "over an undercooked piece of lamb" when she was just five years old (17). Isra realizes that she has come to "a world where not only children were beaten but mothers, too" (17). Etaf sees that revolting against normalizing the beating of women is an important step forward to help them establish a strong identity that guarantees their freedom and dignity as human beings.

Silence is also a must when a man comes to see a girl for marriage. Isra silently peeks at her mother, who sits "in her usual way: head bowed, eyes studying the red Turkish rug in front of her" (14). Isra has been taught not to look at a man; thus, she keeps glancing at the pattern of the rug: "A proper girl never lays her gaze on a man" (14). Etaf criticizes this male-oriented view of marriage. She seeks to show that it's unfair to give men the right to see girls they want to marry while these girls are denied the same right. Girls are expected to bow their heads, keep silent and see what their destiny has in store for them.

Their eyes are also silenced. They should stop their physiological function in this kind of situations and focus on such things as carpets.

Isra has to deal with silence even in her first face-to-face sitting with Adam, her husband, on the balcony, which puts her in a state of unease. His silence gives her trouble: "There was something in his eyes that troubled her. An intensity. What was it? In the glassy tint of his gaze, she could see the days of the rest of her life stacked together like pages. If only she could flip through them, so she knew what was to come" (20). She starts thinking about the reasons behind his silence. She thinks that perhaps he does not like her appearance, remembering how her mother describes her eyes as small and dark, jaw as angular, nose as long and pointed and forehead as large (20). She has never been called beautiful. Male silence controls the female one. His silence makes her perplexed as to what to say and do.

Female silence is generational as it must go from one generation to another. To clarify, Isra is worried about her dislocation to the West and needs someone to reassure her that everything will be alright. She asks her mother: "what will happen to me in America?" (Etaf 16). The first answer she gets is silence: "but mama was silent" (16). The mother tells her daughter that she must "be thankful" as "God has presented [her] with a good opportunity. A good future in America. Better than this" (16). This implies that going to America is a golden occasion for girls like Isra to break silence, develop a different gender identity and unchain themselves from shackles of traditions.

Their gender identities are associated with obedience, bowing, silence and deprivation in the patriarchal society where they live. Etaf considers this unfair and discriminatory and calls for gender equality and justice. It's high time to re-think the female gender identity in male-ruled societies. Girls are human beings, just like their male counterparts, and thus, they should be treated with some respect and given the right to voice out their feelings and ideas far away from the dictates of their fathers, brothers or husbands. Making their voices heard should be an integral part of their gender identity. They can openly say "no" when they are unsatisfied with something. Things should not be imposed on them.

The feminist perspective from which Etaf addresses this issue is founded on the idea of breaking silence and cherishing the right to make free choices and have a say in a number of matters, including their personal affairs. The author is trying to impart the message that the time of female muteness is over. Their silence means their absence and inexistence. In the words of Shetty

(37), "silence is a presence of great nothingness." This implies that silence reduces the existence of females to nothingness. Breaking the veil of silence means taking them from the state of nothingness to being and becoming. It also means having the courage to face male subjugation.

Etaf creates the character of Sarah to exemplify breaking silence. She juxtaposes between the gender identity/roles forced on Sarah by her family and that she chooses out of free will. Sarah refuses to live under the shadow of man, so she breaks up with her conservative family. She decides to live as an independent being and construct her own sense of her gender far away from her parents. By escaping, she tries to get rid of the traditional roles and rules imposed on her. Thanks to her resilient mindset, she manages to open a bookstore to earn a living. In this way, she revolts against her feminine biological structure and succeeds to work outdoors, just like her male counterparts.

Female muteness is linked to lack of insecurity in *A Woman Is No Man*. Isra is worried about her marital life in the USA and many vexing questions come to her mind. She starts making comparisons between Oriental and Occidental culture. She learns from the news and the school library that "Western culture [is] not as rigid as their own" (Etaf 13). America for a conservative girl like Isra is a liberal place, so she wonders how she can adapt to it. She keeps thinking about her ambiguous future and how her life would turn with a man in a different home and country. She starts wondering about the way her husband will look at her: will he love her? How many kids will she have? And what are their names?

Etaf Rum presents reading as a source of power and a means of resistance against female subjugation in the Palestinian society. Thanks to reading, Isra has moved from being totally coward and submissive into becoming audacious and sturdy. She acquires such force of character. As she embarks upon reading the novels given to her by Sarah, she develops a new worldview. In the same way in which Rum celebrates the act of reading, the post-structuralist feminist, Helene Cixous ascribes much value and importance to the act of writing. In her essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa", one of the pioneers of the second wave of feminism suggests that men, across history, have produced literature as a discursive strategy to maintain the same state of affairs and to misrepresent and exclude women. For this reason, she invites women to make use of writing as a means of self-representation and liberation.

Only in this case, Cixous believes, women can challenge the existing patriarchal system:

> I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement. (Cixous 875)

Reading, just like writing, is a way of female emancipation. When women read, they can write and break the walls of silence. They can also develop their intellectual abilities, guarantee their emotional stability and show that they have ideas and feelings just like their male counterparts. The key point Etaf seeks to argue for is that female education is a must to achieve gender equality. The ability to read and voice out views and thoughts should be essential components of female gender identity. When females are denied the right to read, they are muted and sidelined. Reading is not just a pastime activity, but a tool of female freedom.

The importance of female education has been raised by such authors as Virginia Woolf who has related women's ability to write fiction to their autonomy: "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf 7). "Room of her Own" is the title of an essay she published in 1929. The title reflects this autonomy. The relationship between this and Etaf's novel is that they both see reading and writing, two intellectual and cognitive activities, as a way to get to autonomy and break silence against the inferiorizing patriarchal systems. If women continue to be dependent on men, female muteness will persist. This is the message Etaf possibly seeks to impart. Female gender identity should be founded on the ideas of autonomy and intellectual activity.

Seeing women as intellectually handicapped is not a new topic in international literature. To exemplify, in the 19th century, Virginia Woolf paid attention to the marginalization of women at the intellectual level; hence, she comes up with a piece of writing entitled "Shakespeare's sister". In this essay, she condemns the Elizabethan society, for women were confined to domestic affairs and deprived of the pleasure of writing poetry. To further elucidate her stance, she provides an example of a hypothetical sister of William Shakespeare named

Judith. Even though she is uneducated, she is artistically gifted. Because of the unshakable patriarchal system, which confines her to the traditional role and does not allow her to flourish like her brother Shakespeare, she becomes disappointed and disheartened; as a result, she puts an end to her life.

The society in which Judith lives is so much similar to the Arab society against which Isra struggles. This implies that history repeats itself and that female subjugation and patriarchal lifestyle is not new. It dates as far back as the 16th century. As an observation, today's Arab culture relatively resembles that of the British people under the reign of Elizabeth I. It is practically traceable in Elizabethan and Arab-American literature. Such literary works as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *A Woman Is No man*, and *My Name Is Salma* are reflections of this patriarchal and misogynistic community. For instance, Isra's father and Juliet's father are similar in that they both exert a certain control and hegemony over their daughters. Yacob compels his daughter to marry Adam in the same way Capulet decides that Juliet should be married to Paris. Both of them are motivated by greed. Capulet believes that his daughter's marriage to Paris, who is very wealthy, will put an end to his financial crisis. Similarly, Yacob thinks that Adam will solve all his financial problems by marring Isra.

Etaf's novel is another chain in a series of alarming bells against the subjugation and marginalization of women because of their gender. Rethinking female gender identity and establishing a society grounded on gender equality and fairness requires that these bells should be seriously taken into consideration. Men and women are both cut from the same cloth and thus they should be treated as equal entities. The intellectual scene is a space that should be shared by both of them. Etaf is actively engaged in this historical endeavor to put an end to this male dominance.

In this context, it sounds relevant to refer to Helene Cixous who, just like most second-wave feminism activists, has a desire to bring to an end the masculine domination of the intellectual scene. Believing that language is phallocentric, she argues that "women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes," (886). Cixous does not confine herself to the stage of the conceptual, but rather moves beyond to that of the concrete. In "The Laugh of the Medusa", she proposes a theory called

ecriture feminine[1], which metamorphoses into a feminine writing movement, in which a plethora of feminist authors produce literary texts, using a *gynocentric language. The overarching aim behind this theory is to give women a chance to represent their gender identities and dismantle the stereotypical and men-made ones.*

3. Female objectification

In *A Woman Is No Man*, females are demeaned and objectified for the male gaze. The author provides a critical description of a society where women are sexualized and diminished. They are tamed as they have to live under the control of men. They are treated like objects and possessions. They are like puppets remote-controlled by their male counterparts just because of their gender. They live in their parents' homes until chosen by one of the men. Like anything else in the house, they should not say "no" to their fathers; otherwise, they can be considered disobedient and defiant. They have no free will. Obedience is the only answer expected of them. This is the image Etaf tries to give about females in the Arab world.

Isra has to accept the man who comes from America as a husband though she has no idea about him. It's namely her father who has the last word regarding accepting or refusing the man. She is like an object exposed for sale. This is the scene that Etaf tries to critically consider. This scene will last forever if female gender identities in places like the Palestinian society are not re-thought. The core of her argument is that females like Isra are humans and not objects, and, thus, none has the right to decide in their place. It's their marital life and they have to choose their partners out of their free will. It's much of an imposition to ask them to say "YES" where they can freely say "NO" or just "let me think about it".

Etaf's debut novel can be deemed a revolutionary voice against this imposition which is a means of female objectification that perpetuates the dominance of males over females. The implication of this is that female gender identity should bear the hallmark of rebellious thinking against patriarchy that looks at women in terms of their bodies and not of their thoughts and feelings as active entities. Isra's appearance has to be checked and studied by her suitor's mother (Etaf 15). Her physical look counts more than her emotions and ideas. The ironic thing is that her hair, the most beautiful part of her, is hidden beneath her hijab and no one can

[1] *Écriture féminine* as a theory foregrounds the importance of language for the psychic understanding of self. Cixous is searching for what Isidore Isou refers to as the "hidden signifer" in language which expresses the ineffable and what cannot be expressed in structuralist language.

see it (15). Etaf is critical of the patriarchal tendency to see women "in terms of appearance rather than behavior and personal qualities," to use the words of Handzo (1).

Preventing women from speaking means that they have to be as mute as the sofas or chairs they sit on. Isra is speechless while her parents, suitor and his mother are watching her. Her parents don't want her to make mistakes. They want to get rid of her just like an old thing in the house. She is something for her suitor to take and leave. Her parents are afraid that if she grows old, none can marry her. Her mother openly expresses her worry in the form of a question: "do you want to sit in my house forever?" (Etaf 15). Even the objects in the living room are more important than her because they can stay in the house forever or at least longer than her.

There are moments in the novel when there are comparisons between the way women are viewed in the West and East in general and in Palestine and America in particular. To exemplify, the mother of Isra speaks about America as the dream land for many girls in Palestine: "Do you know how many girls would kill to be in your shoes, to leave Palestine and move to America?" (Etaf 16). In America, she can live in better life conditions. The mother speaks about the materialistic dream of girls, but Isra's dream is to get treated as a human being who can love and be loved. She cares more about noble feelings like love.

Thus, Isra dreams of a different better life: "Isra dreamed of bigger things—of not being forced to conform to conventions, of adventure, and most of all, of love" (16). This is how her dream husband looks like:

> He would build her a library with all her favorite stories and poetry. 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. (Etaf 16)

Isra does not want to be treated in relation to her biological or materialistic needs, but more importantly, in connection to her emotional and intellectual welfare as a woman. She thinks high of herself as a female. She looks beyond all that is natural and animalistic. She wants to lead a life full of love and care. She aspires for a beautiful love story with her future

husband just like fairy tales. She is against being an object of pleasure for men. Walking "hand in hand" indicates that she seeks gender equality. Reading stories and poetry and feeling "worthy of another person's love" are important features of her dream gender identity.

The author presents the oriental societies as a battleground for gender wars. She provides the example of Isra and her family to underline how a seventeen-year-old girl sees her roles in the house in comparison to her male counterparts and thinks about the extent to which these roles are fair. Etaf aims at contributing to this battlefield by casting light on the existing female gender identity in her country of origin, Palestine, and calls to re-think it in a way that breaks with the male-dominated view that sees women in terms of their physical appearance and biological needs. Instead, she highlights the value of considering them as lovers of great authors like Rumi, Hafez, and Gibran. She implies that the key to the change of this view is to stop defining females as physical entities. Their minds and hearts should also count.

Etaf does also question the value of love in oriental societies and shows how it's sometimes associated with prostitution. If a girl says that she needs love, it can be interpreted as saying that she wants sex. When Isra raises the question of love in her upcoming marital relationship, her mother bursts out describing her as a "sharmouta" (whore): "Fall in love? What are you saying? Did I raise a sharmouta?" (17). Love for the mother is related to promiscuous relationships and has nothing to do with emotions. The implication of this is that love as a noble feeling is itself objectified since it's related to women's bodies rather than their feelings.

Isra wants love to be part of not only her marital life but her gender identity. But that's almost impossible in an Oriental society where marriage and love are seen as two separate islands. Her mother tells her that in marriage, there is no love and that she has to be patient: "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" (17). The author is critical of oriental societies where such great emotions as love are curbed and where women are denied the right to love and treated like lifeless objects. She seeks to imply that marriage without love is an imprisonment of the female body.

The author underscores female objectification through the word "sharmouta" (whore) which is used to describe girls whenever and wherever they act or think against the mainstream male-dominated traditions and conventions. After signing her marriage with Adam, Isra slaps him when he plants "a kiss on her

cheek" (20). She has been taught that her body is the most important part of her life. If it's touched by a man before the wedding ceremony, it's a shame for her and for the whole family. That's why her mother describes her reaction as good, urging her not to let him approach her before the wedding ceremony (21). She is afraid of what would the suitor's family might say about her daughter. She is afraid that they would see her as a "sharmouta".

The mother is very much worried about the reputation of her daughter because of the pressure of patriarchal socio-cultural customs and traditions. She does not want her to fall into disrepute. She reminds her that women are always seen as scapegoats in this kind of situations and that she should think about her reputation: "Reputation is everything. Make sure he doesn't touch you again" (21). A physical touch can turn the life of a young girl like Isra upside down. Her fame as a girl depends on whether her body is touched or not touched by a male. Immunizing her body against this damned touch is a must to prevent her being subject to infamy. This is pure treatment of females in relation to their bodies and not their intellect.

One of the highlights of Etaf's novel is that reducing the worth of Arab females to the sacredness of their bodies is unfair. Defining Arab female gender identity exclusively in terms of the body is reductionist. She implies that this identity is to be constructed in a way that does not prevent females from voicing out what they have in their mental store. The author seeks to unveil that women in oriental societies are marginalized and silenced both physically and intellectually as they are prevented from showing the beautiful parts of their bodies (e.g., the hair in the case of Isra) and speaking out their minds. This means that their muteness is not just intellectual but also physical. Rethinking their gender identity, according to Etaf, requires liberating both their bodies and brains.

Isra thinks life in America can be better for women: "But maybe American culture isn't as strict as ours. Maybe women are treated better" (17). Her mother keeps reminding her that a woman is always a woman and cannot be a man regardless of where she is: "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" (18). The destiny of Isra is to be a mother and raise children. She should not think about love. She has to exist for motherhood purposes in her house until death; otherwise, she is described as a whore. The word "destiny" implies that female objectification should

be willingly accepted as there is no chance to change it.

The ironic thing is that her mother as a woman is used as a tool to perpetuate gender inequality and prevents young girls from their right to make their own free choices. She tells her daughter that the worth of a woman lies in her house with her husband and not in love and freedom: "There is nothing out there for a woman but her bayt wa dar, her house and home. Marriage, motherhood— that is a woman's only worth" (18). She is like an object that can be moved from one house to another and from one place to another. Etaf chooses the character of Isra to say: "But that's not fair" (18). Gender fairness is a pivotal element for the author to fight female objectification and establish a society founded on equality.

Etaf sheds light on this issue of self-objectification in oriental societies. This self-objectification, as Calogero (112) points out, "occurs when the objectifying gaze is turned inward, such that women view themselves through the perspective of an observer and engage in chronic self-surveillance." This is exactly what women like Isra's mother do. They are made to see themselves as mere bodies in the hands of their husbands and mere housemaids. Their intellectual abilities are peripheral matters for them. This is the situation Etaf criticizes. She doesn't want self-objectification to continue to be an important constituent of their female gender identity.

She is trying to draw attention to the process of educating girls and women in oriental societies on self-objectification and how it impacts female gender identity in many ways. Isra represents all girls who revolt against this objectification. She starts with her mother who has the same gender. If she doesn't manage to convince her mother with her female dreams and ideas, how could she convince men like Yacob, her father and Adam, her husband? Etaf seeks to show that re-thinking female gender identity should emanate from females themselves. The generational nature of the belief in the pre-determined gender inequality is a real hindrance to the establishment of new gender identities. In patriarchal societies, women like Isra's mother can make the change of female gender identity a little bit challenging.

Isra does also represent females who believe in the possibility of being free and getting love in America far away from her home place, Birzeit in Palestine. She dreams of the end of looking at her as a body that should be protected to avoid disgrace and shame. She imagines her life on a new soil to be totally different despite her feelings of fear. She smiles at the idea of being "in America, the land of the free, where perhaps she could have the love she

had always dreamed of, could lead a better life than her mother's" (26).

Objectification is closely connected to the process of mechanizing the female body. In the novel, women are presented as machines whose main role is to produce children and take care of them. Without this machine-like function, they are worthless. Etaf implies that this is a diminishing view of the female gender. Women can fulfill their biological and natural roles of motherhood, but, in the meantime, they should be allowed the chance to demonstrate their intellectual abilities and rely on their personal cognitive qualities to make their own choices. Their brains do also matter. Neglecting their mental powers means turning them into machines.

4. Conclusion

A Woman Is No Man can be considered a revolt against female muteness. It's a voice for a better condition of the author's gender namely in oriental societies. The telling of the story represents a moment of voice emancipation and silence break. It's the moment of liberating the female self from the grip of male-dominated traditions and crying against imprisoning women's stories and keeping them secret. It's the time to give up petrifying women and treating them as brainless entities. Their voice counts a lot in Etaf's redefinition of the Arab female gender identity. It's their voice which can stand up against the dominant patriarchal culture which buttresses female silence.

Through the story of Isra Hadid, Etaf calls to re-think the Arab female gender identity in a way that makes women's ideas, feelings and intellectual abilities at the very center of their existence. They should not be treated as lifeless objects in their hands of their female counterparts. This novel is a call to stop pushing women to see themselves in terms of what they can do with their bodies. It is an invitation to establish an Arab female gender identity that breaks with objectification and mechanization and to see women in terms of their brains and not only their bodies.

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