

**PATRIARCHAL TRAUMA: AN IMPEDIMENT TO WOMEN'S SUCCESS IN THE
NOVEL *A WOMAN IS NO MAN* BY ETAF RUM**

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Abstract

Literature always presents an unsettling, dark and daring portrait of human existence tainted by trauma and its pain. The word 'trauma' is derived from a Greek word meaning wound. Literature voices the deep psyche of the human beings in a society captivated with the invisible wound of trauma. Patriarchy and its binding rules create a deep void in the life of women assigning them a secondary role to act within the norms of the society. Patriarchal trauma traumatized women shattering their psyche, leading them into a meaningless existence. Patriarchal trauma always subjugates and dominates the female power granting a feeling of incompleteness in women. Etaf Rum's novel *A Woman Is No Man* explores this stifling pang and pains of Palestinian American women affected by the cultural and familial expectations of patriarchal society. This novel also explores the inner trauma of central female characters Isra, Deya and their struggle for survival in a male dominated society. It delineates the theme of patriarchal trauma, psychological and the emotional impact of gender inequality. It also highlights the oppression and sufferings of women within a traditional male dominated society. The novel depicts an account of the impact of patriarchal trauma in the central female characters and its perpetuations across generations. *A Woman is No Man* is a powerful and moving novel by Etaf Rum that delves into the lives of three generations of Palestinian-American women living in Brooklyn, New York. The novel also explores the cultural traditions and expectations placed upon women in the Palestinian community, as well as the struggles that come with trying to break free from them. This paper delves into the inner traumas of the central female characters Isra and Deya and their attempts to reconcile the realities of the present with the torturous recollections of the past.

Keywords: patriarchal trauma, anxiety

Introduction

Patriarchal trauma is a phenomenon that affects women worldwide and is rooted in patriarchal structures that have been deeply ingrained in many societies for centuries. It manifests in different ways, including emotional and physical abuse, forced marriages, and a sense of powerlessness. Women who experience patriarchal trauma often suffer from low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression, among other psychological and emotional problems. Moreover, the effects of patriarchal trauma are not limited to the individual; they can have long-lasting impacts on families and communities. According to Cathy Caruth, "trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind". *A Woman is No Man* is a powerful and

moving novel by Etaf Rum that delves into the lives of three generations of Palestinian-American women living in Brooklyn, New York. The book explores the cultural traditions and expectations placed upon women in the Palestinian community, as well as the struggles that come with trying to break free from them.

“She met Isra’s eyes. “Don’t forget to wash the garlic smell off your hands before greeting our guest.” Isra washed her hands, trying not to dirty the rose-coloured kaftan that Mama had chosen for the occasion. “Do I look okay?” Isra asked. “You look fine.” Mama said, turning to leave.” (Rum, 2019, p.9)

This exemplifies how women are stereotyped when they are shown. It shows that Isra wore the long, flowy garment in rose colour that her mother had picked. It shows that women like to wear dresses in rose colours. In addition to that, Isra’s mother and her attempt in wearing the nicest new outfit itself indicates how women are expected to have a nice-look in front of others, in order to create a good impression. Additionally, Isra's hands smell like garlic, indicating that she is cooking in the kitchen, which is implied by the fact that cooking is traditionally a task which is entrusted to women.

“Adam wore a navy-blue shirt with buttons lined up the front and tan khakis, cuffed at his ankles. His shoes were shiny brown leather with tiny holes pricked in them and a solid black heel of good quality. His feet caressed the dirt with ease.” (Rum, 2019, p.18)

Adam is pictured as a man wearing a navy-blue shirt, tan khakis, and shining brown leather shoes. He wears a combination of characteristics that clearly distinguish him as a male. Adam dresses in the manner expected of a male representative. He wore a laid-back outfit appropriate for a casual meeting with Isra. Masculine stereotypes anticipated specific traits in a male portrayal in order to distinguish between male and female bodies. It shows how gender identity is created through the dressing style. Thus it depicts how the clothing is linked to a specific gender identity.

The novel portrays the experiences of women who are trapped by cultural and familial expectations, that dictate their primary role as serving and submitting to the men in their lives. The women experience emotional and physical abuse, forced marriages, and a sense of powerlessness. The patriarchal trauma affects their self-doubt, shame, and lack of agency. The older generation perpetuates the trauma by passing on the same cultural expectations and beliefs to their daughters and granddaughters. However, the younger generations begin to question and challenge these beliefs, leading to a shift in the cultural narrative. “Fareeda was very much like Mama, Isra soon realized. She cooked and cleaned all day, dressed in loose cotton nightgown. She sipped on chai and kahwa from sunrise until sunset. ... Fareeda awoke each day at sunrise and headed straight to the kitchen to make chai” (Rum, 2019, p.78)

Fareeda's behaviour and appearance appear to reflect the stereotypical behaviour of women. She is also shown doing some housework while wearing a loose cotton nightgown, which she often wears every day because a comfy outfit supports her efforts as well. She is implied to be accustomed to staying in the house because of the manner she is characterised as enjoying her tea from dawn to night. Fareeda consequently acknowledged her femininity as she engaged in specific behaviours and displayed traits unique to the female body.

The novel is told from the perspectives of three women: Isra, Deya, and Fareeda. Isra is a young Palestinian woman who is arranged to marry Adam, a man she has never met, and move to America to start a new life. Isra dreams of having a better life and providing her children with

opportunities that she never had. However, her new life is not what she expected. Adam is abusive, and Isra is isolated and alone, trapped in a loveless marriage with no one to turn to. Despite her difficult circumstances, Isra tries to make the best of her situation. She becomes pregnant and gives birth to four daughters, hoping that they will have a better life than she did. However, as her daughters grow up, Isra realizes that they are also caught between the expectations of their traditional Palestinian culture and the desire to live their own lives.

Human beings crave for security, identity and love. If something unexpected happens, that very small situation itself acts as a barrier to their vital requirements and naturally they get traumatized. Trauma has such a power that it alters a person as well as his psyche. The patriarchal system was so dominant in the culture and tradition. It creates an inner prison which prevents an active involvement or participation of women from the main stream society. Patriarchal trauma acts as barrier in one's authentic self-expression thereby acting as a hurdle in one's advancement in the society. Etaf Rum 'A Women Is No Man' explores the shattered psyche and its inflicting bruises of trauma in the mind.

“The woman had deep black hair and fair olive skin. Yet her hair fell wild and wavy over her shoulders, her cheeks were full and bronzed, her lips a crimson red. ... She was startled to see the woman wearing a short skirt, her legs covered only with sheer panty hose...” (Rum, 2019, p.129)

These lines illustrate how a woman's body is represented by the clothes she wears and how the type of clothing itself relates to a particular gender identity. The remark also says that a female body can be recognised by performing specific femininity-related traits. Additionally, a skirt is seen as a symbol of femininity in feminine stereotypes, therefore society has long held the view that only women can wear skirts. As a result, a set of standards for what it means to be a woman that are represented through the physical attributes of female characters can be seen as the outcome of an already established identity.

The novel explores the experiences of Palestinian-American women living in Brooklyn, New York, who are trapped by cultural and familial expectations. It also depicts how far the society and its expectations dictates the role of a women as a housekeeper and the object of server and slave to men in their lives. The novel portrays the impact of patriarchal trauma on the lives of these women and the ways in which it is perpetuated across generations. The novel focuses on the story of Deya the youngest daughter. She is raised by her grandparents and is haunted by the secrets and tragedies of her family's past. Deya's grandmother is Fareeda, Adam's mother and Isra's mother-in-law. Fareeda is a strong believer in the traditional role of women in the Palestinian community, and she believes that women should only serve their husbands and families. She sees Isra's desire for independence as a threat to their culture and traditions.

As Deya approaches adulthood, she begins to question her family's past and the secrets they have kept hidden. She discovers that her parents' arranged marriage was not what it seemed, and that there is more to her family's history than she ever imagined. Deya is torn between the expectations of her culture and the desire to live her own life.

Valerie rein, opines “the collective intergenerational trauma shows up as an invisible barrier to women's success, happiness, and fulfilment” (15). Patriarchy restricts the lives of women and prevents their natural functioning in society. From a very long time the identities of women have been crushed in the name of patriarchy and its still continues its haunting. The novel opens with Isra's story. She is a young Palestinian woman who is forced to marry Adam, a man she

has never met. Isra is excited to start a new life in America and dreams of having a better life for herself and her children. However, she quickly realizes that her new life is not what she expected. Adam is abusive, and Isra is isolated and alone, trapped in a loveless marriage with no one to turn to. Isra's story is one of oppression and powerlessness. She is unable to stand up to Adam, and her dreams of a better life are shattered. Isra is haunted by the memories of her family in Palestine and the sacrifices they made for her. She is torn between the traditions of her culture and the desire for independence and freedom. Patriarchy and its rules always binds and causes mental anguish to women by subjugating their stable condition. This novel describes the impact of trauma and its frustrations on the central characters Deya and Isra. Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as "A system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women" (20). Etaf Rum paints the picture of a patriarchal society at the extremity of torture.

"Women have been oppressed for millennia. Oppression is traumatic" (Rein 10). Women are forced to follow the rules of patriarchy and those who refuse to follow are looked down upon and are treated as a threat to the society. Adjustment is what the women always have to follow. They have to submit the worthiness of their life by submitting themselves to gendered expectation of the family.

Even when our society have advanced to the extremity of modernity, the condition of women always remains the same. They have to lead a life in a such a way to satisfy the societal expectations. Patriarchal trauma breaks the inner self of woman in their struggle for forced marriage. All the characters in the novel discovers nothing but a deep void and gloom in their lives. Women in the novel have to subdue their independent spirit to the expectations of the male dominated society. When the society traces its progress in terms of equality, the injustice and cruelty against women still remains the same. Still, it continues to have its far-reaching effects in the psyche of women. The novel highlights the conflict between personal freedom and cultural expectations. The women struggle to balance their desire for personal freedom with the cultural pressures to conform to traditional gender roles. This conflict results in a psychological impact on their lives, leading to feelings of anxiety, depression, and trauma.

The lives of female characters in the novel are hampered by patriarchal trauma and it obstructs their quest for the discovery of their true self. The inequality and injustice against women continued to torment women in the modern world. Trauma shatters their identity as well as their individuality. *A Woman Is No Man* is a powerful portrayal of patriarchal trauma experienced by women in traditional societies. The novel highlights the psychological and emotional toll that this trauma takes on women's lives and the ways in which it perpetuates across generations. It is a poignant reminder of the need to challenge and dismantle patriarchal systems of oppression in order to create a more just and equitable society for all. The study emphasizes the need to promote gender equality and empower women to achieve their full potential.

The psychological impact of patriarchal trauma on the lives of the women in the novel is significant. The women struggle to find their own identity and voice, leading to feelings of anxiety, depression, and trauma. They are not able to pursue their dreams and aspirations because of the cultural and familial expectations that limit their options. This creates a sense of hopelessness and despair that affects their mental health. This expectation is perpetuated across generations as the older generation passes on the same cultural expectations and beliefs

to their daughters and granddaughters. The women experience emotional and physical abuse and are forced into marriages that they do not want. They are not given the freedom to make their own decisions and are constantly reminded that their primary role is to serve their husbands and families. This creates a sense of powerlessness and affects their self-esteem, leading to feelings of shame and self-doubt.

The novel also highlights the ways in which the younger generations are challenging and questioning these cultural expectations. The younger generations are not willing to accept the same cultural expectations and beliefs as their mothers and grandmothers, and this leads to a shift in the cultural narrative. They are more willing to pursue their own dreams and aspirations, even if it means challenging traditional gender roles. This provides a glimmer of hope and suggests that change is possible.

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