

A Woman is No Man

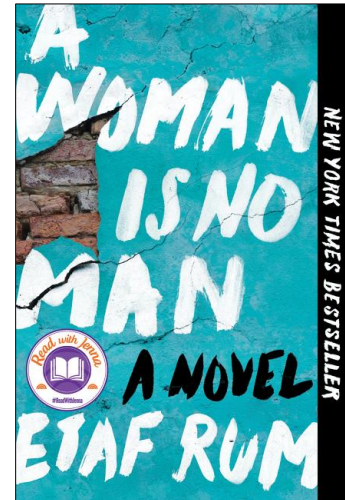
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By Etaf Rum

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Introduction

In her debut novel Etaf Rum tells the story of three generations of Palestinian-American women struggling to express their individual desires within the confines of their Arab culture in the wake of shocking intimate violence in their community—a story of culture and honor, secrets and betrayals, love and violence. Set in an America at once foreign to many and staggeringly close at hand, *A Woman Is No Man* is an intimate glimpse into a controlling and closed cultural world, and a universal tale about family and the ways silence and shame can destroy those we have sworn to protect.



"Where I come from, we've learned to silence ourselves. We've been taught that silence will save us. Where I come from, we keep these stories to ourselves. To tell them to the outside world is unheard of—dangerous, the ultimate shame."

Palestine, 1990. Seventeen-year-old Isra prefers reading books to entertaining the suitors her father has chosen for her. Over the course of a week, the naïve and dreamy girl finds herself quickly betrothed and married, and is soon living in Brooklyn. There Isra struggles to adapt to the expectations of her oppressive mother-in-law Fareeda and strange new husband Adam, a pressure that intensifies as she begins to have children—four daughters instead of the sons Fareeda tells Isra she must bear.

Brooklyn, 2008. Eighteen-year-old Deya, Isra's oldest daughter, must meet with potential husbands at her grandmother Fareeda's insistence, though her only desire is to go to college. Deya can't help but wonder if her options would have been different had her parents survived the car crash that killed them when Deya was only eight. But her grandmother is firm on the matter: the only way to secure a worthy future for Deya is through marriage to the right man.

But fate has a will of its own, and soon Deya will find herself on an unexpected path that leads her to shocking truths about her family—knowledge that will force her to question everything she thought she knew about her parents, the past, and her own future.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why might a community or culture have a "code of silence"? What are the potential risks of such secrecy? In what ways is such silence harmful to Isra and other women and girls?

2. Beyond the literal, what does it mean for a person to have a voice? Why is it important to health and safety? What are the various forces that silence Isra's voice?
3. Why are books so important to Isra, Sarah, and Deya? What makes the reading of books so threatening to Isra's mother, Fareeda and the men in the novel?
4. In the frustrated words of Isra's mother, "What does love have to do with marriage?" What is the purpose of arranged, loveless marriages? Why would her mother accuse Isra of being a sharmouta because she wanted to fall in love?
5. Isra is taught from an early age that, "Obedience [is] the only path to love." What does this mean? Why is obedience important in a society? When does obedience become oppressive or dangerous?
6. When Isra first meets Adam, he vehemently claims: "I am free." To what extent is this true or not? What forces limit personal freedom? What is a healthy balance of personal freedom and obligation to family or community?
7. Why does Fareeda believe that, "Preserving our culture is what's most important," despite the suffering it brings to the women and girls in the family? What, more specifically, does she believe must be preserved?
8. In what different ways do Isra, Deya, Sarah, Adam, Fareeda, and Khaled assimilate to American culture? Which acts of assimilation from their children and grandchildren are acceptable to Khaled and Fareeda? Which are not? What does this reveal about their values?
9. Throughout the novel, men are forgiven for committing zina, for drinking, sexual infidelity, and violence toward women. How is this explained and justified? What is the source of this double standard that contradicts even the Quran?
10. Isra's suffers the profound shaming of her daughter and of herself for giving birth to only girls. Why are girls and women thought to be of such little value in her family and culture? What vast effects do these ideas have on girls as they grow up? What can be done to resist such psychological and physical harm?
11. Of what value is Isra's writing of letters to her mother that she never sends?