

Rum, Etaf. *A Woman is No Man: A Novel*. NY: HarperCollins, 2019, 352pp. By Carol B. Ghattas.

As a former missionary to the Middle East and North Africa and as a librarian, when I saw the title of this book by author Etaf Rum, I just had to check it out. It's one of the few books I've read in the recent past that I've actually devoured. I could not put it down. Every time I came to the end of one of her short chapters, I'd have to turn the page to see what happened. My Christ-following heart wanted the happy ending, the redemption. It does not end in the way I would have hoped.

Rum tells the story of not one, but three Palestinian women and addresses the issues of life for women from Muslim backgrounds. The chapters provide present-day glimpses of the life of American-born Deya, while giving us flashbacks in time to the life of both her mother, Israa, and grandmother, Fareeda.

The story begins with what many would hope to be a happy story of a woman's marriage to a Palestinian-American. We watch Israa leave the only home she's ever known to come to a new land, full of expectation, fear and hope. The American dream is far from any reality Israa will ever know, and she collapses into a world of isolation and loneliness.

Fareeda, Israa's mother-in-law, is far from easy to live with, and puts heavy demands on the innocent interloper into her family's life. Israa's only value is seen in that of producing children, but when no son is born after several attempts, she is ostracized and rejected by both her husband and in-laws.

Deya is the eldest of the daughters born to Israa, and though her mother wants to love her, the shame of her sex builds a wall between them a child could never understand. Expectations are high for Deya to restore the honor her mother lost by marrying a good Palestinian Muslim. The only problem is that Deya is American-made, and has a mind of her own, which doesn't include such a man.

This provides just a glimpse into what is an amazingly complex story line. It's the perfect book for those who already know Muslim culture or would like more insight into what happens within the families of immigrants from Muslim background.

Rum says, "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." Yet, she does tell us, opening to the reader a treasure-trove of insight into the Muslim home life of countless women and even men who feel trapped by religious and cultural expectations. As a Christian, I see this book as a tool to teach believers about the culture of the average Muslim, while also increasing our empathy and compassion for the Muslim women around us.

During my years back in the USA, I have been called to translate for women, just like those in this story, who sought to escape their American prisons, some who were living around the corner from my own home. Reading this story made me wonder just how many more women are struggling like those I know.

Etaf Rum has done a superb job in capturing the culture, feelings and complexities of life as an Arab Muslim woman in this rich, well-written story. So much can be learned through reading

this work of fiction that is a reality for many women from similar backgrounds. I will look forward to seeing her write more in the future.

Carol Ghattas

Author and Speaker

Lifeinexile.net