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Existentialist Feminism in Etaf Rum's *A Woman is No Man*

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Abstract

This research aims to provide a qualitative study into existentialist feminism in Etaf Rum's novel *A Woman is No Man* (2019). The writers examine Arab American women from a three-generation family who emigrated from Palestine to America, which affected them in determining their meaning of existence under Arab American patriarchal culture: Fareeda as the first generation, Isra and Sarah as the second generation, and Deya as the third generation. This research used Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism theory. The findings show two out of the four Arab American women refused to break out from the Arab patriarchal culture, while the other two achieved their transcendence. The existence of Arab American women in the novel is not fully achieved based on Beauvoir's idea of claiming their transcendence. In conclusion, the four Arab American female characters were influenced by generational differences when they were exposed to Arab culture in Palestine. Fareeda and Isra have more anti-assimilation toward American culture than Sarah and Deya, born in America. Sarah and Deya find meaning in their existence because they achieve their transcendence by becoming what they want to be, namely, working and independent women. Meanwhile, Fareeda and Isra find meaning in their existence in the realm of the patriarchal culture, which defines them as the Other since neither of them has ambitions for themselves but has always strived to submit to the Arab culture. Thus, Fareeda and Isra defined their meaning in existence as being mothers and wives.

Keywords: *A Woman is No Man*, Arab American Culture, Existentialist Feminism

Introduction

Patriarchal culture is social structure that places men as the first holders of power and predominates in roles such as elected leaders, morality, social freedoms, and property management (Rahmah et al.). This leads to behavior toward the body referring to females while thinking refers to males. To comprehend this idea, Beauvoir distinguished between gender and sex. Beauvoir stated sex is the constant, physically unique, and factual features (Butler 35). However, with social notions of masculinity and femininity, being man or woman carries significant meaning (Tseng). It referred to as gender. Beauvoir argued gender is the cultural meaning and shape the body acquires, and the ways in which that body is acculturated (Butler 35).

Rum's semi-autobiographical *A Woman is No Man* is inspired by her arranged marriage and despite the push to motherhood, she went to college and got divorced to stand up against the cycle of trauma and oppression in Arab American community (Simon). She wrote the novel to advocate for herself and the oppression of women (Salvianny and Nurcahyani 241). Following 9/11, Muslim characters in literature were



associated with negative connotations such as potential terrorists (Dickert). Therefore, as Muslim American author, Rum strove to break the community's silence through the novel.

The novel provides how patriarchal culture defines the existence of three generations of Arab American women who emigrated from Palestine to America between 1990 and 2008: Fareeda as first generation, Isra and Sarah as the second generation, and Deya as the third generation. Their lives in Brooklyn are strained between personal desires and the strict mores of Arab patriarchal culture within Arab American community. It delves into the concerns Arab American women endure, whether they are related to family affairs, religion, or traditions. Fareeda as dominant woman who oppresses other women as result of upholding Arab patriarchal cultural norms after losing her home in Palestine, Isra who prefers read romance novels to entertain suitors but then was married to Adam at the age of seventeen and she struggles to fight in preserving Arab culture in America, Sarah who refuses to have her life ordered according to Arab culture by defying the culture's rules, and Deya who is determined to continue her studies at college to avoid being imprisoned in the position of women's role under patriarchal culture.

The research used existentialist feminism to examine Arab American women's existence under Arab American culture. The research argued it presents different thoughts on the meaning of each woman's existence: Fareeda and Isra viewed Arab patriarchal culture as a place where they found meaning in their existence, whereas Sarah and Deya viewed it as threat to define their meaning in existence as they desired to be free from male's perspective. This happened because of generational differences as well as differences in Arab and American culture from family and environment.

Fareeda and Isra have the highest level of anti-assimilation. Fareeda defended her life as part of men's lives through being the wife and the mother. Isra dreamed of having a loving husband with harmonious family in America, but it vanished because her husband was abusive. However, Isra maintained her roles as wife and mother as she found her life's purpose in it. Meanwhile, Sarah aspired to be American woman who was not bound by arranged marriage. Deya also aspired to transcend life in the same way as Sarah did. They sought transcendence by freely choosing their own life. Deya. Beauvoir defined transcendence as totally human struggle (particularly women) to break free from patriarchal culture (Pranowo 73). Through this novel, Rum broke the community's silence and reveal the meaning of the existence of being Arab American women. Therefore, the writer is interested in examining the existence of Arab American women in Etaf Rum's *A Woman is No Man* by analyzing how these women characters define their respective existences Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism.

Previous studies have been conducted with this novel. First, Women's Resistance Towards Oppression in Etaf Rum's *A Woman is No Man* in 2020 utilized Patricia Hill Collins' Matrix of Domination and Self-Definition theory (Salvianny and Nurcahyani). It found institutional, regulatory, hegemonic, and interpersonal oppression are ways in which women are oppressed. Second, Patriarchal Oppression to the Main Characters in Etaf Rum's *A Woman is No Man* in 2020 used Sylvia Walby's patriarchy and radical feminism (Sari). It found four patriarchal oppressions: patriarchal method of



production, masculine aggression, patriarchal government, and patriarchal culture. Third, The Representation of Liberal Feminism in *A Woman is No Man* by Etaf Rum in 2020 used Stuart Hall's representation, Michel Foucault's discursive method, and Feminine Mystique of Betty Friedanto (Wulandari and Supiastutik). It found the female characters always performed everything their men asked them to do as a commitment to upholding Arab tradition until Deya fought for her right to an education. Fourth, Arab American Women and the Generational Cycle of Shame: A Cognitive Reading of Etaf Rum's *A Woman Is No Man* in 2021 used cognitive narratological method (Mikić). It indicated variety of psychological, gendered, and socioculturally entrenched elements that influence how shame is elicited, experienced, expressed, and regulated among Arab American women over three generations.

Regarding the claim mentioned earlier, the writer poses a statement of problems as follows: How are Arab American women characters depicted in the novel Etaf Rum's *A Woman is No Man* and How does the existence of Arab American women characters in the novel Etaf Rum's *A Woman is No Man* according to Simone de Beauvoir.

The important aspect of this study is how the women characters have different thoughts in defining their existence under patriarchal culture by considering generational differences and cultural influences from the family and the environment. The first topic of the research shows the characteristics of the women characters in the novel. Then, connecting to the second topic of the research shows how the women characters define their meaning in existence under Arab American culture.

Method

The corpus of the research is *A Woman is No Man* novel by Etaf Rum that was published in 2019. The writer devised a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research is a distinct collection of interpretative activities, procedures, or practices based on semiotics, narrative, content, discourse, archive, and phonemic analysis. It also draws on and employs feminism, cultural studies, survey research, and so on (Denzin and Lincoln 12). Then, the research utilized Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism theory to examine the existence of Arab American women shown in the novel. Therefore, the research was compatible using the qualitative research method. The writer collected the data by analyzing Etaf Rum's *A Woman is No Man* novel about Arab American women characters' existence as shown in the novel. Then, compiling and evaluating it by using the theory, concept, and other secondary sources such as journals, theses, and other expert theorists to support the data analysis (Creswell and Poth). Several steps were taken by the writer during the data analysis. First, the writer read the novel *A Woman is No Man* by Etaf Rum, focusing on the Arab American women characters' existence shown in the novel. Second, the writer identified words, phrases, and sentences from dialogues and the text's narrative that were relevant to the theories and that are used by highlighting the words and taking notes. Third, the writer reviewed additional sources to support the data analysis, such as previous research and theses, journal articles, expert theories, and interviews.

Results and Discussions



The novel tells the story of the existential crises of three generations of Arab-American women in two settings of places: Palestine and America between 1990 and 2008. Four female characters demonstrate the existence of Arab American women in the novel, including Fareeda as the first generation, Isra and Sarah as the second generation, and Deya as the third generation.

Arab American Women Characters

The four women have differences in determining how they find meaning in their existence. Fareeda and Isra have the same intentions in defining their existence. Likewise, Sarah and Deya have factors they consider achieving the meaning of their existence. This is due to differences in the level of cultural assimilation of their ancestors, namely Arab culture and American culture. This difference in the level of assimilation arises due to generational differences in how long they have been exposed to Arab culture in Palestine, causing these women characters to have a stronger bond to preserving the culture of their ancestors without any influence or modernization from outside cultures, including American culture.

Fareeda is a main and static character who upholds Arab culture. By adhering to Arab patriarchal culture, Fareeda always prepared traditional food according to Arab traditions. In addition, before serving food, she made sure the table was covered by *sufra*. She always did this as this is one of Arab traditions. "Why don't you set the *sufra*?" Fareeda said. "I'm making us something to eat." (Rum 45). Hummus topped with ground beef and pine nuts. Fried halloumi cheese. Scrambled eggs. Falafel. Green and black olives. *Labne and za'atar*. (Rum 46)

Even though she lived in America, Fareeda still ate and served traditional food according to Arab culture. *Sufra* is a tablecloth used for traditional eating surfaces. The cuisine is also dominated by dishes from the Eastern Mediterranean or Middle East, except for scrambled eggs which are usually made by Americans. For example, falafel is a typical Arab snack in the form of fried chopped nuts (Munjidah, 2019, p. 182). Fareeda's habit of cooking and consuming these dishes proves that she has strong ties to Arab culture.

In appearance, Fareeda also characterizes her clothing as appropriate to Arab culture. The way she dresses and looks is not wearing tight clothes and not wearing too much makeup. She wore a red-and-black *thobe*, with oriental patterns embroidered on the sleeves, and a wide belt of gold coins around her thick waist. Black kohl was smeared around her small eyes. (Rum 22)

The *thobe* is the traditional clothes of the Arab community, namely long overalls (Suheri 50). Kohl is a traditional eye cosmetic used in the Middle East (Tiffany-Castiglioni et al. 2). Although she lived in America, she thought American women "disregarded" the Arab culture because they tend to wear "tight clothes" and "faces full of makeup." (Rum 106).

Similar to Fareeda, Isra has anti-assimilation towards American culture. She is the main and static character. She was the only daughter of a Palestinian family who lived in Birzeit, Palestine. She was born in 1973 in Palestine. Isra had to quit school at the age of 17 because she had to married. Isra's way of behaving is very traditional. When she married Adam and there was a dancing session in their wedding ceremonies. Adam



and Isra's wedding was held in Palestine, but Adam has lived in America for 14 years. Adam had more experience in this kind of thing. This is different from Isra. She has never known the outside world other than Palestine. Then Adam and Isra were dancing together. She didn't quite know what to do. [...] It felt unnatural to dance so freely, to display herself so openly. But Adam seemed perfectly comfortable. (Rum 22–23)

Isra is a shy traditional woman. She had never looked that open and free in front of men. This happened because she was taught never to be friends with men, let alone have relationships with men. Isra is required to maintain her image as a good Arab girl. Naber stated how Arab Americans reversed American Orientalist discussions to form a sort of cultural validity conveyed through the triangulated ideal of the good Arab family, good Arab girls, and required heterosexuality, all in contrast to an imagined America with its obvious prostitution, broken homes, and bad women (Abboud, Jemmott, et al.; Naber 65).

Isra was responsible for the housework and the children. She is a passive woman because she obeys Adam's orders without any objection. However, no matter how obedient she was to the chores and Adam, she still claimed an unsuccessful woman within the Arab community because she never gave birth to a son. This made Adam throw his frustrations at her. Adam reached out to touch her. He traced the outline of her face, almost as if daring her to move. But she kept still. She closed her eyes, waited for him to stop, to step away and go to bed. But then, all at once, it came. He slapped her. What terrified Isra most was not the force of his palm against her face. It was the voice inside her head telling her to be still—not the stillness itself, but the ease of it, how naturally it came to her. (Rum 132)

She did not respond to Adam's harsh treatment of her because she felt she deserved it. Isra accepted it without any objection demonstrates that was Isra's surrender as she failed to bring dignity to the family because she did not give birth to a son. Therefore, she was claimed as unsuccessful wife. Patriarchal culture contributes to domestic violence in the Arab population in America and the Middle East. The "masters of the house" are men. When a man feels threatened in his role as head of the home, he may resort to violence. If a man injures his wife, all sides realize that the guy is to blame; nonetheless, the man may be able to get away with his conduct since he is the leader of the family (Jaghab 19–20; The Academic Commons of The City University of New York). Isra was claimed as unsuccessful wife as she did not give birth to a son.

In contrast to Fareeda and Isra, Sarah and Deya are more open to new cultures, including American culture. Even so, Arab culture stems from their parents' upbringing and the environment in which they live, keeping them exposed and related to Arab culture. In Sarah's character, she is described as a woman who is rebellious and brave. She is the only daughter and the youngest child of Fareeda and Khaled. She was born and raised in America in 1979. Being in two different cultures made Sarah choose which side of culture could better support her desire to become what she wanted to be in her own life. Sarah feels that the Arab culture of having to maintain the image of a good Arab girl restrains her from expressing and acting in her life. This can be shown by how she dresses.

Sarah wore a flowered miniskirt with thin stockings, long black boots, and a fitted cream blouse. Her hair was wrapped in a loose bun. (Rum 133)



That was Sarah's way of dressing when she was working in America. She was wearing tight clothes that showed the curves of her body. According to Fareeda, tight clothing is one of the characteristics of how American women dress in daily life and they tend to wear "tight clothes" (Rum 106)

The way Sarah behaved with Fareeda shows that there was a lot of quarrels. Sarah, who had been influenced by American culture, and Fareeda, who required her daughter to behave according to Arab culture, created a lot of friction between the two. Their bickering happened because Sarah said the supermarket is only a few blocks away, then why Fareeda not go by herself. She offered she could go to the grocery store for Fareeda after school so that she did not have to wait until Sunday each week. Fareeda was mad and said, "What would I look like, sending my unmarried daughter to the market by herself? Do you want the neighbors to start talking? Saying my daughter is out and about alone, that I don't know how to raise her?" (Rum 151–52)

Sarah's way of behaving is not following what Arab culture teaches. Unmarried Arab woman is prohibited from leaving the house without anyone accompanying her. American woman does not have rules like this. They tend to have an individualistic nature (Hermawanto and Anggraini 2). This is different from Arabs who live in groups.

Much the same as Sarah, Deya was also open to American culture. She is the main and developing character in the novel. Deya is the first daughter of the couple Isra and Adam. Deya was born and raised in America in 1990. When she was 18 years old, Deya was pressured into arranged marriage. This is shown by Fareeda's statement to Deya.

"It doesn't matter where we live. Preserving our culture is what's most important. All you need to worry about is finding a good man to provide for you." (Rum 25)

Deya was always arranged with many suitors, but none of the men could change her mind that she wanted to continue her education in college. Her desire to pursue her education grew stronger when she learned the fact that Isra was murdered by Adam and Adam committed suicide right after that. The most important predictors of thoughts regarding wife beating in Arab patriarchal society were male sex-role stereotypes, unfavorable and conventional attitudes toward women, nonegalitarian marital role expectations, and familial patriarchal beliefs (Haj-Yahia 193). Not only that, but also because of the influence of American culture that she has been exposed to since child that it changed her way of thinking. In the end, Deya got her right to study at a university

Deya's way of dressing is often regulated by her grandmother, Fareeda. This is because Deya was arranged to many suitors by Fareeda. One thing that attracts the male suitor's attention is a woman's beautiful appearance.

Inside her room, alongside the spines of her books, a crimson kaftan provided the only other color. Her grandmother, Fareeda, had sewn this dress, with heavy gold embroidery around the chest and sleeves, specifically for today's occasion: there was a marriage suitor in the sala waiting to see Deya. [...] She walked past the kaftan, slipping on a gray sweater and blue jeans instead. (Rum 25)



Clothing is controlled based on the occasion since certain occasions necessitate certain attire (Joudeh & Awad, 2019). On this occasion, Deya is required to wear a kaftan. Kaftan is a type of clothing originating from the Middle East. The way of dressing can show the gap between modern and traditional (Joudeh & Awad, 2019). Fareeda told Deya to wear a kaftan on this occasion to show her traditional Arab identity, and with jewelry and flashy colors to be a bonus point to attract the attention of men. Deya did not like that so she changed it into simpler clothes.

The women who were born and stayed longer in Palestine have anti-assimilation, Fareeda and Isra have a responsibility to preserve the culture of their ancestors and not to disappoint the native Arab community by turning to embracing or mixing the purity of Arab culture with other cultures. Meanwhile, Sarah and Deya who were born and raised in America have pro-assimilation attitude. Sarah and Deya adapt more easily.

The Existence of Arab American Women

Four female characters are examined to comprehend several aspects that influence how the existence of Arab American women is represented in the novel. They are Fareeda, Isra, Sarah, and Deya. Fareeda lives according to Arabic culture and attempts to uphold traditional values for her offspring, and Isra exemplifies the virtue of being obedient because she consistently complies with the instructions of her parents, her husband, and her in-laws. In this way, Fareeda and Isra have the characteristics of women who are committed to the Arab culture and obedient to the dominant figures in the Arab patriarchal families. This happens because they have been influenced by Arab culture since they were born in Palestine and it was attached and preserved when they emigrated to America. Therefore, they have anti-assimilation toward a new culture, including American culture. Meanwhile, Sarah and Deya have the traits of being courageous and rebellious. This occurs as a result of early exposure to American culture since they were born and raised. Thus, these characters have pro-assimilation toward American culture. Both of them have their own ambitions for their life that are not aligned with Arab culture, so they seek to break out from the Arab culture and become modernized like American women who have more freedom of what they want to be. In conclusion, Fareeda and Isra find their existence as being mothers and wives, whereas Sarah and Deya find their existence as being independent and working women.

Destiny and History of Arab American Women

Women in destiny and history are about their reproductive role and the hierarchy of sexes which places women in a lesser economic position than males (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 33 and 87). Fareeda and Isra are the women who accepted the meaning of their existence in Arab patriarchal culture, whereas Sarah and Deya are the rejecting ones. Fareeda's first pregnancy disappointed Khaled's family because she did not give birth to a boy. Fareeda was also prohibited from giving breast milk to her daughters because according to Arab culture, breast milk should only be given exclusively to boys.

"Khaled's mother made me feed them formula. She said breastfeeding would stop me from getting pregnant, and we needed a son. But there were shortages of food and



medicine. One day I ran out of formula, so I stole a cup of goat's milk from our neighbor's tent and fed them and . . ." (Rum 207)

Daughter is embarrassing in Arab culture, meanwhile having sons may increase a family's dignity, respect, and social position in general (Hammoudeh; Mikić). However, it was not her intention to kill her own daughters. In patriarchy, childbirth and nursing are not vocations for women, but rather natural processes and destiny (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 75; Zahra). Fareeda's responsibility to give birth is thus viewed as a womanly act because the function of giving birth is solely possessed by women. She tried her best but resulted in misery. After all, Fareeda's responsibility to give birth is thus viewed as a womanly act.

In 1995, the birth of a daughter for the fourth time made Isra despair. Adam treated Isra harshly to vent his anger, frustration, and disappointment because Isra had not given him a son.

He traced the outline of her face, almost as if daring her to move. But she kept still. She closed her eyes, waited for him to stop, to step away and go to bed. But then, all at once, it came. He slapped her. What terrified Isra most was not the force of his palm against her face. It was the voice inside her head telling her to be still—not the stillness itself, but the ease of it, how naturally it came to her. (Rum 131–32)

Adam committed physical violence against Isra and Isra accepted all his treatment. Isra felt she deserved it because she had not give him a son. Beauvoir stated men are called *the self*, while women are called *the other*. If others are a threat to the self, then women are a threat to men. Therefore, if men want to be free, then they must subordinate women (Geleuk et al. 225; Wiyatmi 21). According to Beauvoir, the dilemma that women face is when they are with other people (being-for-Others). Other individuals make it impossible for women to freely choose their way of life (Geleuk et al., 2017, p. 225). This is what ultimately makes Isra believe that her existence exists to become a woman who is seen and shaped by social construction. This is what causes her to have no ambition for herself. Her dream since before marriage was to always have relationships with men, namely to be loved by her husband and to have a harmonious family.

Since high school at the age of 18 in 1997, Sarah has lived alone. She had to live independently to support her daily life and school expenses by working two jobs.

"But I managed. I stayed with a friend for the first year until I could afford to live on my own. Then I rented a small apartment in Staten Island. I worked two jobs to pay for community college and changed my last name so no one could find me." (Rum 114)

Sarah graduated from college in 2001. The majority of Americans see achieving financial independence from one's parents as a sign of adulthood in the 21st century, the change from student to worker is a distinguishing characteristic of young adulthood (Bonnie et al., 2015; Fry, 2013).

Alike to Sarah, Deya also has a good adaptation to American culture. During her meeting with her suitors, there was a man who tried to appeal to his worth by explaining how much money they earned. This made Deya feel angry and annoyed.



One man had spent their entire conversation telling her how much money he earned at his gas station; [...] (Rum 29)

With his explanation, the man seemed to explain that Deya could not have her own income because she was an Arab woman and by that, she would be dependent on the man. This is contrary to Deya's wishes, who wanted to start her working career after graduating from college. Refusing to be the Other, to cooperate with males, would mean giving up all the benefits that a partnership with the higher caste grants to women (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 10). In this way, Deya means having to fulfill one's own needs by earning a living for oneself.

Myths of Arab American Women

Fareeda and Isra are the women who accepted to be defined as the myths of women, whereas Sarah and Deya are the ones who rejected them. Myths of women is women's well-being in a patriarchal culture is heavily reliant on their ability to 'please' men. For instance, adapting to masculine notions of what it means to be an actual woman. As a result of attempting to embody these essentialist notions, women wind up rejecting their subjectivity (Kjellgren, 2023). Arab customary law is regarded as having stringent and obedient rules. In this novel, the three-generation family adheres to Arabic culture as a rule of life. One of them is Fareeda from the first generation.

She made sure her children knew Arabic, that Sarah was raised conservatively, and that her sons, as Americanized as they were becoming, still ended up doing what was expected of Palestinian men: marrying Palestinian girls and passing down the traditions to their own children. If she didn't preserve their culture, their identity, then she would lose them. She knew this in her core. (Rum 106)

Women, notably Palestinians, bear a heavier weight of anti-assimilation than males. The central ideology held by Palestinian men and women in America is to stay in their Palestine culture by creating a powerful dedication to their original culture (Cainkar 86). Fareeda is seen as all the lesser things that are forced upon her to be weaker than men.

In Arab culture, marriage is not based on love. Adam and Isra's marriage was not founded on love. Isra had a talk with her mother about how crucial the aspect of love in a marriage was.

"But what if the suitor and I don't love each other?"

"Love each other? What does love have to do with marriage? You think your father and I love each other?" [...] "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." (Rum 19)

The practice of arranged marriage in Arab culture has been passed down from generation to generation without any feeling of love from the beginning of the marriage even until after the marriage has been going on for years. Beauvoir stated love does not always determine the choice of one's marital partner (Duranti 111). The idea of arranged marriages by parents is the patriarchal ideal that denies Muslim women the freedom to select their husbands (Aguair; Khurshid 91; Mohammad). After married, Isra completely belonged to Adam.



The majority of Arabs are Muslim. The women who embrace Islam submit to Arab customs and Islam regulations. However, not all women follow Islamic laws. Fareeda did not allow Deya to wear hijab,

They couldn't possibly be Muslims [...] Religion wasn't something she had learned at home—they weren't a devout Muslim family, not really. Once, Deya had contemplated wearing the hijab permanently, not just for her school uniform, but Fareeda had forbidden it, saying, "No one will marry you with that thing on your head!" Deya had been confused. She had expected Fareeda to be proud of her for trying to be a better Muslim. But after thinking about it more, she had realized that most of the rules Fareeda held highest weren't based on religion at all, only Arab propriety. (Rum 67)

Fareeda's prohibition shows she was submissive to Arab culture. This statement contradicts Islam. In Islam, the purpose the hijab is to cover women's beauty from non-mahram views and avoid the center of public attention as has been written in one of the Qur'anic verses ("Surah An-Nur - 31" 13).

Isra also experienced the same treatment from her husband, Adam. When Adam saw the hijab that Isra wore, Isra concluded from his look that he did not like it.

"You don't have to wear that thing, you know," [...] people here don't care if your hair is showing. There's no need to cover it up." [...] Growing up, she had been taught that the most important part of being a Muslim girl was wearing the hijab. [...] "But what about our religion?" [...] "We have to live carefully here, Isra. People flee to America from war-torn countries every day. Some are Arabs. Some are Muslims. Some are both, like us. But we could live here for the rest of our lives and never be Americans. You think you're doing the right thing by wearing this hijab, but that's not what Americans will see when they look at you. They won't see your modesty or your goodness. All they'll see is an outcast, someone who doesn't belong." [...] "It's hard. But all we can do is try to fit in." (Rum 47–48)

Adam aware that not everyone accepts hijab-wearing women. Beauvoir's statement about hijab is who precisely "is" she under the mask of what she has been forced to "become"? Beauvoir exemplified inequity in a Mediterranean patriarchal culture, having been prepared from childhood for her "natural destiny," as for this is religious customs. Beauvoir identified it as a slave position for daughter, wife, and mother (Beauvoir, *Il Secondo Sesso* 487–91; Duranti 106). Beauvoir's ideas contravene Islamic precepts on women. Mernissi and Djébar showed that during the period of authentic Islam (the original Islam or the time of the Prophet Mohammed), women were treated with great respect and deference (Campanini 184; Duranti 109). Muslim women are looked up to and respected in Islam because the hijab is a show of respect for women. Beauvoir mentioned in civilizations where patriarchy and religion coexist, women have long been destined to submit to their husbands on earth and to God in heaven (Duranti 112). In the end, Isra chooses to obey her husband. While this suggests that males had taken away Isra's right to dress as her own wishes, this also came with a rather good reason for Isra's well-being. In 1990, they needed to blend with the Americans.

Meanwhile, when Sarah worked in the urban center of New York City, she did not wear the hijab.



Like Isra, the woman had deep black hair and fair olive skin. Yet her hair fell wild and wavy over her shoulders, [...] (Rum 98)

Taking off the hijab was the choice Sarah made. Beauvoir demonstrated to us that there are circumstances in which young women may feel joyful and proud of their bodies in addition to being at ease in their own skin (Joseph, 2008). Not wearing the hijab is a desire of her own.

Likewise, Deya took off her hijab when she visited Sarah's office. She did not want to look like an outcast among the Americans around her.

Upon emerging from the subway at Union Square, she had taken off her hijab and tucked it in her backpack, [...] (Rum 133)

Deya was easily adapted to her environment. Arab immigrants discovered early on in their lives in the United States that their ability to integrate would determine whether they survived (Gannam and Sciarcon 28). She took off her hijab not to attract men's attention, but as an effort to adapt to the American environment.

Arab American Women's Lives Today

Two women characters who succeed in claiming their transcendence are Sarah and Deya. Meanwhile, Fareeda and Isra found it difficult to practice it because of their anti-assimilation. When Sarah was in high school, Fareeda always reminded Sarah about how important marriage was for women. Women have to keep their virginity until marriage. However, Sarah once had a boyfriend and had sexual intercourse.

"I had a boyfriend," Sarah finally said. [...]
She drew a breath and started again. "The truth is, I wasn't a virgin." (Rum 133)

Having boyfriend is one of the problems that Arab women in America experience, they who heavily impacted by their Arab parents' cultural and religious norms and perceptions of decency, dignity, and ethics (Abboud, Jemmott, et al.). Sarah was torn between two very different cultures. Most participants associated the "good Arab girl" stereotype with a virgin, an educated woman, and someone who adhered to conventional gender standards (Abboud, Jemmott, et al.). In the 21st century, Arab American young adults are indulging in sex outside of marriage or same-sex partnerships (Abboud, Flores, et al.) Beauvoir stated the loss of virginity is regarded as a disaster in many cultures, such as Arab culture (Beauvoir, *Il Secondo Sesso* 436; Duranti 111). In Muslim, any allusion to the intimacy of the sexual space, particularly by a woman, is considered forbidden. For Muslim women, virginity is synonymous with honor (Duranti 111). Therefore, Sarah's goal of breaking the Arab patriarchal culture was successful.

Sarah decided to run away from home to avoid the shame of what she had done (Rum 138). Sarah supported her life cost by doing two jobs. Living independently is common in American culture. Sarah continued her studies in high school then went to college. After that, Sarah got a job.

"Is this Books and Beans?"
"Yes." A brief pause. "Can I help you?"



"Umm . . . can I speak to the manager? My name is Deya." [...]
Silence. Then, "I can't believe it's you." Deya could hear nervousness in the woman's voice. (Rum 68)

In a patriarchal world, boys often obtain a greater education than girls, as well as better professions and financial freedom. Women's education has grown from the twentieth to the twenty-first centuries, with an increase in the number of women in higher education of up to 37% in 1960 and 57% till 2009 (Baum et al. 20). She perceived to achieve her existence by going to college and working. Beauvoir stated one of the methods for women in the process of transcendence is women can work (Tong 186). However, her feelings of guilt and longing for her parents showed that there was still an Arab identity within her that she still maintained. That means she could not eliminate her attachment to her own family which upholds Arab culture.

Since high school, Deya always declared to Fareeda that she wanted to continue her education in college. Her dream was to continue her education at the college and get a job after that.

Deya was eighteen, not yet finished with high school, but her grandparents said there was no point prolonging her duty: marriage, children, family. (Rum 25)

Deya wanted to be a woman who could go to college and work. American marriage in the early twenty-first century is not based on arranged marriage (Cherlin 34–36). Women of all educational levels have delayed marriage, although less educated women have delayed childbearing less than more educated women (Cherlin 37).

Deya was keen to continue her studies in college. It was difficult for Deya to persuade Fareeda to no longer ask her to marry any man. Deya realized it was better for her to just do the action. Therefore, Deya eventually took the college entrance test and got admitted to the college.

"I got accepted into a college in Manhattan," Deya had told her, [...]
"Manhattan?" She could see fear in Fareeda's eyes. [...]
Fareeda eyed her. "What about marriage?"
"Marriage can wait. [...]" (Rum 261)

Deya succeeded to attend the college. Women may be independent by refusing to absorb their otherness by identifying themselves through the eyes of patriarchal civilization (Tong 187). However, with her statement, "Marriage can wait" it could have the implication that she might still need to get married in the future. However, that was all after she achieved all her desires for herself, which at that time was to work according to her degree after she graduated. This shows that even though Arab women have migrated to America, have a pro-assimilation attitude towards American culture, and merged into Arab American women, there was something that they could not completely eliminate permanently. This is her origin culture, Arab culture. This way, she might still need to respect her ancestors because there is still an Arab cultural identity within her. Beauvoir stated women may be independent by refusing to absorb their otherness by identifying themselves through the eyes of patriarchal civilization (Tong 187). Thus, Deya can be classified as having attained transcendence by being an independent woman since she rejected herself as the Other in Arab patriarchal culture.



In contrast, Fareeda had the attitude that she must teach her descendants to preserve Arab culture. She also believed that America has had a bad influence on Sarah and Deya so that they can become women who are far from the characteristics of traditional Arab women.

Fareeda couldn't understand how her granddaughters had turned out so unlike her, so unlike their mother. Surely it was America. One quick wipe of the kitchen table, and these girls thought they were done. [...] These spoiled American children knew nothing about real work. (Rum 193)

Fareeda believed women's role must follow Arab culture. Women are under more pressure than men to be traditional and uphold roles in Arab Palestinian culture because upholding traditional culture is politically extremely important due to statelessness, occupation, and diaspora and because this work must naturally be done primarily in the home or within the confines of the community (Cainkar 88)

Isra also had a difficult attitude towards accepting new cultures. In America, her attitude was dictated by Fareeda. She could not argue this was her fate.

Isra could hear Mama's voice in her head. [...] Palestine or America. A woman will always be alone. Had Mama been right all along? No, Isra told herself. That couldn't be true. She just needed to earn Adam's love. (Rum 63)

When Adam was physically violent towards her, she felt that she was simply not trying enough to get Adam's attention. This is proven by the statement, "She just needed to earn Adam's love." (Rum 63). If a woman learns she is inessential and never becomes essential, it is because she does not effect this change on her own (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 8).

Conclusion

The novel shows that Fareeda and Isra who have stronger bonds with Arab culture refused to get out of the male dominance. This happened because of generational differences among the characters that take into time between 1990 and 2008. In achieving transcendence, Sarah and Deya have become what they want to be as they break out from the social construction to pursue their dreams. Thus, the existence of Arab American women in the novel is still very far from what Beauvoir expects—the women claiming their transcendence. Half of the women characters are similar because of generational differences. Fareeda lives according to Arab culture and attempts to uphold traditional values, and Isra exemplifies the virtue of being obedient because she complies with the instructions of her parents, her husband, and her in-laws. In this way, both are committed to the Arab culture and obedient to the dominant figures in the Arab patriarchal families. This happens because they have been influenced by Arab culture since they were born in Palestine, and it was attached and preserved when they immigrated to America. Meanwhile, Sarah and Deya have the traits of being courageous and rebellious. This occurs because of early exposure to American culture since they were born and raised. Both have their own ambitions for their life that are not aligned with Arab culture, so they seek to break out from the Arab culture and become modernized like American women who have more freedom



of what they want to be. Rum wants to describe the Arab American community restraints that prevent Arab American women from choosing their way of life choices because they must submit to preserve what their cultural ancestors have passed down. However, Rum also highlights that some of them may have found the meaning of their lives as women defined by patriarchal culture. This type of woman is depicted through the characters Fareeda and Isra. These two characters define their existence as being mothers and wives. Meanwhile, Sarah and Deya do not want to define themselves in the role of women under a patriarchal culture.

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