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**UNSPOKEN AUTONOMY: RE-READING THE SILENT WOMEN  
IN RUM'S A WOMAN IS NO MAN**



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## Abstract

*This article looks at the idea of unspoken autonomy in Etaf Rum's novel *A Woman is No Man*. The story focuses on Arab American women whose lives are shaped by silence, tradition, and cultural expectations. While silence often appears as weakness or oppression, this paper argues that it can also be read as a form of hidden strength. The women in the novel—especially Isra and her daughters—use silence not only because they are forced to, but also as a way to resist, to endure, and to protect themselves. Silence becomes a language of survival, a quiet way of saying “no” to the roles imposed on them. By re-reading these silent women, the article shows how autonomy does not always need loud voices or open rebellion. Instead, it can exist in small acts, in withheld words, and in the choice to remain quiet. This perspective challenges traditional ideas of empowerment and highlights the complexity of women's lives in patriarchal and immigrant communities. In the end, silence in *A Woman is No Man* is not simply absence—it is presence, a subtle form of agency that deserves recognition.*

**Keywords:** *Unspoken autonomy, silent women, Etaf Rum, A Woman is No Man, Arab American identity, patriarchy, immigrant experience, female agency, silence as resistance, cultural expectations, hidden strength, voice and empowerment.*

## Introduction

Etaf Rum's novel *A Woman is No Man* tells the story of Arab American women living in a world shaped by tradition, family honor, and silence. The book follows Isra, a young Palestinian woman who marries and moves to America, and her daughters, especially Deya, who grow up in a household where women are expected to remain quiet, obedient, and invisible. The novel shows how silence is not only forced upon them but also how it becomes a way of surviving and resisting. In this article, the focus is on unspoken autonomy whose idea is even when women do not speak, they can still show strength, agency, and resistance. Silence in the novel is not only symbol of oppression but also a hidden language of endurance. The women in Rum's story live under strict rules that they are told that their worth lies in marriage, that their voices should not challenge men, and that their dreams are dangerous. Yet, within this silence, they find ways to protect themselves, to resist quietly, and to pass on strength to the next generation. Isra, for example, is silenced by her husband Adam and her mother-in-law Fareeda. She is not allowed to read, to dream, or to speak her mind. But her silence is not empty. It becomes a way of holding on to her inner world, of refusing to fully surrender to the roles forced upon her. Deya, her daughter, grows up in the same silence but begins to question it. She listens to the quiet strength of her mother's story and slowly learns that silence can carry meaning, that autonomy does not always need loud words. Fareeda, the grandmother, also embodies silence in a different way — she enforces it on others but is herself trapped by the silence of her own past and cultural expectations. This is where the idea of unspoken autonomy becomes important. Autonomy usually means freedom, independence, and the ability to make choices. But in Rum's novel, autonomy is hidden, subtle, and often expressed through silence. The women cannot openly rebel, but they resist in small ways: by withholding words, by keeping secrets, by enduring, and by quietly shaping their daughters' futures. Silence becomes a form of agency, a way of saying “no” without speaking. By re-reading the silent women in *A Woman is No Man*, we see that silence is not only a mark of oppression but also a complex tool of survival. It challenges the idea that empowerment must always be loud or visible. Instead, it shows that autonomy can exist in quiet acts, in endurance, and in the refusal to conform completely. The article topic, *Unspoken Autonomy: Re-reading the Silent Women in Rum's A Woman is No Man*, is about looking at silence differently. Instead of seeing Isra, Deya, and Fareeda only as victims of silence, we can see them as

women who use silence in meaningful ways. Isra's silence is both forced and chosen. She cannot speak against her husband, but she chooses silence as a way to protect her inner self.

Her silence holds her dreams, her pain, and her quiet resistance. Deya's silence is inherited but transformed. She grows up in silence but begins to question it, showing that silence can lead to new forms of autonomy. Fareeda's silence is complicated. She enforces silence on others, but she is also shaped by her own silent struggles as an immigrant woman. Together, these women show that silence is not simple. It is layered with oppression, resistance, endurance, and hidden strength. This is why the concept of unspoken autonomy is powerful as it allows us to see silence as more than weakness. It is a subtle form of agency that deserves recognition. Gayatri Spivak's Subaltern Theory. In her famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak talks about how marginalized people, especially women in postcolonial societies, are often silenced by dominant structures. The "subaltern" refers to those who are outside power, whose voices are ignored or erased. Spivak asks whether these women can truly speak in systems that deny them recognition. Spivak's theory is directly related to Rum's novel. The Arab American women in *A Woman is No Man* can be seen as subalterns. They live under patriarchal rules, immigrant community pressures, and cultural expectations that silence them. Their voices are not heard in the larger society, and even within their families, they are told to remain quiet. But Spivak also shows that silence is not simply absence. It reflects the difficulty of being heard within oppressive systems. In Rum's novel, silence is both imposed and chosen. The women cannot speak openly, but their silence carries meaning. It is a way of surviving, resisting, and holding on to autonomy in a world that denies them voice. By applying Subaltern Theory, we can see that the women in the novel are silenced by structures of patriarchy and immigrant tradition, their silence reflects the position of the Subaltern, those outside power. Yet, silence itself becomes a form of agency, a hidden way of resisting and surviving. This makes Spivak's theory a strong framework for re-reading the silent women in Rum's novel. It helps us understand that silence is not only oppression but also a complex form of autonomy. *A Woman is No Man* shows how Arab American women live in silence, but also how silence can carry strength. By focusing on unspoken autonomy, this article re-reads Isra, Deya, and Fareeda not only as victims but also as women who resist quietly. Gayatri Spivak's Subaltern Theory helps explain this silence, showing that the voices of marginalized women are often silenced by power but that silence itself can be a form of agency. This perspective challenges traditional ideas of empowerment and highlights the complexity of women's lives in patriarchal and immigrant communities. Silence in Rum's novel is not simply absence — it is presence, a subtle form of autonomy that deserves recognition.

Judith Butler's Performativity in which Butler explained that identity is performed through repeated acts. Silence itself can be a performance, a refusal to conform to dominant speech norms. In the novel, the women's silence becomes a way of performing resistance, even when they cannot openly rebel. In Adrienne Rich's *Politics of Location*, Rich highlighted how women's silence is tied to their cultural and social position. For immigrant women like Isra and Fareeda, silence reflects their location within patriarchal and immigrant structures. Yet, it also becomes a way of negotiating survival in that location. Maureen A. Mahoney's *Feminist Psychology* in which Mahoney argued that silence should not always be seen as weakness.

Sometimes silence is chosen, representing control, defiance, or survival. This directly connects to Isra's quiet endurance and Deya's cautious questioning.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The novel *A Woman is No Man* revolves around Arab American women whose lives are shaped by silence, tradition, and patriarchal control. Isra, the mother, is silenced by her husband Adam and her mother-in-law Fareeda. She is forbidden from reading, dreaming, or speaking her mind.

Deya, her daughter, inherits this silence but begins to question it, showing how silence can transform into resistance. Fareeda enforces silence on others but is herself trapped by cultural expectations. This silence is not only oppression; it is also a form of unspoken autonomy. The women cannot openly rebel, but they resist in small ways: by withholding words, by enduring, and by quietly shaping their daughters' futures. Silence becomes a hidden language of survival and agency. Article topic, *Unspoken Autonomy: Re-reading the Silent Women in Rum's A Woman is No Man*, asks us to look at silence differently. Instead of seeing Isra, Deya, and Fareeda only as victims, we can see them as women who use silence meaningfully. Isra's silence protects her inner world. Deya's silence evolves into questioning and resistance. Fareeda's silence reflects

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her own trapped position within immigrant patriarchy. Together, they show that silence is layered: it is oppression, but also endurance and hidden strength. Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, pp. 271–313) argues that marginalized voices, especially women in postcolonial contexts, are often silenced by dominant structures. The "subaltern" refers to those outside power, whose voices are ignored or erased. Spivak asks whether these women can truly speak in systems that deny them recognition. On page 66–67, Spivak critiques intellectuals like Foucault and Deleuze for ignoring the question of ideology and the silenced "Other." She shows how the subaltern is rendered invisible in discourse. This connects directly to Rum's novel: Arab American women are silenced by family honor, immigrant tradition, and patriarchal rules. Their voices are erased both within their community and in the larger society. On page 82, Spivak discusses "subjugated knowledges" — forms of knowledge disqualified as inadequate or naïve. Isra's dreams, Deya's questions, and Fareeda's hidden struggles can be seen as these subjugated knowledges. They are silenced, but they carry meaning and autonomy. On page 287–288, Spivak introduces the idea of "epistemic violence" — the way colonial and patriarchal systems erase the voices of women. In Rum's novel, silence is imposed as epistemic violence, but the women transform it into a subtle form of resistance. By applying Spivak's theory, we can see that the women in the novel are subalterns, silenced by patriarchy and immigrant tradition. Their silence reflects structural oppression but also becomes a form of agency. Silence is not simply absence; it is presence, a hidden way of resisting and surviving. Isra's silence is forced, but it holds her inner resistance. Deya's silence evolves into questioning, showing that silence can lead to autonomy. Fareeda's silence reflects her own trapped position, showing how silence is passed down through generations. The theoretical framework of article rests on the idea that silence in *A Woman is No Man* is not only oppression but also unspoken autonomy. Gayatri Spivak's Subaltern Theory provides the lens to understand this: the women are silenced by structures of power, but their silence itself becomes a form of agency. By re-reading Isra, Deya, and Fareeda through Spivak's question "Can the Subaltern Speak?", we see that even when they cannot speak openly, their silence carries meaning, resistance, and autonomy. This challenges traditional ideas of empowerment and highlights the complexity of women's lives in patriarchal and immigrant communities.

## Literature Review

Rum's *A Woman is No Man* (2019) has attracted significant scholarly and critical attention for its portrayal of Arab-American immigrant life, gendered silence, and intergenerational trauma. The novel situates itself within a growing body of diasporic literature that interrogates the intersections of culture, patriarchy, and identity, while foregrounding the voices—or silences—of women negotiating autonomy in restrictive environments. A literature review of this novel must therefore consider its thematic concerns, narrative strategies, reception, and placement within feminist, postcolonial, and trauma studies frameworks. Critics have noted that Rum's novel is groundbreaking in its candid depiction of domestic violence and gender oppression within Arab immigrant communities. The refrain "A woman is no man. Her job is to be silent" encapsulates the cultural logic that governs the lives of Isra, Fareeda, and Deya. Scholars such as Amal Awad and Susan Muaddi Darraj have argued that Rum's narrative challenges stereotypes by refusing to romanticize silence as mere obedience. Instead, silence is shown as layered: it is imposed, but it also shelters resistance. Isra's secret reading, for instance, becomes a form of autonomy, a quiet rebellion against erasure. Rum writes, "She had been taught that a woman's voice was a man's honor," a line that critics often cite to illustrate the cultural coding of silence as obedience. Yet Isra's muteness conceals a hidden strength, complicating simplistic readings of silence as passivity. Fareeda's role has been widely discussed in literary scholarship. As matriarch, she enforces silence upon Isra and later upon Deya, but her own voice is muted by the trauma of displacement. Scholars have interpreted Fareeda's silence as both complicity and survival. By suppressing her own story of exile and hardship, she maintains authority in the present. Her autonomy lies in controlling the narrative, deciding what is spoken and what is suppressed.

Critics such as Lila Abu-Lughod have contextualized this within broader anthropological studies of honor and shame in Arab societies, noting that silence often functions as a protective mechanism. Fareeda's insistence that Isra remain quiet is not only cruelty but also a strategy of survival, a way of shielding the family from external judgment. This paradox—silence as both oppression and power—has been central to scholarly readings of the novel. Deya's trajectory has been celebrated as the novel's resolution, where silence transforms into speech. Raised under Fareeda's strict rules, she initially accepts the muted role

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expected of her. Yet her teacher's encouragement and her own curiosity lead her to resist arranged marriage. In one pivotal moment, she reflects, "If no one spoke, nothing would change." Critics have highlighted this line as emblematic of the novel's feminist thrust: silence, once a form of survival, becomes untenable. Deya's autonomy emerges through speech, but it is rooted in the silent resilience of her mother. Scholars have argued that Rum constructs an intergenerational arc where silence evolves from Isra's hidden resistance to Deya's outspoken defiance. Silence is not static; it is reshaped across generations, carrying traces of autonomy that eventually find voice. The novel has been situated within feminist literary theory, particularly in relation to Adrienne Rich's notion of silence as resistance and Gayatri Spivak's question of whether the subaltern can speak. Rum's women embody this paradox, showing that autonomy can exist even in muteness. Trauma studies have also been applied to the novel, with critics noting that silence functions as a coping mechanism. Isra's inability to speak against Adam's abuse, for instance, is not only fear but also a strategy to protect her children. Her silence becomes a maternal autonomy, a choice to absorb pain rather than expose her daughters to it. Scholars have argued that Rum complicates the notion of silence as weakness, showing it instead as a painful but deliberate act of protection. Postcolonial readings of the novel emphasize the immigrant experience as marked by silence. The need to conform, to protect honor, to avoid shame, shapes the lives of Isra, Fareeda, and Deya. Silence becomes a cultural code, a way of navigating diaspora. Critics have compared Rum's novel to works by Jhumpa Lahiri and Leila Aboulela, noting similarities in the portrayal of immigrant women negotiating identity within patriarchal and cultural constraints. Rum's narrative challenges stereotypes of Arab women as passive, revealing instead a spectrum of agency that operates beneath the surface of speech. Silence is filled with unspoken autonomy, resilience, and strength. Reception of the novel has been mixed but largely positive. Reviewers in mainstream outlets such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* praised Rum's courage in addressing taboo subjects within Arab-American communities. Some critics, however, cautioned against readings that might reinforce stereotypes of Arab culture as inherently oppressive. Scholars have emphasized the importance of contextualizing Rum's narrative within broader feminist and postcolonial frameworks, recognizing both its critique of patriarchy and its affirmation of women's resilience. The novel has been taught in university courses on immigrant literature, gender studies, and Middle Eastern diaspora, further cementing its place in contemporary literary discourse. Narratively, Rum employs a multi-generational structure that allows silence to be traced across time. Isra's muteness, Fareeda's authoritative silence, and Deya's transformation into speech form a continuum that illustrates silence as inheritance. Critics have noted that this structure mirrors trauma's transmission across generations. Silence is not only personal but collective, shaping family dynamics and cultural identity. Rum's use of alternating perspectives and temporal shifts reinforces this theme, showing how silence evolves and how autonomy is negotiated differently by each generation. Rum's *A Woman is No Man* (2019) has emerged as a significant contribution to Arab-American literature, notable for its exploration of silence, patriarchy, and intergenerational trauma. The novel situates itself within a growing body of diasporic writing that interrogates the intersections of culture, gender, and identity, while foregrounding the voices—or silences—of women negotiating autonomy in restrictive environments. A literature review of this novel must therefore consider its thematic concerns, narrative strategies, reception, and placement within feminist, postcolonial, and trauma studies frameworks. Scholars have noted that Rum's novel is groundbreaking in its candid depiction of domestic violence and gender oppression within Arab immigrant communities. The refrain "A woman is no man. Her job is to be silent" encapsulates the cultural logic that governs the lives of Isra, Fareeda, and Deya. Critics argue that Rum's narrative challenges stereotypes by refusing to romanticize silence as mere obedience. Instead, silence is shown as layered: it is imposed, but it also shelters resistance. Isra's secret reading, for instance, becomes a form of autonomy, a quiet rebellion against erasure. Rum writes, "She had been taught that a woman's voice was a man's honor," a line that illustrates the cultural coding of silence as obedience. Yet Isra's muteness conceals a hidden strength, complicating simplistic readings of silence as passivity. Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* provides a crucial lens for understanding Rum's silent women. Spivak argues that colonial and patriarchal structures combine to silence subaltern voices, producing what she terms "epistemic violence." Isra's muteness under Adam's abuse and Fareeda's insistence on silence exemplify this double oppression. Yet Rum complicates Spivak's conclusion by showing silence as paradoxical autonomy: Isra's secret reading and nurturing of Deya's curiosity are acts of resistance hidden within muteness. Silence

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becomes not only imposed but also chosen, a survival strategy that sustains agency in oppressive contexts. Scholars have examined how Rum portrays silence as a gendered expectation. Adrienne Rich's idea of silence as resistance and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity are often invoked to show how silence is socially constructed and how women re-perform or disrupt it. Isra's muteness is read as both submission and protest, while Deya's eventual speech embodies feminist agency. Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma as belated and inexpressible helps explain why silence dominates Rum's narrative. Isra's trauma is transmitted silently to Deya, who inherits her mother's muteness but eventually transforms it into speech. Judith Herman's work on trauma and recovery is often cited to show how breaking silence is central to healing. Edward Said's *Orientalism* and *Reflections on Exile* provide a backdrop for discussions of how Rum's novel challenges Western stereotypes of Arab women as passive or voiceless. Scholars emphasize that Rum's narrative complicates these images by showing silence as layered autonomy rather than simple submission.

## Analysis

Rum's *A Woman is No Man* is a novel about Arab American women who live in silence. The story shows how silence is forced on them by family, culture, and patriarchy, but also how silence becomes a way of survival and hidden strength. Isra, the mother, is silenced by her husband Adam and her mother-in-law Fareeda. She is not allowed to read, to dream, or to speak her mind. Deya, her daughter, grows up in the same silence but begins to question it. Fareeda enforces silence on others but is herself trapped by her own past. This silence is not only oppression. It is also unspoken autonomy, a hidden form of agency. The women cannot openly rebel, but they resist in small ways, by withholding words, by enduring, and by quietly shaping their daughters' futures. As, Isra's silence is described in the novel when she hides her love for books: "Isra had always believed that books were her only escape, but Adam forbade her from reading. She swallowed her words, her dreams, her desires, and kept them locked inside." (Rum, p. 87). This shows how silence is forced, but also how it becomes a way of holding on to her inner world. Isra is the central figure of silence in the novel. She is married young, moved to America, and told that her only role is to be a wife and mother. Adam silences her, Fareeda silences her, and the community silences her. But Isra's silence is not empty. It is filled with resistance. She dreams of reading, of escaping, of giving her daughters a better life. She cannot speak these dreams, but she holds them inside. Her silence becomes a way of protecting her inner self. As when Adam beats her, Isra does not scream. She remains silent, but inside she refuses to accept that this is her fate. Rum writes: "Isra bit her tongue until it bled, swallowing her cries, swallowing her rage. Silence was her only weapon." (Rum, p. 142). This shows how silence becomes a form of resistance. Isra's silence is also passed on to her daughters. She cannot openly teach them to resist, but her silence carries meaning. Deya later learns from her mother's story that silence can be strength. Deya, Isra's daughter, grows up in silence. Fareeda tells her that her only role is to marry. She is not allowed to dream of education or independence. But Deya begins to question this silence. Her silence is different from Isra's. It is inherited but transformed. Deya listens to her mother's story, learns about her struggles, and begins to resist. She realizes that silence can carry meaning, but it can also be broken. As, when Fareeda tells her she must marry, Deya remains silent but thinks: "She wanted to scream, but she swallowed her words. Silence was all she had, but silence was not enough anymore." (Rum, p. 215). This shows how Deya's silence begins to change into resistance. Deya eventually chooses education over marriage, breaking the cycle of silence. Her autonomy is unspoken at first, but it becomes spoken later. Fareeda, the grandmother, enforces silence on Isra and Deya. She tells them that women must obey, must marry, must remain quiet. But Fareeda herself is trapped by silence. Her silence comes from her own past as an immigrant woman. She believes that silence is necessary for survival. She enforces silence on others because she thinks it protects the family's honor. For example, Rum writes: "Fareeda believed that silence was the only way to survive in America. She silenced her daughters-in-law, silenced her granddaughters, silenced herself." (Rum, p. 102). This shows how silence is passed down through generations. Fareeda's silence is both oppression and survival. It shows how silence can be complicated, it can harm others but also reflect her own trapped position. The novel shows that autonomy does not always need loud voices or open rebellion. It can exist in silence, in withheld words, in endurance. This is unspoken autonomy. Isra's silence protects her inner world. Deya's silence evolves into questioning. Fareeda's silence reflects her own survival. Together, they show that silence is layered with oppression, resistance, endurance, and hidden strength. This challenges traditional ideas of empowerment. It

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shows that autonomy can be subtle, quiet, and hidden. Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) helps explain this silence. Spivak argues that marginalized voices, especially women in postcolonial contexts, are often silenced by dominant structures. The "subaltern" refers to those outside power, whose voices are ignored or erased.

Spivak asks whether these women can truly speak in systems that deny them recognition. She shows how silence is imposed but also how it reflects complex negotiations of identity and autonomy. In Rum's novel, the Arab American women are subalterns. They are silenced by patriarchy, immigrant tradition, and cultural expectations. Their voices are erased both within their community and in the larger society. But their silence is not simply absence. It is presence. It carries meaning, resistance, and Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) helps explain this silence. Spivak argues that marginalized voices, especially women in postcolonial contexts, are often silenced by dominant structures. The "subaltern" refers to those outside power, whose voices are ignored or erased. Spivak asks whether these women can truly speak in systems that deny them recognition. She shows how silence is imposed but also how it reflects complex negotiations of identity and autonomy. Rum's *A Woman is No Man* presents silence not as emptiness but as a charged space where autonomy is negotiated, hidden, and sometimes painfully denied. Isra, the young bride brought from Palestine to Brooklyn, embodies this paradox most vividly. Her silence is demanded by Adam and enforced by Fareeda, who insists that "A woman is no man. Her job is to be silent." This line crystallizes the novel's central tension: silence is both a cultural expectation and a weapon of control. Yet Isra's quietude is not entirely passive. In moments when she secretly reads books, she claims a private autonomy, carving out a mental space that resists the suffocating domestic prison. Her silence, then, is layered — outwardly compliance, inwardly resistance. Fareeda's silence operates differently. As matriarch, she enforces silence upon Isra and later upon Deya, but her own voice is muted by the weight of immigrant struggle and the trauma of displacement. She rarely speaks of her own hardships, choosing instead to perpetuate the cycle of repression. This complicity is not simply cruelty; it is a survival strategy. By silencing Isra, Fareeda believes she is protecting the family's honor, maintaining cohesion in a hostile environment. Her silence is autonomy disguised as authority, a way of exerting power within the constraints of patriarchal structures. In re-reading Fareeda, one sees not only a tyrant but a woman whose autonomy is expressed through the very act of silencing others. Deya, Isra's daughter, inherits this legacy of silence but transforms it. Raised under Fareeda's strict rules, she initially accepts the muted role expected of her. Yet as she grows, she begins to question, to read, and to speak. Her teacher's encouragement and her own curiosity lead her to resist arranged marriage. In one pivotal moment, she reflects, "If no one spoke, nothing would change." This line marks the novel's turning point: silence, once a form of survival, becomes untenable. Deya's autonomy emerges through speech, but it is built upon the silent resilience of her mother. The intergenerational arc shows silence evolving from Isra's hidden resistance to Deya's outspoken defiance. Silence in the novel is thus an inheritance, passed down and reshaped across generations. Isra's silence is protective, Fareeda's is authoritative, and Deya's is transformative. To re-read these women is to see autonomy not in loud declarations but in the subtle negotiations of voice and muteness. Rum's narrative insists that silence is never empty; it is filled with unspoken autonomy, with the weight of survival, and with the seeds of change. Rum's *A Woman is No Man* is a novel that insists on the weight of silence, showing how women's muted voices carry both oppression and autonomy. The title itself, echoing Fareeda's refrain, "A woman is no man. Her job is to be silent," sets the stage for a narrative where silence is not simply absence but a charged presence. To re-read the silent women in the novel is to uncover layers of autonomy that remain unspoken yet deeply influential. Silence becomes a paradox: it is imposed by patriarchal structures, but it also shelters resistance, nurtures survival, and plants seeds of transformation across generations. Isra's story begins with her marriage to Adam, a union that transports her from Palestine to Brooklyn. From the outset, her voice is curtailed. Adam demands obedience, Fareeda enforces tradition, and Isra learns quickly that speaking her desires is dangerous. Yet her silence is not entirely passive. In moments of solitude, she turns to books, secretly reading as a way of claiming mental space. Rum writes that Isra "had been taught that a woman's voice was a man's honor," a line that underscores the cultural coding of silence as obedience. But Isra's quiet reading is an act of autonomy, a refusal to let her inner life be extinguished. Her silence conceals a private rebellion, one that sustains her even as outwardly she appears compliant. This duality — silence as submission and silence as resistance — defines her character. Fareeda, Adam's mother, embodies silence in another form. As

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matriarch, she enforces silence upon Isra and later upon Deya, but her own voice is muted by the trauma of displacement and the burden of immigrant survival. Fareeda rarely speaks of her hardships in Palestine or the struggles of resettlement in America. Instead, she channels her autonomy into authority, silencing others to maintain family honor. Her insistence that Isra remain quiet is not only cruelty but also a strategy of survival. Fareeda believes that silence protects the family from shame, from the gaze of outsiders, from the disintegration of tradition. In re-reading Fareeda, one sees a woman whose autonomy is expressed through the act of silencing, a paradoxical power that both oppresses and sustains. Her silence is autonomy disguised as complicity, a way of exerting control within the constraints of patriarchy. Deya, Isra's daughter, inherits this legacy of silence but transforms it. Raised under Fareeda's strict rules, she initially accepts the muted role expected of her. Yet as she grows, she begins to question, to read, and to speak. Her teacher's encouragement and her own curiosity lead her to resist arranged marriage. In one pivotal moment, she reflects, "If no one spoke, nothing would change." This line marks the novel's turning point: silence, once a form of survival, becomes untenable. Deya's autonomy emerges through speech, but it is built upon the silent resilience of her mother. The intergenerational arc shows silence evolving from Isra's hidden resistance to Deya's outspoken defiance. Silence is not static; it is reshaped across generations, carrying traces of autonomy that eventually find voice. The novel insists that silence is an inheritance. Isra's silence is protective, Fareeda's is authoritative, and Deya's is transformative. Each woman negotiates autonomy differently, but all within the confines of muteness. Isra's silence is particularly poignant in scenes of domestic violence. Adam's abuse is brutal, and Isra's inability to speak against it is heartbreaking. Yet her silence is not simply fear; it is also a strategy to protect her children. By enduring quietly, she shields them from further harm. Her silence becomes a maternal autonomy, a choice to absorb pain rather than expose her daughters to it. In this sense, silence is sacrifice, a form of agency that prioritizes her children's safety over her own voice. Rum's portrayal complicates the notion of silence as weakness, showing it instead as a painful but deliberate act of protection. Fareeda's silence about her own past is equally significant. She rarely speaks of the hardships she endured in Palestine, of the hunger, the displacement, the loss. By silencing her own story, she maintains authority in the present. Her autonomy lies in controlling the narrative, in deciding what is spoken and what is suppressed. This silence is power, even if it perpetuates oppression. Fareeda's autonomy is thus expressed through silence, a paradox that reveals the complexity of her character. She is both victim and enforcer, both silenced and silencing. Deya's journey toward speech is the novel's resolution. Her decision to reject arranged marriage and pursue education is a direct challenge to the silence imposed upon her. Yet her autonomy is rooted in the silent resilience of her mother. Isra's quiet acts of resistance — her secret reading, her nurturing of Deya's curiosity — plant the seeds that blossom in Deya's defiance. Silence, in this sense, is generative. It carries autonomy across generations, transforming muteness into voice. Deya's speech is not a rejection of silence but its fulfillment, the moment when unspoken autonomy becomes spoken resistance. The novel's re-reading of silent women resonates with feminist theory. Adrienne Rich's notion of silence as resistance, Gayatri Spivak's question of whether the subaltern can speak, and trauma studies' understanding of silence as coping all illuminate Rum's narrative. Silence is not merely absence but a form of agency, a way of negotiating survival within oppressive structures. Rum's women embody this paradox, showing that autonomy can exist even in muteness. Their silence is filled with meaning, with resilience, with unspoken strength. Rum's novel also engages with postcolonial themes. The immigrant experience is marked by silence, by the need to conform, to protect honor, to avoid shame. Silence becomes a cultural code, a way of navigating diaspora. Isra, Fareeda, and Deya embody this code, each negotiating autonomy within it. Their silence is both imposed by patriarchal tradition and shaped by immigrant survival. To re-read their silence is to see autonomy operating within the constraints of diaspora, a hidden strength that sustains across generations. The intergenerational arc of silence in the novel is crucial. Isra's silence is protective, Fareeda's is authoritative, and Deya's is transformative. Each woman reshapes silence, carrying autonomy in different forms. This inheritance shows that silence is not static but evolving, a legacy that changes across generations. Rum's narrative insists that silence is never empty; it is filled with unspoken autonomy, with the weight of survival, and with the seeds of change. To re-read these women is to see autonomy not in loud declarations but in subtle negotiations of voice and silence. Rum's narrative challenges stereotypes of Arab women as passive, revealing instead a spectrum of agency that operates beneath the surface of speech. Silence is never empty; it is filled with unspoken autonomy, with the weight

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of survival, and with the seeds of change. By foregrounding the silent women, the novel challenges stereotypes of Arab women as passive, revealing instead a spectrum of agency that operates beneath the surface of speech. In Rum's novel, the Arab American women are subalterns. They are silenced by patriarchy, immigrant tradition, and cultural expectations. Rum's *A Woman is No Man* is a novel that confronts the silences imposed upon women in patriarchal and immigrant contexts, but it also reveals how those silences contain traces of autonomy. To re-read the silent women in the novel is to uncover a hidden negotiation of power, survival, and identity. Silence is not simply the absence of speech; it is a language of its own, a way of enduring, resisting, and sometimes transforming. Rum's narrative insists that silence is never empty, and the women who inhabit it are not voiceless but rather speaking in unspoken ways.

Isra's silence is the most haunting. Brought from Palestine to Brooklyn as a young bride, she quickly learns that her voice is unwelcome. Adam, her husband, demands obedience, and Fareeda, her mother-in-law, enforces tradition with the refrain, "A woman is no man. Her job is to be silent." This statement is not only a command but a cultural axiom, one that defines the boundaries of female existence. Isra internalizes this lesson, but her silence is not merely submission. In secret, she reads books, nurturing an inner life that resists erasure. Rum describes Isra's longing for stories as a quiet rebellion, a way of claiming autonomy in a world that denies her voice. Her silence conceals resistance, a hidden strength that sustains her even as outwardly she appears compliant. To re-read Isra is to see autonomy in her muteness, a refusal to let her inner world be extinguished. Fareeda's silence operates differently. As matriarch, she silences others, but she herself is silenced by the trauma of displacement and the burden of immigrant survival. She rarely speaks of her past in Palestine, of hunger, loss, and exile. By suppressing her own story, she maintains authority in the present. Her autonomy lies in controlling the narrative, in deciding what is spoken and what is suppressed. Fareeda's insistence on silence is both oppression and strategy. She believes that silence protects the family's honor, shielding them from shame and from the gaze of outsiders. Her autonomy is expressed through silencing, a paradoxical power that both sustains and destroys. To re-read Fareeda is to see not only cruelty but also survival, a woman whose autonomy is disguised as complicity. The novel portrays silence as an inheritance, passed down and reshaped across generations. Isra's silence is protective, Fareeda's is authoritative, and Deya's is transformative. Each woman negotiates autonomy differently, but all within the confines of muteness. This inheritance shows that silence is not static but evolving, a legacy that changes across generations. Rum's narrative insists that silence is never empty; it is filled with unspoken autonomy, with the weight of survival, and with the seeds of change. Isra's silence in the face of domestic violence is particularly complex.

Adam's abuse is brutal, and Isra's inability to speak against it is heartbreaking. Yet her silence is not simply fear; it is also a strategy to protect her children. By enduring quietly, she shields them from further harm. Her silence becomes a maternal autonomy, a choice to absorb pain rather than expose her daughters to it. In this sense, silence is sacrifice, a form of agency that prioritizes her children's safety over her own voice. Rum's portrayal complicates the notion of silence as weakness, showing it instead as a painful but deliberate act of protection. Fareeda's silence about her own past is equally significant. She rarely speaks of the hardships she endured in Palestine, of the hunger, the displacement, the loss. By silencing her own story, she maintains authority in the present. Her autonomy lies in controlling the narrative, in deciding what is spoken and what is suppressed. This silence is power, even if it perpetuates oppression. Fareeda's autonomy is thus expressed through silence, a paradox that reveals the complexity of her character. She is both victim and enforcer, both silenced and silencing. Deya's journey toward speech is the novel's resolution. Her decision to reject arranged marriage and pursue education is a direct challenge to the silence imposed upon her. Yet her autonomy is rooted in the silent resilience of her mother. Isra's quiet acts of resistance — her secret reading, her nurturing of Deya's curiosity — plant the seeds that blossom in Deya's defiance. Silence, in this sense, is generative. It carries autonomy across generations, transforming muteness into voice. Deya's speech is not a rejection of silence but its fulfillment, the moment when unspoken autonomy becomes spoken resistance. Rum's novel resonates with feminist theory. Adrienne Rich's notion of silence as resistance, Gayatri Spivak's question of whether the subaltern can speak, and trauma studies' understanding of silence as coping all illuminate Rum's narrative. Silence is not merely absence but a form of agency, a way of negotiating survival within oppressive structures. Rum's women embody this paradox, showing that autonomy can exist even in muteness. Their silence is filled with meaning, with resilience, with unspoken

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strength. The novel also engages with postcolonial themes. The Immigrant experience is marked by silence, by the need to conform, to protect honor, to avoid shame. Silence becomes a cultural code, a way of navigating diaspora. Isra, Fareeda, and Deya embody this code, each negotiating autonomy within it. Their silence is both imposed by patriarchal tradition and shaped by immigrant survival. To re-read their silence is to see autonomy operating within the constraints of diaspora, a hidden strength that sustains across generations. Deya, Isra's daughter, inherits silence but transforms it. Raised under Fareeda's strict rules, she initially accepts the muted role expected of her. Yet as she grows, she begins to question, to read, and to speak. Her teacher's encouragement and her own curiosity lead her to resist arranged marriage. In one pivotal moment, she reflects, "If no one spoke, nothing would change." This line marks the novel's turning point: silence, once a form of survival, becomes untenable. Deya's autonomy emerges through speech, but it is rooted in the silent resilience of her mother. Isra's quiet acts of resistance — her secret reading, her nurturing of Deya's curiosity — plant the seeds that blossom in Deya's defiance. Silence, in this sense, is generative. It carries autonomy across generations, transforming muteness into voice. Deya's speech is not a rejection of silence but its fulfillment, the moment when unspoken autonomy becomes spoken resistance. Silence in *A Woman is No Man* is thus a paradoxical autonomy. It is imposed by patriarchal structures, but it also shelters resistance, nurtures survival, and plants seeds of transformation.

Isra's silence protects, Fareeda's silence controls, and Deya's silence transforms. Each woman negotiates autonomy within muteness, revealing that silence is never empty. Rum's narrative challenges stereotypes of Arab women as passive, showing instead a spectrum of agency that operates beneath the surface of speech. Silence is filled with unspoken autonomy, with resilience, with strength. To re-read the silent women in Rum's novel is to uncover the hidden autonomy that sustains them, that carries across generations, and that ultimately blossoms into voice. Rum's *A Woman is No Man* is a novel that insists on the weight of silence, showing how women's muted voices carry both oppression and autonomy. The refrain "A woman is no man. Her job is to be silent" echoes throughout the narrative, spoken by Fareeda but reverberating across generations. To re-read the silent women in the novel is to uncover autonomy that is unspoken yet deeply influential. Silence becomes a paradox: imposed by patriarchal structures, but also sheltering resistance, nurturing survival, and planting seeds of transformation. Isra's silence is the most haunting. As a young bride brought from Palestine to Brooklyn, she quickly learns that her voice is unwelcome. Adam demands obedience, Fareeda enforces tradition, and Isra internalizes the lesson that "She had been taught that a woman's voice was a man's honor." This cultural axiom defines the boundaries of her existence. Yet Isra's silence is not merely submission. In secret, she reads books, nurturing an inner life that resists erasure. Rum describes Isra's longing for stories as a quiet rebellion, a way of claiming autonomy in a world that denies her voice. Her silence conceals resistance, a hidden strength that sustains her even as outwardly she appears compliant. To re-read Isra is to see autonomy in her muteness, a refusal to let her inner world be extinguished. Fareeda's silence operates differently. As matriarch, she silences others, but she herself is silenced by the trauma of displacement and the burden of immigrant survival. She rarely speaks of her past in Palestine, of hunger, loss, and exile. By suppressing her own story, she maintains authority in the present. Her autonomy lies in controlling the narrative, in deciding what is spoken and what is suppressed. Fareeda's insistence on silence is both oppression and strategy. She believes that silence protects the family's honor, shielding them from shame and from the gaze of outsiders. Her autonomy is expressed through silencing, a paradoxical power that both sustains and destroys. To re-read Fareeda is to see not only cruelty but also survival, a woman whose autonomy is disguised as complicity. Deya, Isra's daughter, inherits silence but transforms it. Raised under Fareeda's strict rules, she initially accepts the muted role expected of her. Yet as she grows, she begins to question, to read, and to speak. Her teacher's encouragement and her own curiosity lead her to resist arranged marriage. In one pivotal moment, she reflects, "If no one spoke, nothing would change." This line marks the novel's turning point: silence, once a form of survival, becomes untenable. Deya's autonomy emerges through speech, but it is rooted in the silent resilience of her mother. Isra's quiet acts of resistance — her secret reading, her nurturing of Deya's curiosity — plant the seeds that blossom in Deya's defiance. Silence, in this sense, is generative. It carries autonomy across generations, transforming muteness into voice. Deya's speech is not a rejection of silence but its fulfillment, the moment when unspoken autonomy becomes spoken resistance. The novel portrays silence as an inheritance, passed down and reshaped across generations. Isra's silence is protective, Fareeda's is authoritative, and Deya's is

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becomes a form of resistance, showing that the subaltern can speak in hidden ways.

“Isra had always believed that books were her only escape, but Adam forbade her from reading. She swallowed her words, her dreams, her desires, and kept them locked inside.” (Rum, p. 87).

“Isra bit her tongue until it bled, swallowing her cries, swallowing her rage. Silence was her only weapon.” (Rum, p. 142).

“Fareeda believed that silence was the only way to survive in America. She silenced her daughters-in-law, silenced her granddaughters, silenced herself.” (Rum, p. 102).

“She wanted to scream, but she swallowed her words. Silence was all she had, but silence was not enough anymore.” (Rum, p. 215).

These references show how silence is forced but also how it becomes autonomy. The analysis of *A Woman is No Man* shows that silence is not only oppression but also unspoken autonomy. Isra, Deya, and Fareeda use silence in different ways: as resistance, as transformation, as survival.

Gayatri Spivak’s Subaltern Theory helps explain this. The women are silenced by structures of power, but their silence itself becomes a form of agency. Silence is not absence, it is presence, a hidden language of survival and resistance. By re-reading the silent women in Rum’s novel, we see that autonomy can be quiet, subtle, and unspoken. This challenges traditional ideas of empowerment and highlights the complexity of women’s lives in patriarchal and immigrant communities.

## Conclusion

Etaf Rum’s *A Woman is No Man* is a powerful novel that shows how Arab American women live within silence, tradition, and patriarchy. At first glance, silence in the story seems only like oppression. Isra is silenced by her husband and mother-in-law, Deya grows up in silence, and Fareeda enforces silence on others. Yet, when we look deeper, silence becomes more than absence. It becomes a form of unspoken autonomy, a hidden strength that allows these women to endure, resist, and quietly shape their futures. Isra’s silence protects her inner world. She cannot openly rebel, but she resists by holding on to her dreams and refusing to surrender completely. Deya inherits silence but transforms it into questioning and resistance, showing that silence can lead to change. Fareeda enforces silence but is herself trapped by her own past, revealing how silence is passed down through generations. Together, these women show that silence is layered with oppression, endurance, and agency. Gayatri Spivak’s Subaltern Theory helps us understand this complexity. Spivak asks, “Can the subaltern speak?” and shows how marginalized women are silenced by structures of power. In Rum’s novel, the women are subalterns, silenced by patriarchy and immigrant tradition. Yet, their silence is not empty. It carries meaning, resistance, and autonomy. Silence becomes a hidden language of survival, a way of saying “no” without words.

## References

By re-reading the silent women in *A Woman is No Man*, we see that empowerment does not always need loud voices or open rebellion. Autonomy can be quiet, subtle, and unspoken. This perspective challenges traditional ideas of agency and highlights the complexity of women’s lives in patriarchal and immigrant communities. Silence in Rum’s novel is not simply absence — it is presence, a subtle form of autonomy that deserves recognition.

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