



“Space Repeats Itself”: Mapping Insecurity in Isra’s and Deya’s Spatiality in A Woman Is No Man (2019) by Etaf Rum

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Abstract

Home as the emblem of security and belonging is the sacred place that individuals long for and belong to. Since literature is said to be the mirror of society, projecting what happens in it and aspires to capture the essence of its people, it comes as no surprise that most literary works have home as a source of security and belonging. Nevertheless, exceptions exist. Etaf Rum’s novel A Woman is No Man (2019) depicts the story of Palestinian-American women who suffer from domestic violence and non-belonging. In the novel, Isra and her daughter Deya feel insecure in their own home because of the false cultural assumptions that prevail in some Palestinian and Arab American households. It is said that history repeats itself, but in the case of Isra and Deya space seems to repeat itself. In this regard, the present study aims at shedding light on the importance of space and how it affects the social and historical course of the characters. The study also analyses the concept of insecurity in relation to home and belonging.

Keywords: insecurity; spatiality; home; belonging; Arab-American.

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INTRODUCTION

In her semi-autobiographical novel, *A Woman Is No Man* (2019), Etaf Rum sheds light on the matter of women’s voicelessness in the Arab-American community as she specifically speaks of the example of Palestinian-American women who live in America. The novel follows the paths of three generations of women, who are originally Palestinian and had to migrate to America because of the occupation. However, the story focuses more on the life of Isra and later on her daughter Deya.

In a fascinating move of flashbacks and flash-forwards, Rum presents the circumstances of both women and the harsh reality that dominated their existence. What is even more remarkable about this novel is the notion of space, and how it seems that it repeats itself. In the novel, Isra is the victim of domestic abuse. After arranging her marriage in Palestine, Isra moves to Brooklyn to live in a windowless basement in the house of her in-laws and face her oppressing husband who then develops the habit of beating her to death because she fails to give him the male heir that he longs for. Isra’s home that is supposed to be the source of comfort and security becomes the place of her torture and eventually her own grave. Her daughter Deya, the eldest of the four girls, is risking facing the same fate when she is urged by her grandmother Fareeda to forget about going to university and submit to the idea of an arranged marriage.

The novel addresses questions of home, belonging and identity via focusing on women’s lives in unjust patriarchal households. Women in Rum’s novel are voiceless, weak and victims of violence. Unlike the portrayal of the Arab-American community as the Thirdspace that tolerates the contradictions of the East and the West, Rum gives readers an account of the untold stories “the not so beautiful” truths of Arab-American women. As such, the present study aims at analysing the concept of home as a space of insecurity, particularly for Isra and Deya. This study also attempts to showcase the issue of domestic violence for Palestinian-American women that is exemplified in Isra and her daughter Deya’s psychological trauma. Relying on the theory of spatiality, the present paper highlights how space affects the notions of home, belonging and identity. The main argument here is that space seems to repeat itself in the novel for both Isra and Deya despite the long temporal span of eighteen years. Entrapped in the same space, Deya’s life is threatened when she is placed in a similar situation to that of her mother 18 years ago.

I. HOME AS A SPACE OF INSECURITY

Deeply rooted in patriarchal thought, women are believed to be weak and fragile, and thus they are better kept indoors away from any potential harm. However, the supposed security that the home provides is not a universal truth. Women can face a myriad of hardships and threats inside their homes. To illustrate, in the case of Isra and Deya, home is a place of insecurity and discomfort for both the mother and her daughter. Their home is “fragile” in a sense that one can analyse it and contrast it on a micro level to that of the state. According to Andersen et al, “A stable and effective state is a precondition for human development and human security; and a state which fails to provide development and security to its citizens is neither strong nor stable. It is fragile” (3). Similar to this fragile state, Isra’s and Deya’s homes fail to insure the opted for security essential to the creation of a sense of homeliness and belongingness.

Both women lack a sense of belonging to the space that is called their home. Isra was born and raised in Palestine, yet she never truly felt at ease in her parents’ abode. Their household in Palestine is a perfect example of an unjust patriarchal arena where women are treated badly and where violence against them is a common thing. Her father, Yacob, repeatedly exalts his power and control over the family through continuous episodes of both physical and verbal abuse. He does not solely beat her mother but he also directs his rage on Isra and punishes her painfully for silly things, such as reading books. Rum vividly depicts this scene, stating that:

Yacob had beaten her twice that night, punishment for her defiance. He’d called her a sharmouta, a whore. He’d said he’d show her what happened to disobedient girls, then he’d shoved her against the wall and whipped her with his belt. The room had gone white. Everything had looked flat. She’d closed her eyes until she’d gone numb, until she couldn’t move. (13)

No wonder that her realization of home and marital life is distorted because of the example of her parents. It is due to the introduction of unjustified violence that women lose their sense of belonging and acquire the status of “the other”. As stated by Jayawickrama, “the house as a space of familial and personal life”, is “totally defamiliarized by the incursions of violence, where the home, once the productive site of identity, becomes the violently negative space that defines the self as other” (Lal & Kumar, 48). In this respect, violence impacts not only the sense of belonging and homeliness but also the sense of identity.

Fantasizing that things will be different in America since it is a different culture that calls for freedom, Isra was astonished to find the exact same example of women’s oppression and things got even worse when she failed to give birth to boys. Once she wrote a letter addressed to her mother and apparently never intended to send it:

Dear Mama,

Life here isn’t so different from life back home, with all the cooking, cleaning, folding, and ironing. And the women here—they live no better. They still scrub floors and raise children and wait on men to order them around. A part of me hoped that women would be liberated in this country. But you were right, Mama. A woman will always be a woman. (Rum, 129)

Isra was disappointed to discover this bitter truth. Life in America is no different for women in terms of patriarchal control. Having girls instead of boys is considered a shameful act even in Brooklyn. At this stage, Isra is convinced that her situation is not going to improve, not in this space anyways. This letter also marks Isra’s ultimate sense of giving up. She has surrendered to the attributed gender role of “A woman is no man”, and she comes to accept it as it is imposed on her by her surroundings.

As for Deya, the vicious cycle seems to repeat itself, and just like her mother, she is unable to identify with a designated home. Undoubtedly, it appears unusual that the daughter is facing the same fate of her mother despite the temporal gap between them. Their space repeats itself. In Brooklyn, Deya cannot feel a sense of belonging in her natal home. Similar to her mother before her, Deya witnesses the unjustified domestic violence that her mother is living in. It is true that her father does not exercise his violence against his daughters, however, Deya remembers how her mother was screaming and pleading him to stop beating her. Amidst this

unhealthy environment, Deya is unable to feel comfortable enough to embrace her space and attach meaning to it, to turn it into a home.

In the novel, home can be analysed as both a physical and a mental notion. According to Tay, “home is a physical space; it is also the location of the self, a symbolic terrain invested with social, political, and cultural meanings. To be at home is to identify an image of the self in prevalent ideological discourses” (1). In other words, the physical space that is marked by national, social, cultural, and political conventions affects the self-realization of those who occupy it and essentially shapes their perceptions of home and homeland. Nonetheless, home can also be abstracted and psychological. Expressions such as “it feels, smells, and tastes like home” are indications that humans experience home with their senses and form an abstracted version of the physical spatial home. To exemplify, Rum depicts Isra’s first encounter with her new dwelling in Brooklyn after they prepared food and how “the steam of each dish intertwined with the next until the room smelled like home” (46). For Isra, a simple matter such as the smell of the food made her remember her home in Palestine.

According to Jackson, domestic violence is “a form of aggression perpetrated by one family member against another”. It may be “involving physical, sexual, economic, and emotional abuse, used alone or in combination, by an intimate partner often for the purpose of establishing and maintaining power and control over the other partner” (1). Via casting this definition on the case of Isra and Deya, it turns out that Yacob and Adam are the active agents and the batterers who torment the women of the family, mainly wives and daughters. Just like her mother, Isra is in a “battering relationship” with her husband, in which she is living a life of “captivity” that encompasses a “terrifying process of progressive entrapment into an intimate relationship of subjection that is promoted and preserved by a social order steeped in gender hierarchy” (Jackson, 84). The battering is normalized and accepted as part of the social gender role of being a woman.

The batterer believes it to be his right and duty to correct the woman’s behaviour and educate her through chains of yelling, beating and shoving. As Jackson puts it, “Battering takes two: a man and a patriarchy”. Through both individual and collective oppression exercised by one man and approved on by the whole patriarchal society, women find themselves as the hostages of a corrupted system that reinforces the battering of women and ensures its maintenance and continuity in generations to come. What adds oil to the fire is the fact that even women are helping in keeping other women victims of domestic violence instead of helping them out. This is exactly the role of Fareeda, Isra’s mother-in-law, in the story. Fareeda was witnessing all that is going on in her household. She knew that her son, Adam, is beating his wife constantly. However, she does not stop him or correct his behaviour but she suggests for Isra to use makeup to hide her bruises, “thrusting the bottle of foundation” into Isra’s hands and insisting that “what happens between a husband and wife must stay between them. Always. No matter what” (Rum, 142). This statement was engraved in Isra’s mind and heart until it led her to her own grave.

Not reporting domestic violence is what makes it a hidden reality for many women worldwide. “Typically, domestic violence occurs within the private home, and the victims, because of shame or fear of retaliation, are reluctant to report it to police or Justice Department surveyors” (Summers & Hoffman, 170). In the example of Isra, the shame of reporting that her husband was beating her kept her from telling even

her closest friend, Sarah, about it. Furthermore, putting her husband behind bars will put her in a worse situation when no one is there to provide for the family. Her husband keeps battering her and Isra enters what is known as “the cycle of violence”. Lenore Walker addresses this issue in her ground-breaking book *Battered Woman* (1982), in which she explains the three stages of the cycle. She elaborates that the first stage is marked by the batterer’s irritation and anger. The second stage consists of the loss of control and the escalation of physical harm. The third stage is characterized by a feeling of remorse and regret by the batterer that he seeks forgiveness through gifts or smooth words. Unfortunately, this stage is quite brief, as the batterer resolves to anger soon and the cycle repeats itself.

II. SPACE, BELONGING, AND IDENTITY

In *A Woman Is No Man*, space is a vital aspect that affects both the sense of belonging and identity for the various characters, particularly for Isra and her daughter Deya. This space is tainted with unjust patriarchal norms that rendered a woman’s existence to the mere role of producing male heirs and obeying the men of the family. If such a woman fails to meet those norms, she is condemned as a disgrace in the family and thus deserves to be treated less than a human being. All sorts of violence against her will be tolerated and rather encouraged as a means of education. Rum aspires to defy this wrong belief that constitutes a painful reality for many women, mainly in the Palestinian-American society. What is unique about her portrayal of those women is the fact that space is such an integral part in the story that it takes precedence over time.

Nevertheless, space is not an easy concept to define. The mere understanding of spatiality as an empty geometrical shape is far-gone and discarded. Space is full, dynamic, and most importantly produced. Henri Lefebvre stresses this aspect of the production of space and he focuses mainly on what he calls “social space”. For him, “(social) space is a (social) product” (Lefebvre, 26). Tim Cresswell elaborates on the concept of social space as he links it to “set of behaviours” that make up social “expectations” that “relate a position in a social structure to actions in space” in a way that “when this sense of place combines the spatial with the social” it results in the creation of “social space” (In Place, out of Place 3). Isra is expected to act in a certain manner in the house (cleaning, cooking, mothering, and remaining silent) that she automatically absorbs her new role that is the result of her social space (some call it place) without any attempt of defiance.

In fact, Lefebvre believes that space is governed by those with authority and that space “in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power” (26). In the case of women in a patriarchal society, their space is defined for them by men who seek to keep them under control. To illustrate, Isra learns from her mother since an early age that “A woman belongs at home” (Rum, 11). Isra’s mother has reached the point of submitting wilfully to the patriarchal agenda that dictated on women their duty to be confined in the domestic sphere. Her mother now felt the need to pass on this ideology of submission without questioning to her daughter.

When humans ascribe a certain meaning or feeling to a given space, the latter becomes a place of belonging. Cresswell explains that “the most straightforward and common definition of place” is that it constitutes “a meaningful location” (Place, 7). Space for Cresswell, then, is “seen in distinction to place as a realm without meaning”



(10). This is not to assume that space is meaningless and empty. What Cresswell is evoking by “meaning” is related to the notion of the “sense of place” that individuals attribute to given spaces, to feel that they own them in a way that assures a sense of belonging. In the same light, a designated place can turn into a home. The added element is that of belonging and attachment. According to Cresswell, “home is an exemplary kind of place where people feel a sense of attachment and rootedness” and that “it is seen as a center of meaning and a field of care” (24).

For Isra and Deya the feelings of attachment and rootedness are absent. It is natural for them not to feel the sense of home when violence is exercised daily in such space. The one meaning that they can attach to their space is that of brutality and lack of comfort. As such, both Isra and Deya cannot accept their place as a “field of care”, since they only receive the antithesis of care in it. Consequently, their space is not developed to become a place let alone to become their home. Isra and Deya suffer from homelessness and non-belonging and are unable to find peace and tranquility. In this sense, space, home, and belonging interrelate to create a web of meaning, in which each element affects and influences the others.

Edward Relph’s book *Place and Placelessness* highlights the matter of belonging to a given place and its impact on identity. In his book, Relph distinguishes between what he calls “the experience of insideness and outsideness” in relation to place. He argues that “to be inside a place is to belong to it and identify with it, and the more profoundly inside you are the stronger is the identity with the place” (49). The opposite is true for outsideness. When there is a lack of constructed sense of belonging and instead a strong sensation of marginalization prevails, one feels the burden of placelessness and abandonment. Unlike the dominant belief of home as a rosy, “peaceful and meaningful refuge” for women, “the realities of power relations in the home which, at their extreme, are linked to battery and rape” (Cresswell, 83) are commonplace yet they remain hidden and underestimated in many cultures. For Isra and Deya, their home was their prison, a place where they could not act freely.

Following the thread of submission and lack of freedom, Rum portrays the voicelessness of some Palestinian women who are like Isra. Rum reveals how Isra’s marriage to Adam was arranged by both families. Amidst such situations, young women have little to say when the elders already decide for them their lives. Isra “wished she could open her mouth and tell her parents, No! This isn’t the life I want” but she “had learned from a very young age that obedience was the single path to love” (Rum, 12). As such, she could not express her real desire; just the way her mother, and her grandmother before them, obeyed what the others ordered without much ado.

Women, like Isra, learn that their status in their natal home is a temporary one; that they shall one day leave and start their own family. As Rum puts it, “a daughter was only a temporary guest, quietly awaiting another man to scoop her away, along with all her financial burden” (12). It comes as no surprise that girls like Isra cannot feel a strong sense of attachment to their homes.

In addition, Rum stresses the matter of identity and how it is affected by both belonging and space. It is obvious that Isra’s space in Palestine did not help her develop a strong sense of belonging nor did it help her assume a well-defined identity. The harsh upbringing alongside the continuous domestic violence that she has witnessed influenced Isra negatively, particularly after she moved to America. Life in Brooklyn brought forth a new set of challenges. Not only that the American culture

is quite unusual for Isra to adapt to easily, but also that her expectations of the Palestinian American community, exemplified in her in-laws, were more shocking to her. Isra believed that since her in-laws are Muslims, they would lead a life governed by their faith. Nonetheless, she was surprised to find them not only completely detached from their religion, except by name, but also encouraging her not to hold into her religious identity in America to avoid unnecessary trouble.

Similar to other tough-edged concepts, it is not quite easy to box identity and strictly define it. Nevertheless, Hall approaches identity from the cultural angle and sees it as “not as transparent or unproblematic” (222) as is generally thought. Instead, he asserts that identity is “a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Hall, 222). His view brings forth the definition of place by Cresswell, in which the latter affirms that “places are never finished but always becoming” (35). One can have different identities according to the social space that one occupies.

What links social space, or place, to identity is the matter of belonging. To link part of one’s identity to the geographical territory on which one lives is the outcome of a deep attachment to its grounds. As Weedon puts it, “Like the structure of meaning in language, identity is relational. It is defined in a relation of difference to what it is not” (19). Thus, Isra’s identity is that of the Eastern Muslim woman from Palestine who migrated to Western Brooklyn. Her identity is reinforced through relational difference to those around her. This aspect of identity is to give Isra “a singular sense” of who she is and where she belongs (Weedon, 19).

Burke and Stets perceive identity as “a set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person” (3). From their definition, it becomes clearer that the social factor in building and maintaining identities is vital and takes precedence over other factors. In a patriarchal society, women’s identities are reduced to include being a wife, a mother, and a daughter. Professional identities of, say, a doctor, a teacher, or a scholar are not part of the expected assignments for women. When daughters reach a given age; generally, from sixteen onwards, they are expected to get married regardless of their own aspirations. Once a wife to somebody, the next expectation is becoming a mother; more importantly a mother who produces sons. When the woman fails to meet one or more of these requirements, she is deemed as a big failure; someone who brings shame to her parents and adds to their burden.

The latter point is exactly what happened to Isra. When Isra turned seventeen, her parents were anxious about her marriage and they arranged it immediately. Once she married Adam and moved to America, the second matter of giving birth to male heirs became the central issue for the whole family. However, Isra failed to do so. She kept giving birth to females and this added to her misfortune. The whole family, including her husband treated her badly and the episode of domestic violence began. Each time Isra gave birth to a girl, her husband would beat her until she faints.

Another interesting definition of identity that is linked to the sense of belonging is given by Zygmunt Bauman. He states that “one thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs” and that “identity is a name given to the escape sought from that uncertainty” (Gay & Hall, 19). Not knowing one’s place in society and lacking the feeling of attachment essential to healthy emotional and mental development affects one’s identity and consequently one’s behaviour towards

the other. Instead, Isra thought that there must be something “dark stemming from within her to make the men in her life do these terrible things— first her father and now her husband” (Rum, 142). She blamed it all on herself. When Isra could not find an outlet for all the pressure that she went through in her new milieu, she resolved to leave everything behind and just take her daughters and runaway. She thought about ending the cycle of domestic violence after she became sure that her husband will not change and that he is only getting worse day by day.

Nonetheless, Isra was not lucky enough to escape her harsh reality. This time it was deadly. Adam lost control and he kept beating Isra until she breathed her last, in the basement where they lived. He committed suicide right after that, jumping off Brooklyn’s Bridge. It was heart-breaking for Deya to discover that “her mother had been murdered by her own father” that she has been “beaten to death in their home, in the very rooms where she and her sister spent their days” (Rum, 181).

Space risked repeating itself for Deya this time. She felt terrified at the very thought of it. Deya was puzzled when her grandparents “have urged her to get married young and quickly, as her parents had done”. She thought, “How could they risk something like this happening again? Happening to her?” (Rum, 182). Deya was even more horrified to discover that her mother’s attempt of transgression was met by failure and death.

As Cresswell puts it “to have transgressed means to have been judged to have crossed some line that was not meant to have been crossed” (23). Isra crossed that line but she did not fulfil her goal behind the transgression. Through discovering what happened to her mother, Deya finds more reason to break free from the shackles of her current space and she dares to transgress the expectations of her social space. She decides to take charge of her life and not let her sisters face the same fate of their mother; “I will not repeat my mother’s life” (Rum, 182). Via doing so, Deya stopped space from repeating itself. She succeeded in breaking the cycle of repetition as she transcended to a Thirdspace.

According to Soja, Thirdspace “can be described as a creative recombination and extension” that takes from both “a Firstspace” of “the real material world” and “a Secondspace” that interprets this “reality through imagined representations of spatiality” (6). Deya’s Firstspace is her grandparents’ house that imposes a whole set of social norms and restrictions. Her Secondspace is the imagined spatial reality that she wishes to have. Thirdspace combines elements from both Firstspace and Secondspace as it becomes “lived space”. As stressed by Soja, Thirdspace deals with “unsettling epistemological and theoretical critique that revolves around disruptions and disorderings: of difference, of confidently centred identities, and of all forms of binary categorization” (107).

Surprisingly, Deya confronts her grandmother, Fareeda, with the whole truth that was hidden for so long. Deya develops a voice. She tells her grandmother that she will stay at home if she allows her to finish her studies and never force her to marry. Eventually, her grandmother gives in. She goes through a change of heart and she decides to tolerate the new generation’s aspirations, better than losing her granddaughters altogether. Isra’s story is clearly a tale of domestic violence and abuse. It is perfectly explained by Snyder who states that:

Domestic violence is like no other crime. It does not happen in a vacuum. It does not happen because someone is in the wrong place at the wrong time. Our homes

and families are supposed to be sacred territory, the “haven in a heartless world,” as my college sociology teacher drilled into me. (Her class was the first place I’d ever heard the phrase.) This is part of what makes it so untenable. It’s violence from someone you know, from someone who claims to love you. It is most often hidden from even one’s closest confidantes, and on many occasions the physical violence is far less damaging than the emotional and verbal violence. (20)

Rum aspires to highlight this dark side of her culture that kept women’s bruises and suffering hidden and concealed. Through her female characters, Rum aspired to give voice to the voiceless women in her community; women who were taught to be silent and submissive since their infancy.

CONCLUSION

Rum’s novel, *A Woman Is No Man* (2019), explores themes of home, belonging, and identity in relation to issues of domestic violence and patriarchal oppression. The focus of the current paper fell on Isra and her daughter Deya in regards to their spatial reality and belonging. Both women are unable to find a place to call home. They lack a defined sense of belonging particularly that they cannot identify with the social space that they occupy. The paper also argues that space seems to repeat itself for both Isra and Deya. Via being entrapped in the same space, Deya risked facing the same dreadful end that led her mother Isra to lose her life. Isra is the victim of brutal domestic violence that is not reported as it is the case of many other women who hide their shame. Rum is critical of this aspect of patriarchal oppression. Through her story, she calls for reform and resistance. Rum pleads women to stand out for their rights, through the character of Deya. She also stresses the vitality of education in a woman’s life and encourages women to pursue their dreams and not just marry to please their family. Just like the title of her novel, Rum criticizes the false assumptions addressed to women solely on the grounds of their gender. She shows women, in general, and Arab-American women, in particular, that there is much more to do as a woman than the stereotyped social roles that cultural tradition imposes. The novel presents one story of the countless, rich narratives by Palestinian and Palestinian-American women in which matters of home, belonging, and identity are at the core.

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